

FROM INDENTURED LABORERS TO SMALL ENTREPRENEURS

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Migrations have occurred ever since in human history. Almost every people have moved in search of promising lands. During the 19th And 20th centuries the capitalist economic expansion led people moving into different directions and under different set of circumstances. Places with temperate climate such as Canada, the United States, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa became the major destinations for millions of European colonists, settlers, and immigrants. Besides the colonial governments pursue a policy of extracting precious metals and cultivate tropical and semitropical crops. These enterprises needed workers and the indigenous populations could not provide a large enough labor supply. Then the colonizers shipped hands from other lands. This is an ongoing history that in recent times have acquired a different character. What today is called Globalization connotes a multileveled phenomenon that refers to relations not only among nations but also regions and groups. Then it means that, from now on, the migratory processes should to be studied from a transnational perspective.

The route followed by the Korean migration in Mexico is intertwined in many branch roads. It began in Yucatan at the turn of the 20th century when a group of more than one thousand people came as indentured laborers. Most of them were young men and the rest were families with small children. After a harsh experience four years later the contracts ended. They tried to leave the country but were not able to do so. For a while they remained in Merida, the capital city of the State of Yucatan, and after words started a new exodus that spread them into many different places along Mexico. The second one started to arrive at the end of the 60's. It was a smaller group that mostly came to live in Mexico City. On the last twenty years a larger group of Korean immigrants has been coming into the country. They have settled in Mexico City, Guadalajara, Tijuana and Puebla.

The understanding of the saga of these three migratory movements implies to look back to its one hundred years history. The first fact that needs to be understood is that Mexico is not a country of immigrants like Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada or the United States. This statement not necessary implies that there have not been migratory movements. During its three thousand years long history Mexico has been *terre de passage* of various peoples. First were the migrant movements among the original inhabitants of whom can be mentioned the Olmecs, the Mayans and the Mexica, that mistakenly has been called Aztec. Second was the coming of Spaniards who founded the New Spain. Its result was the appearance of a new population formed by the original settlers and the Europeans, an inter-ethnic mixture that gave birth to a new type of ethnic group: the *mestizo*. Later it was added to this mixture, new elements after the coming of the African slaves and the first Asians -Filipinos, Indians, Malays, Chinese and

Japanese- who came with the galleon trade that carried cargoes between Manila and Acapulco from 1565 to 1815.

At the turn of the 19th Century, the birth of an independent state passed through some decades of social unrest until it was finally politically stable. Afterwards the political elite started to look upon the modernization of the country. They assumed that Mexico was a large and rich country inhabited by a small population that has to be increased by a new breed of people different from the native inhabitants who were considered unqualified for achieving modernization and therefore it was important the recruiting of foreign immigrants. The Mexican government tried to attract new settlers mostly of European stock to colonize certain uninhabited regions of the country. The government provide them land and some other economic stimulus. However the Europeans failed to come in the number expected. This failure later led both the Mexican political and economic elite to look for foreign workers. But as the modernization project also needed money, foreign capital was attracted and a new group of technicians and business people entered into the country.

These political, social and economic circumstances created the conditions for the coming of people from Spain, France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, Russia, Poland, the US, Canada, Central America, South America, the Middle East, China, Japan, Korea, India and the Philippines. However the number of all these people was scarce.

At the beginning of the 20th Century, this immigration policy changed after the outbreak of the Mexican Revolution and the flux of foreign immigrants was restricted. Later was voted a new law of open xenophobic character that closed

the frontiers of the country to those people who were considered “malevolent”. In the first place this term was used specifically towards the Polacks, Syrians, Lebanese, Estonians, Latvians, Checks, Palestinians, Armenians, Arabians, Persians, Yugoslavs and Greeks. However the Nazi prosecution of Jews and the Spanish Civil War during the 30’s limited, for a while, this xenophobic attitude and they entered Mexico as refugees.

In the last half of the 20th century continues this ban on the entering of nationals of countries which Mexico did not have diplomatic relations. This was the case of most of Asian nations. However once some Asian countries have acquired international recognition of their outstanding economic performance, such Japan and later Korea, some of their nationals were allowed to come to Mexico. This change has been more evident at the turn of the 21st century and currently foreigners are entering in the country as either investors or to conduct business.

However there is another problem that needs to be pointed out in regard with the historical study of foreign immigrants in Mexico, The great majority of Mexicans tend to ignore the foreigner’s presence in our society. They hold the idea that Mexican society has been shaped during the last four hundred years, by a *mestizo* type of national identity, formed by two elements –Spanish and the indigenous inhabitants- in which there is no room for any other foreign ingredient. This broadly-accepted idea is fictitious. It puts aside the fact that Mexico is a multi-ethnic mosaic formed by the descendants of the various groups of the original inhabitants, the Spaniards, and a mixed population that also includes other ethnic components that came along with the foreign immigrants. In this last regard

Mexico needs to revive its cultural heritage in order to construct a new national consciousness based on the large number of people and cultures living in the country.

The most suitable way to place this co-existence of cultures requires on one hand, the recognition of the indigenous peoples which is not only a cultural issue, but a political and economic as well, and on the other the admission that all those people of foreign descendant, have also contributed to the shaping of the nationhood.

The lack of this consciousness explains why for long time the presence of immigrants on Mexican soil has not received scholarly attention. Broadly speaking it has been until the last two decades of the 20th Century that some research on the subject has been published. Most of these works have been devoted to European immigrants. In the case of East-Asian immigrations only Japanese and Chinese have been studied to certain extent; the Korean immigration has remained in oblivion.¹ Therefore it is important to collect all sort of information related with the three waves of immigrants and the different circumstances under

¹ The general works that cover some issues related with Asian immigrations and contain some references to the Korean immigration are: Moisés González Navarro. *La Colonización en México. 1877-1910*. [The Colonization in Mexico. 1877-1910]. México, Talleres de Impresión de Estampillas y Valores, 1960; and *Los extranjeros en México y los mexicanos en el extranjero. 1821-1970*. [Foreigners in Mexico and Mexicans in Foreign Countries. 1821-1970]. Vol. II. México, El Colegio de México, 1994, pp. 135-197; Luz María Martínez Montiel & Araceli Reynoso. "Inmigración europea y asiática, siglos XIX y XX". [European and Asian Immigration. 19th and 20th Centuries.] In Guillermo Bonfil Batalla (ed.) *Simbiosis de culturas, los inmigrantes y su cultura en México*. [Symbiosis of Cultures, the Immigrants and their culture in Mexico.] México, CNCA-FCE, 1993, pp. 305-421; María Elena Ota Mishima. "Las migraciones asiáticas en México". [Asian Migrations in Mexico]. In *El poblamiento de México. Una visión histórico-demográfica*. [The Peopling of Mexico. An Historical and Demographic Perspective], Vol. III. México, Secretaría de Gobernación y Consejo Nacional de Población, 1993, pp. 188-205. The latest book dealing with single Asian groups such as Arabians, Asian Indian, Chinese, Koreans, Japanese and Filipino is María Elena Ota Mishima (ed.) *Destino México. Un estudio de las migraciones asiáticas a México, siglos XIX y XX* [Destination Mexico. A Study of Asian Migrations to Mexico, 19th and 20th Centuries.] México, El Colegio de México, 1997.

which they have arrived in Mexico. As it has been mentioned, the presence of Koreans dates back to the turn of the 19th century when the first immigrants left their ancestral home in Korea and started a new life in Yucatan. Later they spread around Mexico on an itinerary that had many stops along the way before they founded a permanent place to stay. The second was a rather small group that arrived in the seventies and the third is still coming.

The account of the life of Koreans in Mexico in the Spanish language is a history yet to be written. In this paper I attempt to shed some light on the conditions and circumstances under which these three waves of Korean immigrants have settled in Mexico by discussing the following issues: 1. The state of the research. 2. Their arrival in Yucatan and their spreading along Mexico and Cuba. 3. Their Adaptation, Integration and Acculturation. 4. The new wave of immigrants in Mexico City.

The State of the Research

The existing literature on this subject in both Korean and English is rather small. With some exceptions it appears mostly in relation with the first Koreans who came to Hawaii and those who later moved to the continental United States. Most of these works are based on either English or Korean sources. The first is Warren Y. Kim's [Kim Won Yong] historical account of the four groups of Korean immigrants who came to the American continent at the turn of the twentieth

century, which briefly covers the story of those immigrants who settled down in Mexico and Cuba.²

The second is Paek Pong Hyon's M.A. dissertation which is the result of a field research conducted in Mexico on 1967 and the use of documents housed at the Korean National Association in Los Angeles. This study covers the Mexican government's immigration and colonization policy during the last part of the nineteenth century under which came the first Koreans contracted as indentured labourers for working in the henequen fields of Yucatan. He also describes the early year's life of these immigrants in the henequen haciendas, their wait in Merida for entering in the United States, a release project that did not work.³

The third is José Sanchez Pac's memories, a personal account of his life in Mexico, the country in which he arrived when he was a new-born baby. He grew up in Mexico and worked in several places until he reached Mexico City where he later became the President of the Korean National Association. From this position, he draws a portrait of the way the Korean immigrants and their descendants adapted themselves to this new social environment.⁴

Fourth, comes Yun Yo-jun's article based on the data he collected during a research tour in the American continent for writing a series of articles appeared on the newspaper *Kyonghyan Sinmun*. On this general historical account on Korean

² Kim Warren Y. *Koreans in America*. Seoul, Pochin Chai Printing Co. Ltd., 1971. Originally published as *Chaemi Han-in-osip-nyon-sa*. [Fifty Year History of Korean Migration to the United States]. Reedley, California, 1959.

³ Paek Pong Hyon. *The Koreans in Mexico: 1905-1911*. M.A. dissertation. The University of Texas at Austin, January 1968.

⁴ José Sanchez Pac. *Memoria de la Vida y Obra de los Coreanos en México desde Yucatán, México*. [Memories of the Life and Work of the Koreans in Yucatan, Mexico]. México, D.F., Author's edition, 1973. There is a Korean translation edited by Mme. Yi Yong.suk, under the title: *Yucatan ei chotkorion. Hanguk Meshiko inmin pal sip nyonsa*. [The First Koreans in Yucatan. Eighty-Year History of Korean Immigration to Mexico] Seoul, In Mun Dang, 1988

immigration to the United States the second part of the article is devoted to the story of the first Korean immigrants to Mexico.⁵

Finally, there is Wayne Patterson's highly scholarly written essay that covers the immigrants recruitment operated by John Meyers, the British agent hired by the Yucatan hacienda's owners and the use Japanese diplomats in Seoul did of the departure of this group of immigrants in pressuring the Korean government to stop migration. The sources he used were the diplomatic correspondence housed at the **Gaimusho Gaiko Shiryo Kan** of Japan and several articles appeared on Korean periodicals.⁶

As it has been mentioned, most of the above listed materials have made a little use of Mexican sources. Therefore there is a need for searching them in order to have a more accurate view, of the immigrant's arrival, their early life in Yucatan, and the way they lived in some of the Mexican towns and cities they later moved, included Mexico City. This is a job that implies the knowledge of the local regions and their geographical, historical and cultural milieus.

For my own research I turned my attention to the files of the **Registro Nacional de Extranjeros** (Alien Registration Office) first taken in 1926 and the set of the three population census taken in 1910, 1920 and 1930. The total amount of identification cards of the Korean immigrants housed in the **Archivo**

⁵ Yun Yo-jun. "Early History of Korean Emigration to America" (I-II). *Korea Journal*. Vol. 14-6, pp. 21-26 and Vol. 14-7, pp. 40-45. Reprinted in Kim Hyung-chan (editor) *The Korean Diaspora: Historical and Sociological Studies of Korean Immigration and Assimilation in North America*. Santa Barbara: ABC Clio Press, 1977.

⁶ Wayne Patterson. "Korean Immigration to the Yucatan at the Turn of the Century: The Diplomatic Consequences". Paper presented at the 234th Annual Convention of the International Studies Association, Mexico City on April 5-9, 1983.

General de la Nación (National General Archive) is rather small (153) a number that certainly represents a minority of group originally formed by 1031 people.

Something similar occurs with the figures appeared in the censuses of 1910, 1920 and 1930, that show a decreasing number of the Koreans living in Mexico. On the 1910's census appeared a total number 310 people of Korean origin living in Mexico. Most of them (306) were living in Yucatan. In 1920 the total figure is 257, most of whom (131) are still living in Yucatan. Finally in 1930 appears a total number of 219 and 101 still remain in Yucatan.

This data does not agree with that of a letter founded in the **Archivo del Estado de Yucatan** [Archive of the State of Yucatan], sent by the Governor of Yucatan to the Mexican Secretary of Foreign Affairs, which states that the whole group of Korean labourers living in the henequen haciendas of Yucatan numbered 1085 people, included women and children.⁷ Therefore it is hard to believe that by 1910 only 310 immigrants could have been living in Mexico because as it has been mentioned, after their working contracts were released most of them remained in such a difficult situation that would not have money enough to afford the travel expenses to either go back to Korea or to emigrate to a third country.

More over there is another fact that asserts that the number of Koreans living in Mexico was not so small. In the early 1920 about 288 or 289 Korean residents departed from Yucatan to Cuba. This group of people is almost equivalent to the total number of Koreans listed on the census of 1920. Out of

⁷ Letter in response to the request of September 23, 1908 made by the Mexican Secretary of Foreign Affairs, in regard with the working conditions of the people that formed "the expedition of Korean coolies [sic] that arrived in Yucatan on May 15, 1905".

these disparities the only conclusion that can be reached is that the majority of them remained in Mexico and made their lives in this country.

A first hand source on their departure from Korea are the diplomatic documents housed at the Japanese **Gaimusho Gaiko Syryo Kan** [Diplomatic Records Office] where there appear the exact number of the immigrants, their regional origin, their social composition and both the date and port of entry as well.⁸ These data assert that there was an only group of immigrants formed by 1031 people who were induced by the Yucatan's henequen haciendas owners. All of them arrived on May 15, 1905. Therefore the majority of the 151 people registered in Aliens Registration Office arrived on that date, some of them as little children. The exception are those 28 who were born in Mexico and the 5 that later entered the country as visitors.

This research also includes the searching into the regional archives in Mexico City, Mérida, Yucatan; Tampico, the Port of Veracruz, Havana and Matanzas, Cuba; articles appeared on Mexican newspapers and magazines and personal interviews conducted among the descendants of the first Korean immigrants living in Mexico City; Mérida, Yucatan; Coatzacoalcos, Veracruz; Tijuana, Baja California and Havana.⁹

⁸ **Kankoku seifu Hawaii oyobi Mokushika yuki Kankoku imin kinshi ikken-tsuki hogo itaku Kankoku no ken.** [The issue of the Prohibition of Emigration to Hawaii and Mexico by the Korean Government. Recommendation and Protection]

⁹ Alfredo Romero-Castilla. "Los coreanos en México". ["The Koreans in Mexico"] *Eslabones*. Review of Regional Studies, No. 9, México, June 1995, pp. 96-105 and "Huellas del paso de los inmigrantes coreanos en tierras de Yucatán y su dispersión por el territorio mexicano". ["Footprints of Korean Immigrants in the Yucatan and its Diaspora through the Mexican Territory"]. In María Elena Ota, (Editor) *Destino México: Un estudio de las migraciones asiáticas a México, siglos XIX y XX*. México, El Colegio de México, 1997, pp. 123-166

Finally it is important to refer to the most recent publishing on this subject. In the first place the book written by Professor Lee Ja Gyeong, a two volume history of the Koreans in Mexico, based on almost all the existing Korean sources. Along with the historical account appear testimonies of the descendents of the first group and a picture's collection. It provides an overview of the life of the first Korean immigrants in the different places they settled down. The author of the second book is Pastor Nam Hwan Jo. It is devoted to the life of Koreans and their descendents in Yucatan. The third is a collection of papers presented by Korean and Mexican scholars in the Colloquium "One Hundred years of the Korean Migrations to Mexico: Memories and Perspectives," held in Seoul on August 2005, edited by Professor Ko Kyesun.¹⁰ These papers deal with several issues related to the historical conditions of both Mexico and Korea at the end of the 19th century that made Koreans immigrate to a remote land and the meaning of the presence of their descendants for the contemporary history of the two countries.

Though there are various reasons to be pleased with the results of this new research, which enlarges the historical view of the Korean migration in Mexico, it is also important to mention that there are still some gaps. There is a lack of documents in the Korean sources, and still prevail some misinterpretations and contradictions, that can only be corrected by contrasting them with Mexican sources. Therefore the search should continue in order to have a more accurate

¹⁰ Lee Ja-Gyeong. *Meksiko Hanin 100 Nyonsa*. [One Hundred Years History of Koreans in Mexico] Seoul, Organizing Committee of the Centennial of Korean Migration to Mexico, 2006. Nam Hwang Jo. *Meksiko Hanin Seng Hwalsa 100 Nyon* [History of the Life of Koreans in Mexico, 1905-2005] Korean-Spanish Bilingual edition. Los Angeles, Ca. The Christian Herald, 2006. Ko Hyesun, *Meksiko Inmin 100 Ju Nyon, Hwego wa Hyangjhu Jonmang* [Centennial of Korean Migration to Mexico: Memories and Perspectives]. Seoul, 2005. These papers were also edited in Spanish and appeared *Revista Asia y America*, published by the Institute of Asia and America Studies of Dangoon University.

the picture of the lives of Mexicans of Korean ancestry in so many different regions of the country, in particular Mexico City, where the major part of the last wave of Korean immigrants are making his new home.

From Chemulpo to Yucatan and the other exodus

Once the colonization policy failed in attracting European settlers, the Mexican economic elite looked upon foreign workers. Work was available because entrepreneurs who operated within the proposed modernization project wanted cheap labour that eventually could replace the native workers who were not only considered unqualified but also reluctant to accept the job, as supposedly it was the case in Yucatan. The first East-Asian immigrants that came to Mexico and later to Yucatan were the Chinese whom first got contracts in the railroad construction. The second was a group of Japanese farmers that attempted to grow coffee in Chiapas. The last were the Koreans.

At the turn of the 20th Century Yucatan appeared to have a promising future. The so called henequen industry was prosperous, though there were signs of an unexpected change in the market price. On an effort for preventing economic instability, the hacienda owners induce the coming of workers from many different countries. Among them the Chinese appeared to be not only satisfactory workers but those who best adapted to Yucatan's climate. By 1904 the hacienda owners wanted to continue the recruitment of Chinese labourers and for accomplishing this purpose named John Meyers, as their agent in China.

Once in China Meyers found out that in both China and the United States was well known the ill treatment the Chinese and the rest of workers suffered in Yucatan. As result, the Chinese were advised to avoid been recruited for jobs in Mexico, hindering Meyers efforts.¹¹ Then he moved to Japan where he also failed. However, while in Japan, he heard about the recruiting of Koreans for working in the sugar plantations in Hawaii. Then he made up his mind to try to take his chance there.

Meyers arrived in Korea in Augusts 1904 with the idea suggested by the *hacendados*, of hiring workers on a large time basis trough a recruiting system based on either individuals or families. He associated with Hinata Terutake, the director of the Continental Colonization Company (**Tairiku Shokumin Kaisha** in Japanese and **Teryuk Shinmin Hoesa** in Korean). They conducted a whole recruiting network. They established a main office in Seoul and office branches at Kwangju, Mokpo, Pusan, Inchon, Pyongyang, Wonsan, Kaesong, Suwon and Chinampo. Afterwards they published a series of advertisements that appeared on the *Hwansong Shinmun*, and some other periodicals, based on attractive, and in every case, false promises about labour and living conditions in Mexico.¹²

Under the title “Work notice to farmers” the advertisements appeared on this newspaper stated:

In North America, Mexico is a country equal to the United States in wealth and civilization. It is known for fertile land, beautiful nature and warm weather. There is no typhus virus. There

¹¹ “Lian Hsun. Encargado de Negocios de China quien afirmó que la ‘inmigración coreana no dará resultado en Yucatán’”. [“Lian Hsun. Chargé d’Affaires of China said that ‘the Korean immigration will not succeed in Yucatan’”]. *La Revista de Mérida*. 31 de enero de 1905; “La inmigración amarilla. Trabajadores coreanos para Yucatán”. [“The Yellow Immigration. Korean Labourers for Yucatan”]. *El Imparcial*. Vol. XVIII, No. 3076, February 20, 1905.

¹² Warren Kim. Op cit. p. 14; Yun, Op. cit. p. 40; Patterson Wayne. Op. cit. pp. 1-2 and the Japanese diplomatic correspondence.

are many rich men and few poor people and therefore there is a shortage of workers. Recently, many unmarried Japanese and Chinese men have made a lot of money. Korean young men too, come...”¹³

This advertisement worked in persuading the Koreans to sign up a contract form written on both Korean and English binding them to work at Yucatan for four years, unaware of the practice in the Mexican haciendas by which Mexican and foreign workers were bound to the farms by debts under a system of economic bondage. In straightforward terms the system was slavery but in this case it could be considered as a disguised slavery. Certainly the masters of Yucatan dared to call this system slavery and preferred to name it “enforced service for debt”.¹⁴

Warren Kim states that all the arrangements made by Meyers for establishing the network to contract Korean immigrants were conducted as an illegal recruitment operation without official permission of the Korean Bureau of Development, suggesting that they were recruited in secret. On the other hand Yu Jo-jun and Wayne Patterson state that the operation was conducted openly through newspaper advertisements.¹⁵

However it is true that Meyers failed to inform the Korean government about his operation. He did not call to the Chungch’uwon, the Privy Council which was in charge of the immigration affairs sharing responsibilities with the Foreign Office and the Ministry of Agriculture, Commerce and Industry, after the demise of the

¹³ *Hwangson Shinmun*. December 17, 20, 22, 24 and 28, 1904 and January 9 and 13, 1905.

¹⁴ Turner, John Kenneth. *Barbarous Mexico*. Austin, University of Texas, 1969.

¹⁵ Recent founded Korean data refer that the first advertisement appeared under the title of “Call on work in Mexico, North America”, on the *Daehan Ilbo*, a Korean newspaper edited by the Japanese in Inchon, on November 25, 1904. It also contained a phrase implying that the operation had the approval of the Korean government. Before the *Daehan Meil Sinbo*, a paper edited by Ernest T. Bethel, carried the news that the Taehan Company was aiming to hire “300 hundred Korean families for working as colons in Mexico.” Whang Oh & Chung-ja Kong. “Datos Historicos sobre la emigracion coreana a Mexico. Hallazgo de documentación relacionada con la partida y la llegada” [“Historical Data on Korean Emigration to Mexico. Recent Found Documents related with the Departure and the Arrival.”] *Revista Asia y America*. Vol. 5 No. 2 pp. 157-159

Yunminwon in 1903. This was the former Korean Department of Emigration the office in charge of issuing passports to Koreans going to Hawaii. ¹⁶

Originally the immigrants were informed that the departure would be from the port of Pusan but latter it was changed to the port of Chemulpo. Warren Kim says that the reason why Meyers decide to have the group in this place was a “legal manoeuvre to secure passports for them, and asked the British Minister to Korea for help. The British, however knowing the illegality, declined to intervene directly but to ‘save English face’ he advised Meyers to seek help trough the French legation. Urged by the French Minister as a favour to his British colleague, the Korean government issued passports to the group without any investigation.” ¹⁷ When the government finally learned about this fraud, it was too late the ship with the immigrants on board has already sailed for Mexico.

Korea was left behind. After forty-one days they arrived to the port of Salina Cruz on May 15, 1905. From this port they took the railroad to Coatzacoalcos where they boarded a boat that brought them to the port of Progreso, the last stop before their final destination.

Once in Merida they had a warm-hearted welcoming. “The Koreans just arrived! They are just robust and healthy” was the title under which *La Revista de Merida* heralded their arrival. The excited writer wrote:

...they look in very good shape some of them have even an athletic body complexion. Is noteworthy the large amount of youngsters, one could see many soft skin faced young boys playing around, eating or talking joyfully. Women also came... The Immigration Junta seems to be satisfied with them and it is expected, the Koreans who appear to be frugal and hard working people, will certainly make

¹⁶ Patterson, Wayne. *The Korean Frontier in America. Immigration to Hawaii. 1896-1910.* Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press. pp. 252 and 257

¹⁷ Kim, Warren. Op. cit. p. 15

a contribution to the improvement of Yucatan's agriculture, solving the serious problem caused by the lack of workers.¹⁸

Sanchez Pac describes their encounter with the Promised Land as follows:

After resting from the tiredness of the long trip and when they were starting to get bored for being inactive, without understanding why they have been housed on an open air place [the Army quarters in Merida] closely watched and without any money, the first hacendado who was holding a walking cane pointed to several people and they were put apart the rest of the group ... Most probably this man was the one who has contributed with the largest amount of money because he took with him the lager crew of workers.¹⁹

They started their new lives in Yucatan facing many difficulties. Three years later eight men were able to free themselves and remained in Merida where they got contact with the Korean National Association in the United States and informed them about the situation of the Koreans in Mexico. The following year, 1909, all the contracts were finally expired and the Korean National Association sent two representatives who attempted to conduct a relief project that eventually could have all them moving to the United States. At the last moment this project did not work. After this failure most immigrants remained in Merida and from there they started to move to nearby places such as Campeche and Quintana Roo. Step by step they began to move to more distant places: Tabasco, Oaxaca, Veracruz, Nuevo León, Tamaulipas and Mexico City.

Early in the twenties a group of them heard that there was in Cuba a sugar boom and labourers were needed. According with Warren Kim, Yi Hai-Young, a Korean resident in Havana, made an agreement with the Manachi [sic] plantation to supply 400 labourers within six months, for a commission of \$25 per labourer and the transportation to be provided by the plantation. He was able to recruit 288

¹⁸ *La Revista de Mérida*, May, 1905

¹⁹ Sanchez Pac, José. Op. cit. pp. 11-12

persons.²⁰ They arrived at the port of Manati, on March 11, 1921 but were detained for 15 days on the ship, because of an unforeseen controversy over nationality:

The Cuban government regarded these immigrants as Japanese citizens, but the immigrants insisted they were Korean, and refused to land, if they were not accepted as Koreans. Such was the national spirit of the Koreans in America. Finally the Japanese legation in Cuba proved that they were not Japanese, and the Cuban government permitted their entry as Koreans.²¹

It has not been possible to find in both the National Archive of Cuba and the Japanese GGSK any written evidence that might confirm this incident. On the two sources available on the Korean community in Matanzas, Cuba, authored by Alberto Pedro Diaz and Raul R. Ruiz and Martha Lim Kim there is no mention at all. The main difficulty to assert the true lies in the fact that by the time the Korean arrived to Cuba, many people of different nationalities were also coming in search for jobs that it was almost impossible to control immigration. Therefore all of them were not officially registered.

The descendants of these Koreans interviewed by Alberto Pedro Diaz said that they arrived at Manati on May 1921, with a labour contract that allowed them the right to have a Cuban branch of the Korean National Association. After their arrival it turned out that the contract was a fraud. This sort of international commerce was frequent and the case of the Koreans was not an exception. Unfortunately things did not worked as they have expected and just after their arrival in Cuba, the sugar market collapsed and they were left helpless without

²⁰ According with the already mentioned document from the Japanese Legation in Havana, the total number of immigrants was 289 people. **Ryoken Hoki oyobi dou oki Toritsukai** (3-8-5-11) February 16, 1922. GGSK.

²¹ Report by Yi Hai-Young of Havana, Cuba, to the Korean National Association of San Francisco. February 1922. Kim, Warren. Op. cit. Note 10, pp. 23-24

any chance for finding a job. The only opportunity they got was to go back to the henequen fields, this time in the Cuban Province of Matanzas.²²

In this way the Korean immigrants kept moving all across the Mexican territory settling down in many distant places where they lived separately from the main group, exposed to the conditions of the new social environments in which they came to live. Now days there are three important Korean communities in Mexico located in Merida, Yucatan, Mexico City and Tijuana, Baja California, where they started to arrive on the early fifties.

I will focus on this the paper on the story of the Koreans who settled down in Mexico City. In the decade of 1920, Mexico started to change its face from an agricultural country to an industrial one. The agrarian reform pushed the formation of an internal market and many immigrants from the country side rush to the city where they became blue-collar workers. The same did those of foreigner stock who came to the city and got engaged in commercial activities.

These changes were more evident in Mexico City where since the second half of 19th century started the building of modern and urban environment. The age of modern housing development was upon. Real state and construction entrepreneurs flourished everywhere developing new *colonias*, as are still named the city districts. In two decades the urban area enlarged from 46.30 square

²² Pedro Díaz, Alberto. "Gruppa koreiskij emigrantov v Matansas" ["The Korean Immigrants in Matanzas"] In *Etnografya Kubinskoj Provintssi*. [Ethnography in the Cuban Provinces]. Moscow, Nauca, 1988, pp. 7-6. Raul R. Ruiz & Martha Lim Kim. *Coreanos en Cuba [Koreans in Cuba]*. La Habana, Fundacion Fernando Ortiz, 2000.

kilometres in 1921 to 117.54 square kilometres in 1940 and its population over passed one million inhabitants.²³

Thus Mexico City was no longer the place that had witnessed the entry of revolutionary armies. The times of the smell of the revolutionary troops' gunpowder and the maize field no longer existed and gradually it started to acquire the spirit of a great metropolis. It appeared like a sort of heaven, a land of a promising future. Along with farmers, new groups of foreign immigrants were also arriving.²⁴

Such was the atmosphere of the place where some of these first Korean immigrants came to live. It is not possible to date the exact moment of their arrival. José Sanchez Pac attests on his book of memories that it was as early as 1910.²⁵ However there are not documents that could validate his words. According with the population census of 1910, there was not any Korean living in Mexico City. The 1920's census registered 4 while on the census of 1930 appeared a total of 14. Among the Alien Registration's cards appear 50 people who settled down from 1930 to 1940, while in the List of Nationalized Foreigners, among the total number of Koreans who acquired Mexican citizenship, 10 of them were Mexico City's residents.

Out of all this figures it can be presumed that most of Koreans started to move into Mexico City around the early thirties. The place of the City they came to

²³ Carlos Martínez Assad. "La ciudad de las ilusiones" ["City of Illusions"]. In *Los inicios del México Contemporáneo*. [*The Beginnings of Contemporary Mexico*]. México, INAH, FONCA, Centro Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes y Casa de las Imágenes, 1997. pp. 234 and 241

²⁴ Ibidem. p. 241

²⁵ José Sanchez Pac. Op. cit. pp. 38 and 121

live was the Colonia Guerrero, a district that started being developed in 1876 as a middle class settlement but by the time the Koreans came it was on the way to become a blue-collar neighbourhood. The streets are still named Violeta, Camelia, Tulipan, Mosqueta, Humboldt, Guerrero Zaragoza, Nonoalco, Sol, Luna, Estrella, Marte and Pesado.

Though the data contained on the Alien Registration's cards, it may be imagined how could be the life of these first Korean families in these new places, where the former large houses were divided into small apartments for housing poor people. Men going daily to their commercial activities; the house wives shopping at the neighbourhood's market in search of vegetables that could be used for fixing *kimchi*; the children attending public schools and all the families getting together for the Sunday's services at the nearby protestant churches.

In this same area, on the street of Moctezuma, was located the office branch of the Korean National Association which according with José Sanchez Pac very few of the immigrants attended to the point that it has to be closed at the end of the 50' because of lack of money.

The pass of time and the 1985 big earthquake destroyed most of these places. It still remains the building located in Soto 190 where Pedro Kim, Miguel Park and Lee Mein Con used to live with their families. The last two managed a shoe repairing workshop. It still stands the house owned by Joaquín and Concepción Kim located in Violeta 92. But all the houses located in Guerrero and Mosqueta no longer exist. In this street used to be a jewellery shop named "La Coreana" owned by Ricardo Lee, a successful entrepreneur, who became

Mexican in 1925. He was also President of the Korean National Association in the 40's.

Those who did not live in Colonia Guerrero stayed at nearby places. In Peralvillo lived the Sours and in Santa María la Redonda Antonio Pak and his family. Beyond this area, in the street named Peru, used to live Professor José Han at a time when he hardly could have thought that one day he would be able to return in his home land liberated from the Japanese. Once in Korea he was first adviser on Latin American affairs for President Syngman Rhee. Later on he spent the rest of his life teaching the Spanish language at the Hanguk University of Foreign Studies in Seoul, where he also was President for a short while.

Though she enter Mexico as a visitor, and therefore does not belong to this first group of Korean immigrants, because of her artistic renown, deserves to be mentioned the presence of Sai Shoki, Choe Sung-Hui in Korean, who came along with her husband Hitsusho An, An Mak, in Korean. She was an outstanding performer of Korean traditional dances and also the precursor of Korean modern dance.²⁶ She came on a U.S. tour in the year of 1940 and extended it in Mexico contracted by the Mexican Agency Daniel, for four performances held at the then newly opened National Theatre, popularly known as Palacio de Bellas Artes, on October-November of 1940.

This overview of the first Koreans who came to live in Mexico City needs to be enlarged with the study of the way their descendants are living. According with Warren Kim, at the end of the fifties, there were still living about 100 of the first

²⁶ Judy Van Zile. *Perspectives on Korean Dance*. Middletown, Connecticut, Wesleyan University Press, 2001

Korean immigrants that arrived on May 1905 at the Port of Salina Cruz. They and their descendants numbered about 1000. A more recent document, elaborated by the Embassy of the Republic of Korea in 1989, states that the number of Mexicans of Korean ancestry was 4000. However this number is inferior compared with the figure listed on the Directory published by the Mexico-Korea Association in 1991. According with this source there are 276 families living in Mexico. Altogether sum up 1,075 people, 571 of them live in Mexico City and the metropolitan area. ²⁷ I am not satisfied with all these figures and I presume its number should be larger because as it usually happens, as time passes by, the descendants of foreign immigrants finally outnumbered that of their parents.

However what is important to observe on the people listed on the Directory is the change in their way of lives. Today Mexicans of Korean ancestry living in Mexico City and the Metropolitan area are medical doctors, engineers, business administrators, professors, secretaries, entrepreneurs, merchants, technicians and even a TV actor. Most of them now live in middle class districts. This change can be explained on the fact that the children of the first immigrants often have a better chance to become incorporated trough the adoption of cultural patterns of the places they came to live, which in the case of the Koreans implied to be separated of their own people and mixing with the local populations.

This experience increased in the case of those who came to live in Mexico City. The only space they could meet other Koreans was the Korean National Association where, according with Sanchez Pac, they did not attended regularly.

²⁷ **Je Meksiko Hanin Jusorok**. *Directorio 1991*. **Hanin Huson** [*Descendants Directory*]. México, Asociación México Coreana A.C.

However, during the Second World War they got together in rejecting the Mexican government purpose of consider them Japanese nationals and therefore enemies. Ricardo Lee, then President of the Association, and Jose Han argued that they could not be considered Japanese because their arrival to Mexico happened before Korea was annexed to Japan. Besides they were always reluctant to accept Japanese colonialism.

There was another time of togetherness in 1955, when they celebrated the 50th anniversary of the Korean's arrival in Mexico. After the festivities they separated again and the continuity of the Association stopped until the year of 1962 just after Mexico and the Republic of Korea established diplomatic relations. The support provided by the South Korean government helped to reanimate the Association.

The first Korean immigrants and their descendants have been undergoing through a process of somewhat amorphous social change. Currently it is getting more complex when the life in Mexico and the big Megalopolis in which Mexico City has turned out differs from that of the first encounter. This is somehow a process, that may appear often confusing and frustrating, but that has finally led them to become adapted, integrated and acculturated through a cultural change that have resulted in a new sense of mixed identity.

Adaptation, Integration and Acculturation

The life of the first Korean immigrants in Mexico and the way they ensured their own survival in confronting a new social environment is a process that needs to

take into account the historical, sociological and psychological aspects involved in their adaptation, integration and final acculturation into the different places where they settled. These experiences were shaped by the peculiar ethnic and cultural social environments in which they came to live.

For the discussion of these processes I will rely on José Sanchez Pac's book and the data collected by Paek Pong Ho, in the interviews he conducted with the first Koreans living in Yucatan, late in the 60's. According with him their life as migrant workers in the henequen haciendas was not an easy one. Almost from the day they first set foot on Yucatan's soil they were exploited and abused, but they fought back in what ever ways they could. They arrived in a land of poor soil, where the main products were corn and henequen, during a time when the economy was dominated by the land being owned by large states and therefore both native and foreign workers were bound by debt.

They have to be adapted immediate to the life in the haciendas to overcome initial difficulties. The work conditions were far from those they had been promised. They were kept at the haciendas where the work was hard, the weather unbearably hot, housing bad and the food poor and insufficient. Their first step was to learn the Spanish language and grasping some words of the Mayan language. Men have more opportunity to acquire these linguistic skills than women who mostly remained at home.

They were looked upon with mixed views by the owner of the haciendas and the administration staff because of their lack of experience in the henequen cutting. Later they showed themselves to be clean, industrious and intelligent.

However the showing of these qualities did not help them to improve their wages and the working conditions.

Thus their wish to make money and return home rich and prosperous was far from being accomplished. Their work began right after they heard the big bell in the patio ringing at 3:45 or 4 o'clock in the morning and continued until sunset. Sometimes women and children also worked in the fields. At night they were locked in one-room huts. Husbands were allowed to live with their families but their movements within the hacienda were severely restricted.

The food habits were more difficult to overcome. In some haciendas they could get rice, beans, salt and sugar, but in others they mostly received corn, which they did not know how to cook. They found by chance some edible herbs that were not eaten in Yucatan, and this helped improve their diets. They also found that the cooks in the haciendas disposed of some parts of the cabbage and they picked them up for preparing kimchi. Later they found out that it also could be used the white part of the pulp of watermelons.

After the contracts ended they remained in Merida where they tried to create a new life. Merida was the centre of their lives and activities, which were divided between this city and the nearby haciendas, the latter constituting the nucleus of the labour force and a place for recreation and public entertainment. They managed to survive by helping each other. These ties of solidarity were both the natural results of their Korean traditional family relations and their own patriotic ideals.

Later on, more formal ties were developed when they organized a society known as the Korean Chin Mok Association, born on February 10, 1909. This

society pursued the promotion of friendship among its members in order to intensify group unity and to encourage business. That same year, a Merida branch of the Korean National Association in the United States was founded, and new activities began such as church and school.

On October 5, 1908, a Christian church was established to hold services in Korean. The founding of this church not only helped to fulfil the spiritual needs of the immigrants, but it also had educational purposes that led to the founding of a school, where Korean language and customs were taught. It also provided military instruction. This institute was a private school in which young men could get physical training to promote a strong sense of duty, moral obligation and antagonism against the Japanese. The Korean language was used as a mean to teach Korean history and Mexican geography. Both the church and the school faced difficulties after the outbreak of the Mexican Revolution.

This movement brought along new social and economic reforms that improved the living conditions of the Mexican population as a whole. Yucatan was one of the last places the revolutionary forces took control. General Alvarado, the new Governor, abolished, in 1915, the servitude of the Maya Indians, liberated the debts that farm workers had contracted with the *hacendados* and stopped all forms of oppression.

These reforms had an impact on the lives of Korean immigrants. They no longer were considered subordinates and now they could move more freely and their survival depended on the way they could manage the opportunities the building of a new society was providing. They looked for better jobs, some of them

opened small shops and engaged in tin workshops but there were some that remained in the haciendas, this time working under different conditions.

However most of them were not satisfied with their life in Yucatan and longed for better places to live. A new exodus began and they engaged in whatever economic conditions they could manage wherever they moved. In Campeche they first worked as farm labourers and later turned into merchants. In Frontera, Tabasco, they were mostly farmers. In the port of Veracruz they were blue-collar workers. The first to become prosperous were those who engaged in fisheries in the port of Coatzacoalcos, Veracruz. In Mexico City most of them became merchants

This exodus and the reforms made by the Mexican revolutionary movement truncated the natural development of the Korean community and opened the way for the integration of the Korean immigrants into the economic, political and social structures of Mexican society. As it has been mentioned, while they were all together in Yucatan, they refused to integrate but as time passed by they have no other choice that to began to sink deep roots into Mexican soil.

In this process they acquired a new consciousness. Once they were not able to preserve the national and cultural links they had while living in Yucatan, their contact with other social environments made them go through various forms of adaptation that finally paved the way for their integration. They had no choice but to merge into the local communities. They had to stop using the Korean language and start using Spanish as lingua franca for communicating at home and with the outside world in order to get along with Mexican people at work, in the school and

in socializing with the neighbourhood. In this way the Korean culture started to be abandoned.

Moreover the Mexican public education system and the nationalistic trends on education imposed by the new revolutionary government precipitated this change. The Korean children attended classes in Spanish and were taught by Mexican teachers, who used textbooks that contained information not only about Mexican culture but also a patriotic view of history on which teachers based the main concern of the education programs, to inculcate revolutionary and nationalistic values.

Another issue that fostered their integration was inter-racial marriage. As far as most of them arrived when they were young men and children and later they disbanded for so many different places, by the time they have to get married they were not able to find Korean partners. Then they married locals. This happens first in Yucatan and later in the other places they lived. Over a few years, a new generation of Koreans outnumbered their immigrant parents and lived as a racially mixed progeny.

Another important issue that helped their integration into Mexican society was the reform of the immigration law. This new legal system established after the Revolution removed all discrimination and allowed the right of naturalization to all foreigners living in Mexico and granted, according with the *jus solis*, the right to all children of foreign ancestry to be considered Mexicans by birth. In this way the Korean immigrants and their descendants were assured the same type of opportunities Mexican nationals have. Through this way the descendants of

foreign immigrants got the chance to improve their lives and to become equal partners with the rest of the population.

In this last regard it can be asserted that through both adaptation and integration processes, the descendants of the first Korean immigrants have assured their acculturation in becoming Mexicans of Korean ancestry. This was a process of forced acculturation that developed as the natural result of the way they have interacted within the different social and cultural milieus they got in touch with wherever they settled down.

The above explanation stands as a sort of snap picture. It needs to be enlarged with the collection of some more particular data related with the way they met the social conditions in the places they came to live. This information could show more in detail the way this first group of Korean immigrants managed to survive in Mexico.

Immigrants Arrived during the Second Half the Twentieth Century

The establishing of diplomatic relations between Mexico and the Republic of Korea, on 1962, opened a new era on Korean immigration to Mexico. On 1966, the Ambassador Oh Chung-suk, invited Pastor Wu Sang-bom for establishing a Korean Christian Church to held services for the Korean diplomatic personnel and the descendants of the Korean immigrants. The idea did not worked out and after Ambassador Oh left the country the Korean community stopped attending the services. A frustrated Pastor Wu moved then to Tijuana where he also did not had any success and finally he left Mexico.

In the middle of the 60's the National University of Mexico and the Hanguk University of Foreign Studies, where Professor Jose Han was teaching the Spanish language, signed an exchange agreement that made possible the coming of the first Mexican student to Seoul. In reciprocity came down to Mexico two graduate students: Park Sung-duck and Chang Ki-chul. Under this agreement, also came Professor Woo Dong-yong, who thought Korean language in the newly opened Center of Oriental Studies in UNAM. This Center had an ephemeral life. Chang Ki-chul remained in Mexico, married Esperanza Lee, the daughter of Ricardo Lee and he is currently managing his own business.

Around those years also came Moon Dae-won, in a short visit for conducting a Taekwondo workshop, a sport that by that time was almost unknown. After this experience Moon made up his mind to remain in Mexico and since then he has become an institution. His pioneer effort has flourished to the extent that *Taekwondo* has switched the previous public interest on Japanese martial arts. Taekwondo practicing gyms are almost everywhere and the emblem that identified them are now a familiar element of Mexico City's landscape. The Mexican *Taekwondo* trained by Moon and his disciples have gained recognition in international competitions and even in the Olympics.

Another personality who came about the same time is the engineer, Suh Dong Soo, contracted by the industrial group Crisol. He has had a successful professional career that has been prized by the Korean community and the Mexican business circles in which he has worked. He is a former President of the Asociacion Mexico Coreana, A.C. and more recently he acted as the President of

the Organizing Committee of the Korean Migration Centennial celebrated on 2005.

At the end of the 70's the large South Korean economic conglomerates started to look at Mexico's geographical position as the door for North American and Latin American markets. Attracted by this idea South Korean students came and enrolled in the Spanish language and Mexican History courses at UNAM's School for Foreigners. Afterwards they pursued graduate courses in UNAM and some other Universities. Some of them have returned to South Korea and got teaching and research positions in Latin American Studies. Some others remained in Mexico working for South Korean companies or have established their own business.

The economic and political importance acquired by the Republic of Korea on the last 30 years favoured the increasing of Korean trade and investment in Mexico. The result of these new activities was the coming of South Korean companies such as Hyundai, Samsung, LG, Daewoo, Gold Star, etc. Along with them also came business executives and their families. They made their homes in the fashionable districts of Lomas de Chapultepec, Polanco, Bosques de las Lomas and the somehow less fashionable Colonia del Valle and Colonia Roma. The coming of all these companies attracted a new group of Koreans who saw on the increasing of economic trade between the two countries, the coming of Korean business people and Mexico City's larger population, a good chance for making business providing food, entertainment and some other services for the newly arriving Koreans and selling cloth and some other goods to Mexican consumers.

According with a document elaborated by the Embassy of the Republic of Korea, quoted by Jung Sang Hee, on 1997 the Korean population residing in Mexico City was about 2000 people. By 2003 this number increased to 17,000. 70% of them were engaged in business, 10% were students and 9% entrepreneurs. Some other data collected by the Instituto Nacional de Migracion, [National Migration Institute] of the Secretaria de Gobernacion [Secretary of Interior] also quoted by her, show that between 1985 and 2000 were living in Mexico 1,610 Koreans of whom 35% of them were immigrants.²⁸

More recently the Centro de Estudios Migratorios, [Migration Studies Center] a research Center affiliated to the Instituto Nacional de Migracion, based on the figures registered on the 2000 Population Census, shows that there were 2,079 South Korean nationals living in Mexico up to that year. However this same Center has also recorded that 107,380 people holding South Korean passports have entered into Mexico by airplane during the period 2005-2009.

According with this last source, Koreans staying permanently in Mexico in 2007, number a total of 1,255 people. 676 were immigrants while 579 were immigrated; on 2008 the total number was of 1,291, 775 are immigrants and 579 immigrated. Finally on 2009 total number is of 492; 292 are immigrants while 200 are immigrated.

The above figures provide a general view of the Koreans who entered in Mexico. Therefore it is hard to know how many of them are currently living in Mexico City. However they outline the picture of the dynamics of Korean migratory

²⁸ Jung Sang Hee. *Mexico and the Republic of Korea: The Encounter of Two Modernization Processes*. Ph.D. Dissertation on Latin American Studies, UNAM, 2005, pp. 235

movement. The data related to people that arrived by plane on the last years, shows that they did so under the categories of tourists, transit passengers or business people coming for a short while. The number of permanent residents appears to be lesser and it seems to be rather stable. Any how it can be inferred that there has been a constant flux of South Koreans coming to Mexico City for conducting activities in the fields of art, commerce, investment, education and religion.

The settling of all these people required a space for living, gathering, entertaining and shopping. The place chosen has been the second section of Colonia Juarez divided by the street of Florencia. The building of this area dates back to the last years of the 19th century, on a time when the government of Porfirio Diaz encouraged the coming of European immigrants, mostly French and Italians, and from the United States. The district started as Colonia Americana and was inhabited by well to do foreigners and aristocratic Mexican families. On 1906 its name was changed for that of Benito Juarez. During the first decades after the Revolution it maintained its atmosphere as residential area but on the 50's it got a new look. The European style houses were converted into shops, galleries and restaurants and turned into apartments. Their owners aspired to make out of it the most fashionable business and tourist district in Mexico City. A new denomination began to be in vogue, "La Zona Rosa," ["The Pink Zone"] and for about three decades it certainly was a mark in the City. Today it stands as an office buildings area and a less pretentious entertainment district.

The Korean immigrants got interest on this place because its design as an urban residential area that made a plot of the curve of business activity, and its

location relatively close to Mexico City's downtown, particularly Tepito, where they have concentrated their main business activities of selling cloth, shoes and some other goods. Tepito is a district of pre-hispanic origin located in the north east area of Mexico City that along with Colonia Guerrero, Peralvillo, la Lagunilla, La Merced and Jamaica formed what in the 50's of last century was considered to be an "*herradura de tugurios*" ["*Curve of hovels*"]²⁹

In Armando Ramirez words, Tepito is: '... a neighbourhood that has been vilified, sanctified, turned into the stuff of legends, dirtied, and vilified. It is the stuff of urban myths. Of Legends without glory. Of lawbreakers, who wish to be inducted into the criminals Hall of Fame'. On the old times the market was nicknamed "baratillo" (cheap place). Here, in hundreds of stands, there is on sale all kind of things: second hand clothes, objects recycled for sale, outlets, illegal merchandise and drugs.³⁰

Whatever, Tepito is the place where people from all Mexico come to buy all sort of goods and for this reason is attractive for those interested in making business, as it has been the case of these new Korean merchants. Ella Grajeda, reporter of the newspaper "El Universal" wrote about the way Korean merchants conduct their business there. She found out that they walk on groups. They are the first to open the shops. They keep them clean and they display their merchandises orderliness, they read the Bible while waiting the customers and do not send their children to the public schools in the neighbourhood. She also

²⁹ Ernesto Arechiga Cordoba. "La formacion de un barrio marginal: Tepito entre 1868 y 1929" ["The Building of a Marginal Barrio"] In Maria del Carmen Collado (Ed.) *Miradas recurrentes. La ciudad de México en los siglos XIX y XX. [Recurrent Glances. Mexico City in 19th and 20th Centuries]* Mexico, UAM, 2004, p. 287

³⁰ Fundacion Televisa. *ABCDF. Diccionario Grafico de la Ciudad de Mexico.* Mexico, JPMorgan, 2001.p. 1441

interviewed the local historian who made the comment that the Koreans keep themselves away from the members of the neighbourhood and do not have meals at the local restaurants. According with him they do not remain longer in the market. It is like they mostly come here for a quick training and once they master the Tepito's way of selling goods they move away to other areas in Mexico City's downtown to continue their business there.³¹

The presence of Koreans in Tepito's market has produced mixed feelings of admiration and envy among the local merchants while it has also caused the police suspicion that behind the facade of diligent people there is a sort of Korean mafia that smuggler goods, fake products, and sell arms and drugs. From time to time, there have appeared on Mexico City's newspapers, news about Koreans whom have been arrested on charges of not having permission for staying in the country or being smugglers or "piratas", brand items fakers.³²

Some groups of local merchants have complained about the economic power the Koreans have acquired in such a short period of time. They own about 800 hundred stores in the market and its number is more likely to increase. They feel helpless before the Koreans who have money enough to invest in whatever possible business. But there is also another type of problem that is related to culture. In an interview appeared at the newspaper "El Universal", Alfonso Hernandez, Director of Centro de Estudios Tepiteños, a Research Center that is studying the effects of foreign presence in Tepito, has expressed his concern in

³¹ Ella Grajeda. "Viven en Tepito bajo sus normas y tradiciones." ["They live in Tepito under their norms and traditions."] *El Universal*, June 14th 2005.

³² "Detienen a 11 coreanos ilegales". ["11 ilegal Koreans are arrested"] *El Universal*, October 21, 2003; "La mafia coreana controla ya en Tepito la venta de armas". ["The Korean mafia controls already the sale of arms."] *La Crónica*, November 6, 2003; Yetlaneci Alcaraz "Reconocen coreanos: sí hay mafia" ["The Koreans admit that there is a mafia."] *El Universal*. May 3, 2005

regard with Tepito's future. He said that if things keep going in the way they are working now, Tepito will lose both its social and economic traditions or what, will be worse, its cultural identity. Hernandez and the staff of the Center are trying to oppose to this cultural influence, by promoting among the local population born in the barrio, the study of Tepito's old history, its customs and its music.³³

In commuting from Zona Rosa and Tepito goes by the daily life of these Korean immigrants. They get up early in the morning for taking care of their shops and come back late in the afternoon to rest at home or meeting friends. In a circle formed by the streets of Hamburgo, Florencia, Londres, Liverpool, Praga, Varsovia, Biarritz, Oxford and Lancaster are located restaurants, small shops, groceries, supermarkets, a dry cleaning shop, beauty parlor and acupuncture, medical and dental clinics. Before their arrival there were only two Korean restaurants nearby this neighbourhood, "The Korean Pavilion" and "Seoul" which no longer exists. Today there are more than a dozen restaurants scattered along this area, which also include *norebang* bars, where get together groups of young bachelors. Though Mexicans are welcome in these places still very few dare to come in them. Thus the customers are mostly Koreans.

In this same area can also be founded some offices that are used by the Koreans for various purposes. Among them can be mentioned two. In the first one is located the Asociacion de Coreanos en Mexico and in the second, the Centro Cultural Coreano en Mexico, A.C. The first is a sort of business center where Koreans share information about business, housing and some other related

³³ Alberto Cuenca. "Tepito, en peligro de desaparecer". ["Tepito in risk of disappearing."] *El Universal*, December 22, 2002

matters with Mexico City's life. The second is a Cultural Center founded on 2003. The Director, Mr. Jung Kab Hwan, has informed that the main purpose of the Center is to strength the friendship and cultural exchange between Koreans and Mexicans. The Center offers Korean language classes for Mexicans and Spanish language classes for Koreans. There are also classes on Korean cooking, crafts, music and dance. The Center has formed a *salmunori* music group, integrated mostly by young Mexican fellows. Korean films are shown monthly.

Other places of encounter for the Korean community are the churches. The religious diversity of Korea is expressed by the number of religious denominations established in Mexico City: Catholic, Protestants and Buddhist. Services are mostly attended by Koreans but in some cases also Mexicans came. The *Meksico Hanin Kyohei* has attracted those young Mexicans who have formed the group of fans of Korean pop-culture, in particular TV dramas that have been a perfect vehicle for introducing Korean culture in foreign countries. The Buddhist have been conducting a yearly lantern parade on the occasion of Buddha's birthday through Paseo de la Reforma, the largest boulevard in Mexico City, just few blocks away from Colonia Juarez.

In regard with culture it is also important to look at how these Korean immigrants are educating their children. As it has been mentioned before, people from Tepito complained that Korean children were not attending the barrio's public schools. However this is not only the case of Koreans because most Mexicans of high middle and upper classes do not send their children to public schools either. Mexico City offers various types of private schools. Some of these schools are managed by religious groups, Catholic, Protestants and Jews; others supported

by the foreign communities established in Mexico some years ago, who came from Britain, France, Germany, Japan, Spain, Switzerland and the United States. There are also schools founded by different social associations. For elementary and middle schools the most attractive are the so called bilingual schools that emphasize the teaching of English.

The presence of these Koreans in Mexico City is still too recent and they are not yet in the position of having their own school. Thus their children attend Mexican private schools that teach in Spanish. Because of that the Koreans have opened the *Meksiko Hanguk Hakyo* that works every Saturday. Its main purpose is to teach Korean children who are living in a predominantly Spanish-speaking environment the language of their parents.

The above experiences point out the need to explore more in detail the question of intercultural communication. This concept supposedly connotes a confrontation between people belonging to two different cultures. In the case of immigrants it is related with the way an individual adapts the model of communication acquired in their native country to that of another cultural environment. It primarily refers to the terms, favorable or unfavorable, in which people of foreign origin behave towards their integration in a new cultural milieu. In this regard it would be also important to grasp some problematic situations such as the possible conflict among the values of the original culture with those of the new society they are living in, the language barrier, prejudices and ethnocentrism.

Epilogue

In a historical perspective, the saga of the three waves of Korean immigrants in Mexico is related to the economic and political changes operated, in both countries, on the last one hundred years. The two modernization processes that began in the middle of the 19th century, in Korea and Mexico, had evolved into a different manner. The Choson Kingdom failed in preserving the national independence, and therefore could not avoid being colonized by Japan. The Mexican political elite also aimed to modernize the country but because of the way they conducted the process, the country changed in a lesser extent, to the point that it was necessary a change of regime. The revolutionary governments set the bases for a real modern country.

One hundred years later the story appears to be more less the same but moving in an opposite direction. Korea is no longer the poor and unstable country it was at the turn of the 20th century. Modern South Korea is a qualitative distinct society from the colonial one it emerged from. The economic transformation started since 1960 has resulted into an economic strength that has led to its full insertion into the world economy, On the contrary the economic policy followed by Mexico after a good performance, has impeded the dynamic character it had prior to the 60's.

Under the above circumstances, the first Koreans were impelled to leave their country by poverty and the worse conditions in late Choson, attracted by a rosy picture of Mexico as a sort of heaven where they could easily become rich. This is the reason why they accepted to become indentured labourers in the henequen haciendas of Yucatan. They hold the idea that within four years they would be able to return home but this desire was never accomplished and they

remained in Mexico After words they moved into many places along the Mexican territory. This shifting from one place to another occurred during the starting period of Mexican Revolution which brought the transit of Mexico from an agricultural country to an industrial and urban one that offered many opportunities to people for changing their lives.

Under such circumstances, they had no choice but to merge into many different places. They did all sort of jobs. Their children attended Mexican public schools where they were taught in Spanish and inculcated nationalistic values. In this way they start abandoning the original culture and integrated into that of the places they were living. Two more elements contributed to this change: inter-racial marriages and the promulgation of a new national law. The first took place since they were living in Yucatan and in few years a new generation of Koreans was living as a racially mixed progeny. The second allowed people from foreign origin the right to be considered Mexicans by birth. All this set of circumstances paved the way for them to sink deep roots into Mexican soil.

Broadly speaking, the pioneer generation would have found many difficulties in its encounter with this new Mexican society in which they struggled not only to enable themselves to live but also for the sake of their children who afterwards found better opportunities for improving their socio-economic status and educational background. This status' improvement shows their ability for coping with the barriers within the socio-economic and political environments they found in this country. This fact is clearly reflected in the new way of life acquired by those Mexicans of Korean ancestry who are currently living in Mexico City.

The second wave of Korean immigrants was a rather small group formed by individuals, who came as students and professionals, on a time when the government tended to restrict the entrance of Asians. Though they could have problems in become adapted to the life in Mexico, their educational backgrounds helped them to overcome difficulties. In other words, they were able to develop mechanism to ensure their lives in confronting with this new environment.

Something alike may occur with the new Korean immigrants who keep arriving in Mexico City. This time they are coming under different international and national circumstances that assure them better conditions for coping with this new environment. Globalization and the open door policies in many countries, allow people moving in a global scale. The opening door policies have made Koreans to search for a new life in Mexico and some other Latin American countries. It is certainly a new type of social situation for a country like of Mexico that for quite long time, refused to allow the entrance of foreign immigrants, especially those from distant places and with different ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

The present economic policy the Mexican government is pursuing, is based on the idea of fostering links with well to do countries in terms of their size of their economy and their weight in international trade. In this regard Korea appears to be one of those countries. This explains how the coming of Koreans is welcome and one of the reasons of the fast growing of this new Korean community.

These new comers have different social and economic backgrounds than their predecessors. They are people with good educational level, identified with an urban and middle class status and with money enough to start any sort of

business. Some of them are business executives or technicians working for Korean companies investing in Mexico. The large number is conducting merchant activities in the old and most traditional commercial district in downtown Mexico City, and in some other places, while the rest are engaged in some other economic, religious and social activities.

The presence of these new Korean immigrants is having some social and economic impacts that are not easy to be grasped. Mexicans, in general, complain that though they are polite they tend to keep together avoiding any contact with the local population. There have been confrontations with Mexican neighbours at the building apartments they are living. This lack of communication is attributed to language barrier and customs difference. Their ability in making business has been both praised and criticized. Among the Tepito's merchants there are some that have associated with them while there are some others that consider them to be aggressive competitors. There are also conflicts and disharmony among the Korean community, an aspect even more difficult to know.

A different and positive image of Koreans is among those Mexicans attending the Korean Cultural Center and some Churches. They are people genuinely interested in Korean culture and they may eventually open the door for the Koreans' entrance into the main stream of Mexican society.

As a final remark it has to be stated that the history of the life of the Korean immigrants in Mexico is still a task to be accomplished. It has to be complemented with analysis of the different mechanisms the immigrants developed to ensure their own survival in confronting a new environment, in the past and now days, taking into account that these life experiences have been shaped by the peculiar

ethnic and cultural histories of the local Mexican societies they merged in. The study of the experiences of the Koreans who now are settling in Mexico City requires the understanding of the new global trends that are pushing people to move to many different places in search for a better living. It also implies the understanding of the complex character of Mexico City, a megalopolis formed by a set of multicultural cities, in which live people from many different places and diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

The understanding of these one hundred years history concerns to everybody in Mexico and Korea: to the descendants of the first group because they need to know their roots; to the newcomers because they need to realize the difference of being an immigrant then and now; to both, the South Korean government and society, because these immigrants are a bridge between two nations that need to know more about each other, in order to get along in today's global society; but especially to the great majority of Mexicans who are still reluctant to admit the presence of the descendants of foreign immigrants who have enriched our culture and have also contributed to the shaping of our nationhood.