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Exploring the roots of cultural shock of Koreans in Brazil

Yun Jung Im – University of São Paulo

Abstract

Despite Brazilians being widely known for their tolerance and their understanding of the “otherness of others,” the enculturation process of Koreans in Brazil is not free from conflicts involving the particularities of each cultural pattern. At the same time that the Korean community is seen as a self-segregated, “rich community”, its members do not make significant efforts towards changing their minimum contact with the dominant culture. This study investigates the behavioral features of both cultures as formulated by distinguished thinkers, seeking to identify the origins of cultural shock between Koreans and Brazilians.

Keywords: Korean culture, Brazilian culture, Korean community in Brazil, enculturation, cultural shock

Introductory remarks

In a survey carried out by the Group of Korean Studies-USP with 104 high-school second-generation Korean students in Brazil¹ one point merited particular attention: 60% of the interviewees felt themselves discriminated. Commenting the results, Prof. Martin Alonso Perez Le-Fort, from Universidad de Chile, concluded that the enculturation process of second-generation immigrants in Brazil is close to “separation,” in line with J. W. Berry’s classification of psychological acculturation strategies, that is, when a group preserves its ethnical culture and maintains minimal contact with the dominant culture.²

This was already no surprise to Prof. Kyung Su Jun, from Seul National University,³ considering that “Brazil is a country formed by 80 different immigrant groups that have brought with them 80 different cultural systems. According to him, each group maintained its particularities while, at the

¹ The Second Generation of Koreans in Brazil: a portrait, a survey carried out for “Joint Research Project: Korean Immigration in the Americas” coordinated by the Center for Koreans Studies, UCLA. The results were presented in the conference “Desplazamientos/Emplazamientos: Corea, América Latina y más allá” at the Universidad de Buenos Aires on July 14, 2009.
same time, keeping different degrees of contact with other groups, which is the foundation of the Brazilian society. As a consequence, it has always been pluricultural and integrative, admitting and accepting the coexistence of differences. But it must be noted that, on the other hand, each micro-group maintains its unity at the expense of some xenophobia.

This study investigates the roots for “separation” mentioned above in the enculturation process of Koreans in Brazil, focusing in particular on the conflicting behavioral patterns of daily life between two groups. Free interviews were made with 47 people – 27 Koreans and 20 Brazilians – mainly from the district of Bom Retiro, unofficially known as Korea Town, during March and April, 2010. The contents of the interviews were grouped in topics and analyzed in light of some concepts drawn from the cultural anthropology literature of both countries.

District of Bom Retiro, the place of Korean cultural shock in Brazil

On January 6th, 2010, São Paulo’s municipal law no. 15110 established the district of Bom Retiro as “the cultural pole of Korean traditions.” This is a significant landmark for the half-century-old Korean immigration to Brazil, since Bom Retiro had been the most important Jewish sector in Latin America until quite recently. Even today, the most orthodox Jewish members still live there, which is why many community shops – libraries, restaurants, groceries, churches and schools – persevere among the Korean commercial area.

The first Koreans began to establish garment shops in Bom Retiro in the mid 70s, and this intensified after the 1982 amnesty for illegal immigrants, precisely where and when old Jewish owners were retiring from and/or gradually closing up their family businesses since their sons and grandsons were all now graduating from good universities and becoming independent professionals.

Almost three decades later, at the end of 2002, the Renascença School, the most important Jewish school (elementary, junior and high school) of the district, was closed down, “putting a symbolic end to the 80 years of Jewish occupation in that district.” In 1968, 15 thousand Jews lived there, and in 2001 this number dropped to 7,200. The new, educational reference in the district then came to be Polilogos School, a Korean school founded in 1997 with Korean government aid.

Since over 90% of the 50 thousand Korean immigrants in Brazil live in São Paulo, and even those who do not live in the Bom Retiro district, run their businesses there or go there often, if not everyday, for one reason or another (kindergarten, restaurants, groceries, video store etc.), it is reasonable to assume that Bom Retiro is the most important point to investigate the cultural shock of

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Koreans in Brazil. In fact, outside Bom Retiro, any type of research concerning the Korean community will render scattered results that lack numerical representativeness, especially in light of the astounding cultural difference, be it regional, socio-economical, educational or racial in Brazil. São Paulo doubtlessly shows the greatest racial diversity within Brazil, and Bom Retiro, for instance, has been home to communities of Italians, Jews, Koreans and Bolivians, and more recently, Chinese.

From the racial point of view, Brazilian society seems to have incorporated the differences well, “accepting each other’s existence and building up an integrational culture,” and it is known as the “melting pot” of ethnical and cultural miscenegenation. But it is true that the shocking differences in income and social/educational inequality have been creating dangerous frontiers for a socio-economic apartheid within it. This environment is a big cultural shock in itself for Korean immigrants, who have always been taught to be a “single people” living in a society which is quite uniform and standardized in many aspects.

The eminent anthropologist Darcy Ribeiro pointed out the danger of the “hostility between castes” within Brazilian society. In his book *The Brazilians: the theory of Brazil*, he pondered about the existence of castes: “there are oppositions between the many strata of local society which, despite undergoing intense merging on the racial plane and uniformization on the cultural plane, solidify into a rigid social-racial stratification of castes, which see one another as distinct entities and are reciprocally hostile, creating an environment marked by strong tension.” In light of Brazilian reality, this passage would suit us better if we substituted the expression “socio-racial” for “socio-economical.”

**Cultural shock and the hostility between socio-economical castes**

According to CDL-Bom Retiro (Chamber of Shopkeepers), there are 2,600 commercial establishments in Bom Retiro, of which 60% are run by Koreans. The 2,600 companies hire 50 thousand direct employees, and 30 thousand indirect ones. In a very simple calculation, Koreans hire 48 thousand direct and indirect employees in Bom Retiro alone. This number should at least be doubled since in the neighbouring Brás district, there are certainly as many shops run by Koreans as in Bom Retiro. The difference is that almost all Korean commerce aimed at Koreans, as well as associational offices, are located in Bom Retiro.

Consequently, the kind of relationship that Koreans develop with Brazilians and their judgement about the Brazilian culture relies heavily on their employees and customers, since their weekends are

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9 According to Kelly Lopes, Executive Secretary of CDL-Bom Retiro, interviewed on June 6th, 2010.
10 Even though there is no CDL-Brás, this was confirmed by Dr. Joo Il Seo, current president of Association of Koreans in Brazil.
spent in churches and golf clubs, which does not help in cultivating horizontal bonds with Brazilians. It is understandable for a relationship of the type “hostility between castes” to occur, a mode that is quite different from that of the Japanese community. Jeffrey Lesser and Koichi Mori conducted a survey on how Brazilians see the three Asian minority groups – Chinese, Korean and Japanese. It is noted\(^{11}\), for instance, that Japanese – and by “contamination” all Asians – had frequently been the target of mockery in the early stages of immigration, due to their “funny accents and the image of the hard worker with no social life.” But the reality of the Korean community seems to be different. Brazilian interviewees made frequent mention to their discontent: “they have dominated the local commerce and treat Brazilians as slaves”; “they think we are ‘less’ than they are”; “they think they are more intelligent than us”; “I do not have any prejudice against them, but I am sure that they have it against us”; “they yell at employees, they are too demanding and not ‘kind’ at all when they ask for things.”

In the aforementioned survey, 2\(^{nd}\) generation Korean high school youngsters considered it “discrimination out of envy.” But these comments show a tension closer to that which exists between the hiring class and the “exploited” class in Brazilian reality. What happens is that the spacial (Bom Retiro and Brás), sectorial (garment industry) and commercial (manufacture and wholesale) concentration of Koreans, has created a particular atmosphere around Koreans, intensifying the image of a wealthy, closed and snobbish community. In Jeffrey Lesser and Koichi Mori’s remarks, Korean families are said to have arrived in Brazil bringing at least 30 thousand dollars each.\(^{12}\) But the truth is that a Korean cultural code, namely kye, helped community members to raise the necessary money for their businesses, more than the eventual seed money brought from Korea.

Recently, a Brazilian funk rapper MC Kauan launched a song called *The House of the Korean*, which brought chills to the Korean community.\(^{13}\) Its lyrics depict a criminal gang plotting a robbery to a house of a Korean that “looks like a house from a movie.” In May, 2009, a criminal arrested by police declared to a TV news reporter that he did not like Koreans and that he would continue robbing Koreans after his release from jail.\(^{14}\) In kidnappings and assaults against Koreans, it is common for former employees and maids to be involved, not to mention the frequent labor suits against Korean employers. Naturally, these occurrences are felt by Koreans as cultural shock. Even in their daily life,


\(^{12}\) Idem, Ibidem, in the chapter “Post World War II Asian Immigration”

\(^{13}\) [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j6O_hd-iCx0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j6O_hd-iCx0). Posted on March 10\(^{th}\), 2009, registered 420,802 until May 12\(^{th}\), 2010.

they do not get from Brazilian employees the kind of commitment that a Korean expects, that is, confucianist hierarchical obedience combined with jeong.

The culture of pali-pali

The most frequently mentioned conflict during the interviews was probably Korean haste versus Brazilian delay. Although this trait can be attributed to mere laziness, Brazilian thinkers on the matter commonly explain it in the context of “the Brazilian (tricky) way.” This was the case, for instance, of a study called Dimensions of the Brazilian Culture in the Vision of Expatriates, by Tania Casado and Siegrid Guillaumon Dechandt. According to them, “The ‘Brazilian way’ is a special way to deal with problems, bureaucratic or not, to bypass unexpected situations, to procrastinate, to wait for conjunctural factors to change, in short, a series of attitudes that confuse the expatriate, bringing about the impression of disorganization, unfairness, inefficiency and lack of control. Obliged to live with political patrimonialism, a type of government in which the State is used by its governors to gain opportunities and assets in its own favor, a ‘Brazilian way’ made up basically of a series of artifices employed to get around Portuguese bureaucratic obstacles.” American anthropologist Félix M. Keesing also states: “The Brazilian way is a custom that arose from the need to adapt the society to unfavorable situations. It has an actual cultural origin and can differentiate the Brazilians from other people.”

Another way to approach the matter is to explain it through the concept of “personhood” (pessoalidade), a very common concept in social anthropology to explain the Brazilian culture and it is defined as loyalty directed to a person: for a Brazilian, it is fundamental for there to be compatibility of personalities, captivation and empathy in any kind of negotiation, an additional task that demands a certain skill to consolidate mutual trust, even in situations that require non-personal objectivity. This is also related to the lack of assertiveness of Brazilians as defined by Ribeiro through three criteria: latency (the period of inactivity between a stimulus and its response), the duration of the speech and the verbal content. Twisted objectivity in conversations allows a Brazilian to collect additional, personal information and to show his empathy. When a Brazilian acts evasively, he is refusing to tackle a matter and is, in his own way, attempting to preserve his wellbeing by not verbalizing the problem. A Brazilian talks about matters in his personal life to strangers in an attempt to create complicity and to strengthen relationships. This may bother foreigners, who are not used to

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15 A Korean interviewee said he was shocked when he tried to give advice to his employee, and he answered back: “You are not my father!”
17 This is frequently perceived as unethical by foreigners, and it is no different for Koreans.
these forms of manifestation of “personhood.” Brazilian “receptivity” and “affability” would then be a
strategy of “personhood” as well, in an attempt to get things done within a uncooperative environment.
Koreans, however, perceive this “personhood” as precisely the obstacle that prevents things from
getting done. As a result, Koreans do not practice “personhood” type relationships, whether out of
lacking language skills, strict ideas of hierarchical relations or refusing to recognize (or even have
contempt for) this cultural code, and they do not consider the possibility of accelerating the process by
getting things done, precisely through the practice of personhood. For instance, one of the
interviewees expressed his indignation for bank tellers who wasted time talking about frivolities with
each other and, more shockingly, those who were waiting in the queue often participated in this
collection, when in fact they should have been trying to accelerate the process.

The conflict between haste and delay is observed even between Korean members of the
community depending on the amount of time they have lived in Brazil. The longer the person has
lived in Brazil, more tolerant he becomes to the delay, and he, eventually, incorporates it. To the eyes
of a newcomer, these people are “too Brazilian,” and those who have lived in Brazil longer justify
themselves by stating that “they have to understand that this is Brazil.” This occurs especially in
Korean companies established in Brazil and hired Korean descendants. Newcomers complain about
the “Brazilian time,” and have to frequently hear Brazilian expressions such as “I am coming,” which
conveys a very broad and vague concept of time.

The thing is, according to Tania Casado, “the personhood in work relationships dissolves
hierarchical barriers and promotes more informality, making it easier to work in group. The result is
that the hierarchy is configured through distribution of responsibilities.” Here, we see a point of
conflict with the Korean Confucian frame of mind and it is obvious that Korean employers are not
aware of this degree of informality in Brazilian culture within their daily lives as company owners.
Even when they step out of this daily routine, this unequal relationship with Brazilians continues,
since they become consumers of product and services in refined restaurants and golf clubs.

Prof. Jun Man Kang dedicates a whole chapter of his book The Korean Code to the “cultural of
pali-pali,” explaining it by historical factors. According to him, Korean haste is the outcome of a
generation submitted to a military dictatorship simultaneously with the imperative of accelerated
economic development amid a post-war social environment in which “the credibility of procedures
and the rules of the game were not yet settled (…) The logic of accelerated development and
collective historical suffering in conjunction with the high populational density of Seoul has shaped
the conditions in which one could only survive under the law of pali-pali.” At this point, we must
remember that, right after the Korean War, North Americans, temporarily residing in the country,

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20 São Paulo KBC (Korean Business Center, former Kotra São Paulo) informed, as of June 25, 2010, that there were, today,
56 Korean companies in activity in Brazil.
made references to “Korean time” and mocked the locals’ lack of promptness. It may be true that haste is not within the original matrix of Korean culture. Prof. Jung Kwon Jin, for instance, finds it problematic to use expressions such as “culture” or “national character” (guk-min-seong) of a people. In his Homo Koreanicus, he points out the danger of “a ‘racial psychology’, taking the pain of a society that undergoes the stages of a fast growing economy for a mere ‘genetics of the people’.”23 He proposes instead the term habitus as being the “sum of the thinking and acting patterns as well as emotional structure of the collectivity.” Be it habitus or culture, Korean haste was unanimously thought of as a problem behind the cultural shock between Koreans and Brazilians by all the interviewees. Even those who have been living in Brazil for a long time confessed their impatience with Brazilian delay. As mostly employers or consumers, Koreans in Brazil feel they have the right to demand “pali-pali” from the Brazilians, which worsens the hostility between the socio-economical castes.

Insiders and outsiders

“They are closed, and I remember my mother used to say that they never came to any neighborhood meetings... I don’t know if it is because they are anti-social or because they can’t understand anything anyway...”; “it seems that they keep themselves closed in little groups that only Koreans can enter...”; “there are many orientals at the school... Koreans go to churches.... but they always gather in their little groups... Koreans are more closed than Japanese, because they do not mix with others... I heard that they only marry Koreans... I don’t like this closed thing much...” This self-segregation was perceived by Brazilians as a very negative aspect of the Korean community. The tendency of Koreans in separating the world into those “who are within” and those “who are out” has been pointed out by several authors, commonly in the negative sense of “cronism” (paegeori-munhw). Prof. Jun Man Kang wrote a book called The Republic of Cronism,24 and Prof. No Ja Park, in his book The Korea of Yours,25 also exhaustively criticized the Korean vice to draw a line between “us” and “them,” cruelly antagonizing the latter in benefit of the former.

That is also true for the Korean community in Brazil, which is far from being homogeneous, hiding inside multiple intersections between micro-groups. For instance, Kim Hyung-Mi already identified the separation between “Korean-Korean,” “Korean-Brazilian” and “Brazilianized Korean” in identity shaping of the Korean youngsters in Brazil;26 employees of Korean companies (executives)27 living temporarily in Brazil do not mix with Korean immigrants (merchants).28 But the

27 According the São Paulo KBC (Korean Business Center, former Kotra São Paulo), they are 248. But the number is much
separations are manifold. The global economic and financial crisis of the 90s brought about a drastic reduction of kye, and many Koreans went bankrupt due to the recession, the shortage of bank credit and the inability to access legal financing – out of ignorance, suspicion or inability; as a consequence, a community that in the 70s and 80s was averagely wealthy underwent a class separation, frequently measured by one’s ability to frequent golf clubs. More recently, another separation began to arise between the older generation of immigrants and the newcomers; and the separations can be identified in many other aspects.

Thus, the self-segregation of the Korean community in Brazil is just natural for an overly nationalist (macro-cronism) people exposed to an environment that they feel is culturally, racially and ethically incompatible. Korean ethnocentrism or nationalism is commonly explained in light of numerous foreign invasions in the peninsula which, nonetheless, were not able to beat Korean ethnical and cultural unity. According to Prof. No Ja Park, despite the majority of Koreans that do “feel proud for having a strong racial conciousness and sense of self identity as if they were virtues,” they are in reality ideas ingrained by a dictatorship attempting to forge a “racial justification” to legitimize an authoritarian regime. To him, expressions like “our country” instead of Korea and “our language” instead of Korean language were rhetorically imposed during the military regime.29

Whether innate of forged, the sense of racial identity is a fact and the self-segregation of the Korean community in Brazil, unanimously pointed out by the Brazilian interviewees, is seen as a defense mechanism of a group that feels that its integrity is being threatened. That is especially true in the moral sphere, since Brazilian society does not seem to offer a moral model for the raising of its children. Eminent Brazilian sociologist Sergio Buarque de Holanda classified two types of ambition for a nation – working-type peoples and venturing-type peoples – distinguishing each other’s cultural traits: the former aspire to attain wealth through persistence by transforming work into products, planting and harvesting. On the other end, the venturing type ignores boundaries, wishes to collect fruit without planting a tree, takes risks and knows how to transform obstacles into a trampoline. According to him, the latter is known for its impertinence, improvidence, unstableness and some “irresponsibility and idleness” features that would identify some of the cultural aspects of Brazil. Of course, Korea is much closer to the working-type people in this classification, and even though Holanda’s intention was to draw out the positive elements of Brazilian cultural traits through this classification, such as as flexibility, tolerance and adaptability, Koreans understand them respectively as permissiveness, carelessness and immorality. It is no coincidence that community churches play an essencial role in this struggle for moral preservation.

bigger, since these are from big companies only, not to mention all their families.
28 Eventually, many of them ended up settling in Brazil. As they feel themselves different from the two other groups, they gather themselves in an associational group called Nurumae-hoe, that is, “the group of those who remained.”
The limits of enculturation

In the study of Prof. Kyung Su Jun, he states as a premise that “the success of an immigration to a country is measured by how deep the immigrants or their second generation are inserted and participating in the local society. Those who have learned more deeply the culture offered by the Brazilian society can, in the same extent, participate more deeply in the Brazilian society, and those who have not, naturally lead a life apart of the Brazilian culture, even living inside its society.” But, after half a century, the insertion of Korean youngsters in Brazilian society seems to be occurring solely in the professional area. Actually, in other aspects, it seems that the Korean community is drawing further and further away from enculturation. The interviews showed a clear distinction between the before and after of the advent of digital media in the mid 90s and the way in which the Korean immigrants interacted with Brazilian culture. After this period, Korean dramas and news were made available through the internet and DVDs, and, especially by TVC (TV Coreia), a cable TV channel that aired in October 1998, showing mixed content from SBS, MBC, YTN and Arirang. The Korean community portal sites www.hanin.com.br, which began its activities in 2001 and www.hanaro.com.br started in 2003, offer continuously updated Korean content.

It is not an exaggeration to say that, from the beginning, enculturation was not part of the Korean’s immigration project in Brazil. It is widely known that most wanted to earn money and re-immigrate to the US – the ultimate goal – or, at least, send their sons there to study. Thus, the extent of enculturation in Brazil has always been deliberately limited to survival as an entrepreneur in Brazil. But now, the perspective or the will for enculturation seems even more distant, for the “new” rediscovered Korea, as it was now seen, was much better than that remembered by the elders or that imagined by the youngsters. And, more importantly, it was seen as being richer and more fashionable than Brazil. Of course, a number of other elements have helped: twenty years of Brazil’s economic stagnation has helped to build an image of Korea as a model to be followed; the financial crisis of the 80s forced many Koreans out of their garment activities and they turned to the business of trading Korean goods, spurred by Brazil’s market opening policy; hallyu products – music, dramas, films – attracted not only Korean youngsters but their non-Korean friends; and Korea’s new policy toward overseas Koreans.

OKF (Overseas Koreans Foundation) was established in 1997 by the Ministry of Trade and Foreign Affairs, and its slogan “Interior and exterior Koreans are one” is a clear indication of the new willingness to embrace the 6.8 million Koreans overseas. Several projects finance local activities – such as supporting Korean language schools –, enabling fellow Koreans abroad to tour Korea, maintaining worldwide Korean organizations such as the Future Leaders Conference and the Korean

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31 http://tvc.nammiro.com/idx.php?id=tvc. Since 2005, TVC have been conveying Korean dramas with Portuguese subtitles for the 2nd generation as well as for Japanese, Chinese and even Brazilian viewers.
32 Constitution of 1988, pronounced by President Fernando Collor.
Business Convention, which attracts numerous Korean-Brazilian youngsters. In 2009, an amendment of the Korea's Election Law granted overseas Korean nationals the right to vote as of 2012.

With all these movements, it seems that the very concept of enculturation is becoming outdated. Eun Mi Yang, a Korean Portuguese language graduate from Hankuk University for Foreign Studies who is presently writing a doctoral thesis on the 1.5 Korean generation in Brazil, at the Faculty of Education, University of São Paulo, also shares this view. According to her research, these youngsters, albeit being socially integrated to Brazilian society as professionals, are culturally identifying themselves as Koreans. She concludes that among several sources of education – school, family, church, mass media, friends – family education still talks more loudly in shaping their cultural identity, and as they get in touch with Korea, their cultural bond with Korea is reinforced, having the new set of circumstances described above as background.

The story of 30-year-old H. J. Park, a 1.5 generation woman, is a good example: she came to Brazil when she was 15 and, after graduating in Advertising & Marketing in Brazil, she went to London where she got her master’s degree in Design at Central Saint Martins. Today, she works as the Strategic Planning Manager at the Brazilian branch of McCann Erickson, a huge advertising agency. Her interest in Korea was aroused after she was invited to visit Korea as part of the 7th Future Leaders Conference held by OKF in November, 2009. She, who “was quite indifferent to Korea, never interested in Korea and never thought of spending money to tour Korea” ended up rediscovering herself culturally as a Korean through this visit to this “strange homeland.” After her experience, she started a blog to divulge Korean contemporary culture in Portuguese called “Great Korea” and even engaged herself in Korean Associational Activities as Director for Welfare Affairs. An excerpt of what she wrote about her trip is shown below:

“The days that followed made my 'spirit of race,' which was lazily dormant inside of me, awaken and take flight (...) From a certain moment on, I was conscious that I was not a visitor but the very owner of that place (...) Although I've always considered myself a pretty much globalized person (...) I had to experience the harsh fact that he who does not realize his own identity roots cannot pretend to be of any other culture (...) I have always felt uncomfortable with the overly conservative Korean community (...) I was foolish and arrogant building up a wall against Koreans, neglecting my own identity (...) When I analyze myself now, this very gesture of avoiding the Asian portion that I relegate as provincial and trying hard to reach for the western classy culture were, in truth, an expression of the complex face of western civilization, a proof that I hadn't overcome the culture shock (...) I think there have been many times when I wronged myself committing an irresponsible error, nearly a murder, against my own culture. Today, I idealize an attitude of soul and heart capable of unifying the foreign breath in one smooth rhythm, as a 1.5 Korean and as an immigrant. I want to give my motherland and my identity an expression through my life, as I was given the chance to get to know it once more, more naturally. This may be overly ambitious, but I want to grow inside as

an intellectual in whom thoughts, words and acts about my identity are transparently united into one. I even think this is a task for us all.”

From this passage it becomes clear that the concept of enculturation as we know it cannot describe all the modes of interaction of the Korean-Brazilian youngsters as it is happening today.