

# **The Reality of Immigrants: A Long Journey from Mongolia to Korea**

**Jin-Young Kim**

(Corresponding Author)

Department of Global Cultural Contents

Hankuk University of Foreign Studies

107 Imunro, Dongdaemun-gu, Seoul, Korea, 130-791

E-mail: staci21@naver.com

**Young-Jun Lee**

Department of English Literature

Seoul National University of Science and Technology

232 Gongneungro, Nowon-gu, Seoul, Korea, 139-743

E-mail: 007mom@daum.net

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## **Abstract**

Mongolia and Korea have kept close ties since the two countries established diplomatic relations in 1991. The exchanges of business activities and human resources have been rapidly increasing every year. Consequently, the number of Mongolians who entered Korea is increasing and the trade volume between the two countries has developed in a similar vein. Reflecting this socio-demographic phenomenon, the Korean government has implemented a wide variety of supportive policies for immigrants. It is indispensable to securing good human resources in order to cope with changes in political situations around the Korean Peninsula and develop future-oriented relations between the two nations

**Keywords:** Mongolia, Korea, Marriage Immigrant, Migrant Worker, Multiculture.

## **1. Introduction**

Mongolia has been a very near and far away country in relation to Korea throughout the history. Korea (Goryeo) ruled by the Yuan Dynasty in the 13th and 14th centuries has experienced a great deal of change in almost every aspect from politics to coiffure. Although the dramatic concoction of the two cultures was attributed to the conquest, apparently, Goryeo and the Yuan Dynasty once enjoyed a close bond that lasted almost one hundred years (Korean History Research Group, 2005). From the perspective of modern history, until the late 1980s, Mongolia was a socialist country strongly intertwined with the Soviet Union (Lee, H., 2004) and perceived as an enemy state against the free world. Accordingly, the two countries have been forced to remain estranged from each other diplomatically.

However, breaking these historical fetters, Korea and Mongolia reached a turning point when they restored diplomatic relations in 1991. Since then, the bilateral exchanges of business activities and human resources have been rapidly increasing every year. According to statistics from Korea Immigration Service, the number of Mongolians who entered Korea as of July, 2014 reached 41,979, a 93.2% increase from the previous year (The Monthly Statistics, July, 2014). The trade volume between the two countries has developed in a similar vein. Except for the years of the global financial crisis in 2007 and 2008, exportation to Mongolia has increased by over 10% while the importation from the country has been increasing by over 50% every year since 2011 (Korea Customs Service, 2012). These remarkable figures depict that the two countries have maintained a close relationship in recent years. In addition, the Mongolians living in Korea play a crucial role in turning Korea, which has upheld a longstanding tradition of being a homogeneous society with a strong cultural identity, into an ethnically diverse multicultural nation. The arrival of marriage immigrants, migrant workers and students from Mongolia to Korea has recently helped bridge the gap of hundreds of years between the two countries. Even though the reality that the Mongolian immigrants have to either confront or overcome may still be in existence, their efforts have already planted the seeds to the achievement of incremental changes in Korean society

## **2. Study Method**

To conduct this study, the comprehensive surveys carried out by the governmental bodies such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family and the Ministry of Strategy and Finance from 2009 to 2012 were analyzed, with particular focus on data concerning Mongolia. The official statistics released by Statistics Korea, Bank of Korea, and Korea Immigration Service have also provided approximate figures on immigrants in Korea. Relevant theses published by the Korean Association for Mongolian Studies from 2001 to 2013 as well as dissertations registered in the National Assembly Library of the Republic of Korea were studied in conducting the research on Mongolian immigrants. For a practical approach, major newspaper articles and related literature such as books and magazines were also included in the study. Direct contact was made with officials working at the Mongolian Embassy in Seoul and the Ministry of Equal Gender and Family, the Ministry of Employment and Labor to broaden the scope of the research.

## **3. Previous Studies**

From the 1990s, when Korea and Mongolia established diplomatic ties, to the present some remarkable studies have been conducted on Korean language education for Mongolian learners and on current political, economic, and societal situations in Mongolia. Studies on the positive economic effects and achievements with marketing strategies regarding the cooperation between the two nations, given that Mongolia is one of the top 10 nations worldwide in terms of natural resources, have also been conducted. However, these studies reflect an interest in the quantitative results of the exchange of human and material resources rather than the epistemological aspects. The purpose of a study advocating the necessity to develop Korean language textbooks (Kim, M., 2011; Tsagaanchuluun, A., 2010; Purev-Ochir, A., 2008) is mainly to enhance substantial aspects of Korean language education in Mongolia including the securing of expert teachers, teaching methods, teacher training programs. In the current situation in which there are almost no proper textbooks appropriate to Mongolians' requirements and characteristics while we have general colloquial textbooks for learners speaking English, Chinese, and Japanese, the study proposes the development of Korean language textbooks with practical contents covering overall life cultures of the two nations.

While a Korean language textbook is a tool with which one can reduce differential elements between Korea and Mongolia through education about the two nations' cultural differences as well as language, students from Mongolia and Korean students studying in Mongolia are the main intermediaries who not only understand cultural differences between each other's countries as a result of having acquired each other's cultures, but who also form networks of cultural exchanges. In their work related with international students, Han (2009) and

Bayarjargal (2011) try to provide basic data that can help Mongolian students adjust to college life by attempting to shed light on the general characteristics of Mongolian students living in Korea, the stresses they experience in making cultural adjustments, social support, and levels of adjustment to college life, and examine what effects they have on the students' adjustment to college life. Choi (2011) has compared and examined Chinese and Mongolian student groups in Korea based on a questionnaire survey and interviews about the former group's recognition of Korea and their nationalistic disposition, but her study focuses on Chinese students rather than Mongolian students in Korea.

Mongolia has a history in which it made a foray to Europe as well as Asia to build a great empire. Thus, numerous studies have been conducted on the period during which Korea made geographically close relationships with the 13th century's Yuan (Lee, S., 2009; Yook, J., Byambasuren, O., 2010; Park, W., 2007; Northeast Asian History Foundation, 2011). The tendency since the 2000s has been to conduct studies examining the conditions and cultural adjustment problems concerning Mongolian marriage immigrants (Batarjawoo, M., 2011; Chae, O., Hong, D. and Song, B., 2009; Huh, M., 2009), and writings on the problems triggered by international marriages (Shin, S., 2012) have been increasing with the rapidly growing numbers of marriage-immigrated women. However, most of the studies merely suggest abstract methods by which to help marriage-immigrated women lead stable family lives. Due to the lack of comprehensive investigations about Mongolian marriage-immigrated women, we not only have been unable to grasp their practical requirements, but we have also failed to meet the prerequisite that of establishing multicultural policies and related laws in Korea in the first place. Thus, in establishing policies for marriage-immigrants, research suggesting productive and creative welfare is essential in order to provide quality education for the purpose of improving social welfare and keeping them from experiencing difficulty with obtaining employment or starting up their own businesses. In addition, studies about workers, who account for a considerable portion of Mongolian immigrants (Lee, I., 2006; Bayarma, 2008), have mainly focused on workforce use issues like working conditions and the economic effects of their employment. However, as the rate of illegal immigration of Mongolian workers has exceeded 30%, the number of laborers who have settled in Korea is increasing and their economic activities have considerable influence on the industrial realm. Given this state of affairs, a shift to a new paradigm is necessary in which immigrated workers are recognized as proper members of society rather than as a group that simply provides a cheap workforce.

Though Mongolia-related studies have been carried out in diverse directions as such, we have almost no general work on immigrants newly introduced following the establishment of diplomatic relations, namely, marriage immigrants, migrant workers, and students. It is a priority to secure good human resources in order to cope with changes in political situations around the Korean Peninsula and develop future-oriented relations between the two nations. As Mongolian immigrants are valuable human resources for the foundation of cultural and economic exchanges with their potential to serve as a bridge between the two nations, this study provides more integrated basic data for the establishment of cultural policies and projects for Mongolian immigrants.

#### **4. Marriage Immigrants**

The recent propensity toward a high demand for cross-border marriages has resulted from the social problems embedded in Korea. Traditionally, the preference for sons over daughters has led to a serious imbalance between males and females of marriageable age. In addition, due to the nation's low birthrate, daughters and sons now receive equal treatment and education (Seol, 2005). Consequently, the increase of highly educated women and their rising participation in economic activities may impede marriage. The vast economic difference between urban and rural areas is another factor that disturbs the marriage market. Men of lower socioeconomic status, especially those living in the countryside, tend to remain unmarried. As a possible solution to the difficulties that have arisen in the domestic marriage market, Korea has witnessed a massive influx of marriage immigrants since the early 2000s.

Korea is a very fast learner and adopter especially when it involves western doctrines or new trends. Multiculturalism, a term that originated from the Western world, is no exception. After the Multicultural Family Support Act was enacted in 2007, the Korean government implemented a number of multicultural policies to integrate immigrants into Korean society. The Ministry of Gender Equality and Family mainly in charge of the policies related to multicultural families conducted a comprehensive survey on marriage immigrants throughout the nation based on the Act in 2009. The results concerning Mongolian marriage immigrants are as follows: The total number of Mongolian marriage immigrants is 1,830 which ranked the 7th (1.8%) among international marriages as of 2009 and an overwhelming 98% of which consists of females. These Mongolian marriage immigrants mainly reside in Seoul and its neighboring province. About 55% of them are considered to be new comers who entered Korea after the year 2005. This figure proves relatively higher than that of Japanese and Korean-Chinese marriage immigrants. The average of age gap is 10 years between a Korean man and Mongolian wife, and the gap between a Mongolian man and Korean wife is 6.3 years while Korean couples have a gap of only 2.2 years (the National Statistics Service, 2010).

Marriage between an older man and a young woman may be accepted positively in certain cultures, yet it may pose serious problems to Korea's domestic economy. The Standard of Korean Labor Act stipulates a retirement age of 58, which can reduce the economic ability of a household. In Korea, a country where education is highly cherished, it is not surprising that private sector education spending is double the OECD average. Accordingly, it is inevitable that the nation's education relies heavily on individual economic strength. In the cold light of reality, parents will be likely to pass down their wealth and even educational capital to the next generation. That is why a major part of multicultural policies should be focused on providing vocational training to immigrant women so that they can easily access the job market. Fortunately, 61.3% of the Mongolian women immigrants entered Korea with college degrees. This figure is relatively higher than that of other immigrants. Hence, they have a high potential to obtain a decent job. About half of the Mongolian marriage immigrants assess that their Korean language competence to be good, following Korean Chinese immigrants. Other immigrants (non-Mongolian) do not consider themselves as good language learners. However, their overall educational level is high, one out of three Mongolian marriage immigrants does not possess his or her own house but rent on a yearly or monthly basis. Like education, house ownership manifests more than a structure in Korea: it represents the house owner's socio-economic status, which many Koreans are obsessed with.

The monthly income of Mongolian-Korean households is far below average, with about 44% of households earning less than 2 million won (\$1,850 USD) while 40% of the Koreans earn more than 3.44 million won (\$3,185 USD). Consequently, these immigrants think of themselves as lower class compared to the Koreans. However, despite their economic difficulties, more than 60% feel satisfied with their lives in Korea. Only one out of three Mongolian marriage immigrants has a job and 68% have no occupation. Those reporting to be unemployed actually used to work in their home country. Although most of them have higher educational capital, they may seem to have a great deal of difficulty gaining access to the job market. The reasons for this may vary. For example, 62% of the women chose to be stay-at-home mother. On the other hand, less than 10% were unable to find a proper job, which left them unemployed. As for the jobs typically available to immigrants, a majority of them involve simple labor. Ironically, only 1.3% of the Mongolian marriage immigrants pursued the mere low-skilled jobs. An absolute majority, 93.8% is willing to have an occupation. To meet their needs, a job platform designed specifically for immigrants should be constructed to provide appropriate services.

Following the Chinese-Koreans, Mongolians have the second highest rate of immigrants (71.3%) that plan to be naturalized or who have already acquired Korean citizenship. Moreover, Korean citizenship gradually increases the immigration of other family members to Korea. Mongolian marriage immigrants tend to build up a strong bond with their families back home, keeping in touch with them at least once a week. The approval rate for marriage with a Korean is higher than that of Chinese-Koreans or Filipinos.

Most Koreans acknowledge the trend of increased cross-border marriages although they still may not deem it to be desirable. Reflecting this recognition, the government has implemented many policies to integrate the marriage immigrants over the last decade. For instance, the Nationality Act, the Departures and Arrivals Control Act, and related laws on social welfare have provided immigrants with a systemic footing. However, these policies have drawbacks, such as the fact that they often overlook immigrants' cultural and ethnic identity by presuming them to form a homogeneous group. As an example, it would be a serious misconception to perceive Pakistani and Indian immigrants to be identical just because they have similar facial features, skin color and hair. Moreover, as Koreans differ vastly from Japanese, immigrants differ concerning their historical background, present needs and circumstances. Multicultural policies are limited in two additional aspects. First, the policies drawn by the Korean administration mainly focus on marriage immigrants in spite of the fact that they comprise a smaller proportion of immigrants as a whole by applying a divide-and-rule strategy that integrates sedentary marriage immigrants while neglecting migrant workers. Although its policies sometimes raise a hue and cry, the government strictly continues to prioritize marriage immigrants over workers. Secondly, the multicultural policies do not appear to be conducive to a paradigm shift in attitudes towards and approaches to immigrants. Recently, an anti-immigration movement has emerged and tried to expand its influence. Ironically, as more multicultural policies have emerged, more problems have arisen.

## 5. Migrant Workers

The Korean government has been executing the Employment Permit System since 2003 to ease labor shortages particularly in '3D' (Dirty, Difficult, and Dangerous) industries. The system allows employers who have failed to employ Korean workers to legally hire an adequate number of foreign workers. The government introduced this system as a means of managing foreign workers in Korea in an organized manner. As of December 2012, a total of 230,000 workers from 15 countries with which Korea has signed a memorandum of understanding on the Employment Permit System have been hired at designated workplaces. Under this system, Korea has witnessed an increased influx of Mongolian workers, reaching as many as 9,136 as of 2012. This figure is almost four times larger than the number of marriage immigrants.

Unlike other migrant workers who rushed onto Korea in the early 1990s, Mongolians only started to come to Korea after 1997. Thus, Korea is still an unfamiliar land to Mongolians, who adhered to a communist system under the influence of the Soviet Union and then experienced a period of chaos and turbulence with the introduction of capitalism and democracy in the 1990s. With the establishment of a formal democratic relationship between Korea and Mongolia in 1990, the two countries came to know each other and a relationship has been built up gradually between them.

First of all, we will look into the factors inducing them to Korea. Korea has recorded around \$10,000 GNP per person owing to economic growth, continuous wage increases following the country's democratization, and the rise in college graduates, which resulted in lowered entry into 3D work. According to Labor Market Division Theory, the labor market in Korea has become divided with the major industry changing from that of labor intensive, secondary industries to the tertiary industries focusing on information and technology services. Despite the high number of unemployed people among Koreans, the secondary industry fields still lack personnel. Additionally, Korea is very close to Mongolia from the perspective of history, culture, race and language. The Soviet Union, once a longstanding ally, collapsed. Relations with China have historically been hostile, Japan left animosity emotionally because of World War II. Europe and the US are distant from Mongolia geographically. By comparison, Korea is being recognized as a culturally and economically advanced country based on the hallyu craze, and more and more Mongolians are coming to Korea, thereby increasing exchange of materials and human resources between two countries.

Labor immigration to Korea has also been spurred by domestic difficulties in Mongolia. With chaotic turbulence owing to the fall of the communist regime, Mongolia's economy has

worsened and with the exception of a few wealthy people so has the quality of life for most people. As of 2011, Mongolia is a poor country recording a GDP of around \$4,800, and average labor wages are below 108,000 tugriks. Because of the economic difficulties in the domestic market, labor immigration to Korea is an attractive option despite the expenses and risks involved.

Additionally, the high unemployment rate, which has reached 40% due to economic stagnation, has accelerated the emigration of Mongolian workers. It is known that more than 100,000 out of 2.5 million of total population are working overseas. The amount remitted by 15,000 Mongolian workers in Korea is estimated as 77.4 billion won per year, which accounts for 7.1% of Mongolia's annual GDP. Mongolian workers in Korea can make an enormous impact on the economy of Mongolia, even when they actually earn a little less than the estimated amount.

When looking into Mongolian migrant workers, we can find several distinctive characteristics. First, they have high mobility. As nomads-accustomed to moving to places where they can feed their stocks, they show dynamic rather than static traits. They relocate their dwellings and change works very often and are oriented to the new and the fresh. It is difficult to find a tendency to enjoy stability through settlement. In regard to human relationships, they form relations based on the supposition that they may depart at any time rather than building deep relations with selected people. They usually do not marry but live together and then form new relationships with new partners. As they tend to be dynamic in nature, they enjoy festivals, parties and rigorous exercises.

Second, compared to migrant workers from other countries, they show remarkable capabilities in terms of adapting to Korean society. As they are close to Koreans from the perspective of race, it is difficult to distinguish them from Koreans, and they usually learn the basic Korean language necessary for everyday life in 6 months. As the linguistic disparity between Korean and Mongolian is very small, they can learn Korean very quickly. Furthermore, they seem to have a high capacity to learn languages overall as revealed in their ability to learn Russian, English and Chinese in a short time. Excluding the Korean-Chinese and ethnic Koreans from Middle Asia, Mongolians are the best at learning Korean language and culture. Their remarkable achievements in acquiring new languages and knowledge reflect their strong desire to study.

Third, Mongolian migrant workers are typically young. This is consistent with the age distribution among Mongolia's population. In Mongolia, the number of people under 30 is nearly twice that of those over 40. The proportion of young people is especially higher among Mongolian workers in Korea. While these young workers have a traditional culture and way of thinking, they also have a globally universal youth culture and mindset because of the influence of mass media.

## **6. Mongolian Students in Korea**

Like Korea, the people of Mongolia have a high level of enthusiasm concerning education. The number of students in Mongolia is about 730,000, accounting for about a quarter of the entire population. Mongolia's educational capital is impressive given that more than 90% of high school students advance to universities or polytechnic schools, and the number of universities and colleges is relatively high in proportion to its population. Currently, the popularity of Korean culture, called *hallyu*, has been rising in Mongolia. This is associated with interest in the Korean language and its miraculous economic development in spite of the destructive Korean War. Hence, the number of Mongolian students who come to Korea to receive degrees at the university level or to learn the Korean language has risen.

According to the Korea Immigration Service, the number of Mongolian students as of December 2012 is 4,952, which is second to the number of Chinese students. Korea has actively developed and exploited foreign students as a human resource from 2005 through the advent of the 'Study Korea' Project, a program designed to attract international students.

Moreover, Korea intends to make the leap to become the Northeast Asian Hub for knowledge and human resources by creating opportunities to become publicized worldwide. Accordingly, the number of Mongolian students invited by the Korean government occupies third place among all international student groups.

However, basic information about Mongolian students, though on the increase, is still insufficient. According to a questionnaire survey conducted on Mongolian students in 2008, they tended to experience stress in regard to cultural adjustment, male students experienced more culture shock than their female counterparts, and cultural adjustment stresses were lower in students accommodated in dormitories compared with students living in boarding houses or in housing that did not supply meals. Students who belonged to a religion experienced more difficulty with cultural adjustment than students without a religion, which seems to suggest that the atheist atmosphere of Mongolia's longstanding socialism had an influence on many students. Based on the fact that Mongolian students received the greatest amount of support from other Mongolian friends rather than from professors, persons affiliated with a religion, or official agencies, and the lowest support from their Korean seniors or juniors, we can see that barriers existed with regard to making personal relations or extending social networks.

In particular, given the fact that the students who frequently used college services showed significant results in cultural adjustment, it seems necessary to provide them with supportive programs like learning helper programs and opportunities to make Korean friends. Such programs can give positive and receptive recognition of other cultures also to Korean students by increasing their understanding of Mongolian culture.

However, Mongolian students are relatively new-comers and may still need time to play core roles in Mongolian society, Korea is rising as a new place that provides high quality human resources for Mongolia as the past 10 years have seen Mongolian students increased up to the second place after Chinese students.

Mongolian students who have finished their studies in Korea are playing faithful roles by serving as a bridge between the two nations after their return to their motherland. In 2007, the Mongolian Association of Graduates in Korea (MAGIKO) was founded, which has the goal of publicizing Korea throughout Mongolia by building networks among its members, contributing to the development of Mongolian society, and in particular, devoting themselves to the promotion of the relationship between the two nations.

## **7. Conclusion**

Mongolia has called Korea Rainbow in the Middle Age demonstrating their close relationship. That is, Korea was accounted the Land of Light which had had pride in beautiful nature and cultural heritage for then Mongolians (Kim, K., 1998). It may be an old legacy found in the history of both countries, yet the recent phenomenon surrounding the influx of Mongolian immigrants depicts that the Rainbow is an old word that can be used in a new sense.

Mongolia has been one of Korea's important allies for the last decade and the subsequent and sustainable exchanges of human resources have made the two countries closer than ever. As a country having the 10th largest amount of natural resources, Mongolia is building a new type of strategic partnership with Korea. At the same time, Korea can share its experience in developing a miraculous economy and marketing strategy with Mongolia as well.

It is necessary to become more efficient at building a constructive partnership between the two countries. Thus, it should be a primary target of the government to utilize the cultural identity of Mongolian immigrants, including marriage immigrants, migrant workers and students entering Korea in fulfillment of their dreams, in further bridging Mongolia and Korea. However, as seen above, Korea has not had sufficient, empirical experiences in its history regarding ethnic groups. Thus, its multicultural policies mainly aim to support

immigrants based on social welfare and more productive measures. A comprehensive study or survey on demand of each immigrant group conducted by the government does not even exist, which indicates that immigrants are still perceived as a whole.

Accordingly, a comprehensive survey should be premised on developing any relevant policies and strategies. The first step to becoming a real Rainbow does not start from the yellow brick road but from the road to the politics of recognition for immigrants.

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