



# “What is Korean Identity?”

## Spring 2020 EAI Internship Project

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### Report Purpose

In 2005, the East Asia Institute (EAI) launched a research project aimed at identifying the shifting values and identity of South Koreans. Since then, the “Korean Identity” project has conducted a public opinion survey once every five years to analyze how South Korean people perceive themselves and others. The survey covers social issues such as views of Korean history, social participation, perceptions of social conflicts, and perceptions of foreign affairs. The EAI team then collects and analyzes the longitudinal survey data to present the main findings in a written report. EAI published the results of the public opinion survey, last conducted in 2015, in a volume titled *South Korean Identity: Change and Continuity, 2005-2015*. The publication was awarded the 2017 Sejong Book Prize for Academic Publications by the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism. Thus far, EAI has conducted the survey three times over the last fifteen years (2005-2015), and the fourth survey will take place this year, in 2020.

In light of the 2020 “Korean Identity” survey and research, EAI intern for the 2020 Winter-Spring semester, Suhena Mehra, under the guidance of research associate Sea Young Kim, conducted interviews with individuals on their perspective of what it means to be Korean within a globalized society. This report is a product of her internship research on Korean identity and consists of in-depth interviews with students studying in Korea, who come from diverse backgrounds and areas around the globe. The interviews reveal their multifaceted understanding of identity, Koreanness, and Korean assimilation. This report was written with formal consent from the interviewees, who have asked to remain anonymous due to privacy concerns.

### Introduction

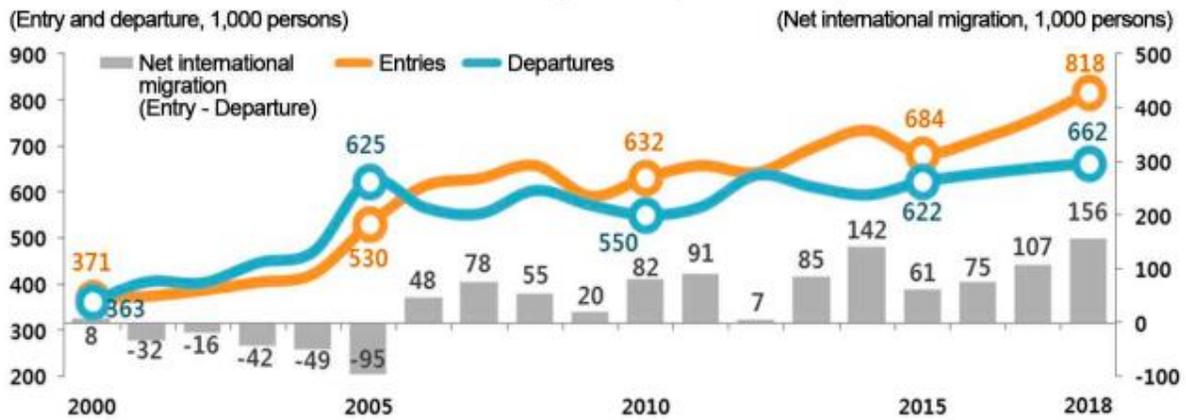
Korea is regarded largely as an ethnically homogeneous and racially pure nation. The division of the Korean Peninsula into the Republic of South Korea (ROK or South Korea) and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK or North Korea) following the Korean War not only dichotomized the Korean population but the aftermath of war has also led to the dispersion of Koreans across the world. Migration patterns that developed after Korea’s industrialization also contributed to the formation of a diverse Korean diaspora. An observation of how South Koreans’ perception of their identity



changes over time amid the ever-changing global environment hence provides a meaningful case study for research on ethnicity and identity.

Though foreign nationals have visited Korea for many decades, this number has increasingly grown throughout the last decade due to globalization and freer movement of people across borders. The number of international migrants<sup>1</sup> rose to 1.48 million in 2018, which is a record high after 2000. This figure also represents a 5 percent increase from the 71 thousand persons recorded in 2017.<sup>2</sup> The entries of Koreans and non-Koreans increased by 5.7 percent and by 9.4 percent respectively. In particular, the entries of Koreans and non-Koreans aged 20 to 29 showed the highest increase of 7.7 percent, totaling 21 thousand persons.<sup>3</sup>

Figure 1: International Migrations (2000-2018)



Source: International Migration Statistics, Statistics Korea, 2019.

In addition, more Koreans have been travelling to foreign destinations, both temporarily and permanently. As of 2019, roughly 7.5 million people of Korean descent live outside of Korea.<sup>4</sup> The Korean diaspora community does not consist of a uniform group and individuals are scattered across the globe in northern China, in the former Soviet Union and North America. As such individuals of Korean descent communicate and interact with the international community they also transform the external perception of Korean identity.

How has globalization changed Koreans' perception of their own identity over the years? According to EAI's study on Korean identity, globalization has not exactly brought about an "opening up" in terms of how South Koreans perceive their identity. For example, compared to 2010, South Koreans' level of empathy towards multicultural families fell in 2015. In her analysis, Professor Jung-Mee Hwang suggests that South Koreans not only identify foreigners as an

<sup>1</sup> Migrants are defined as those who have stayed in Korea for more than 91 days, concerning both entries and departures.

<sup>2</sup> While entries totaled 818 thousand, a rise of 60 thousand (7.9%) from 2017, departures totaled 662 thousand, with a rise of 11 thousand persons (1.6%) from 2017.

<sup>3</sup> International Migration Statistics in 2018, Statistics Korea, 2019.

<sup>4</sup> *재외동포현황(2019)/Total number of overseas Koreans (2019)*. South Korea: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2019. Retrieved April 1, 2020.



element of fear, but as “others” who are to be ousted from their cultural community. Professor In-Jin Yoon adds by arguing that the number of South Koreans who believe that governmental support toward North Korean defectors and multicultural families is excessive has also increased from 2010 to 2015.<sup>5</sup> It would be interesting to see how such narrowing in perception has progressed with the upcoming 2020 survey.

## **Literature Review: What Do “Uri Nara,” “Multiculturalism Problem,” and “Otherness” Have in Common?**

While there are many existing studies on ethnicity and Korean identity, this report discusses three literature below with the following themes in order to provide further analytical context of the interviews that were conducted: ‘*uri nara* (우리 나라, or our country),’ the ‘multiculturalism problem,’ and ‘otherness.’

‘*Uri nara* (우리 나라),’ which means ‘our country’ in Korean is used by Koreans in everyday conversation when referring to South Korea. This national unity according to Patrick showcases pride in the nation and willingness to come together as one. According to his interview, these are the defining characteristics of Korean identity.

Kim Nelson finds that the use of this term is confusing to ‘others’, for example, Korean adoptees. This is due to the underlying national confusion about transnational adoption and the return of Korean adoptees to Korean soil. Korean adoptee identity is often shaped by connections to fellow adoptees and by feelings of cultural and racial in-betweenness, rather than a connection with other Koreans and the country. According to Nelson this disconnect forms the basis for ‘other’ Koreans’ net-working and activism.<sup>6</sup>

Draudt identifies the challenge faced by the government of the Republic of Korea to incorporate 1.57 million foreign-born residents into its social, economic, and political landscape. The ‘Multiculturalism problem’ is an existential one due to Korea’s historical idea of ethno-racial purity.<sup>7</sup> This causes a tension between its narrative of being a homogeneous nation and a 21st-century global democracy. In her interview, Bella provides insights into *identity as a product of ability*, highlighting social integration of foreigners as a prime adaptation method and access to Korean identity. She believes that it is possible to maintain a unique identity while also adapting to a new environment. However, governmental policies towards foreign migrant policies are rooted in filling economic needs, paying little attention to cultural differences.

Integration centers for multiethnic families target wives and children and focus on assimilation rather than integration from both sides, which creates a lack of understanding of diversity. Bella’s insights into the experiences of Polish brides also align with this discourse. The notion of citizenship based on ethnocultural homogeneity and descent is prevalent in policies towards co-ethnics i.e. genealogy is preferred over expertise. Elsa’s insights into *identity as a product of physical and legal existence* remove this idea of ethnocultural homogeneity and provides for a more inclusive

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<sup>5</sup> Lee, Nae-Young, Yoon, In-Jin. “South Korean Identity: Change and Continuity, 2005-2015.” East Asia Institute. 2016. ISBN 979-11-87558-02-6 93340

<sup>6</sup> Kim Park Nelson, “Uri Nara, Our Country Korean American Adoptees in the Global Age,” In *Invisible Asians: Korean American Adoptees, Asian American Experiences, and Racial Exceptionalism*, 150-188. New Brunswick; New Jersey; London: Rutgers University Press, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Darcie Draudt, “South Korea’s National Identity Crisis in the Face of Emerging Multiculturalism,” *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* 17, no. 1 (2016): 12-19.



view. Anya's insights into *identity as a product of experiences* provide an even more multifaceted look at identity as a constantly evolving idea. Although it is unlikely that Korean policies will take these into account in the near future, Draudt believes that it is key for the South Korean government to continue to help shape what it means to be Korean in the 21st century through inclusivity, tolerance, understanding, and appreciation of cultural and ethnic diversity.<sup>8</sup>

Lee finds that Korea relies heavily on the concept of 'otherness' to categorize mixed race people and foreign brides. Racial, gendered, and sexual discursive modalities have rendered them outside the scope and meaning of Ko-reanness. This is also reflected in the gendered politics and establishment of laws that govern traditional desired familial relations.<sup>9</sup> Anya's insights about the Korean societal categorization of people and the implication this has on identity are in line with Lee's position on Korea's reliance on 'othering'.

In Korea, citizenship is determined through patrilineal descent which creates unequal access to healthcare, social welfare and state education. Historically, multiracial subjectivity had been folded into pre-existing medical classifications that work to pathologize mixed-race children and metaphorically liken racial hybridity to physical and mental degeneracy.<sup>10</sup> This subjectivity is still prevalent today and interviews with Amerasians and other mixed-race children reveal that issues like fear of rejection, isolation, abandonment, discrimination, suicide, joblessness, debt are still prevalent.

The 'othering' of mixed-race children and the masculine vision of public community through patriarchal citizenship subordinates women's bodies to the service of state growth. Patrick's insights into *identity as a product of upbringing and tradition* highlights the patriarchal traditions and values that continue to shape Korean identity today. Pride, responsibility as well as pressure and burden are mixed emotions that are attached to the tradition of compulsory military conscription for men. The expectations from men to be the heads of household and of women to be filial above all else also highlight the existence of patriarchal values in traditions that define what it means to be Korean.

This patriarchal governance has in recent times shifted the stigmatization of Korean women to poor foreign women which Lee describes as the 'transference of colonial vantage point', and highlights the underlying exoticism of foreign brides, as extended wombs of the nation. Not only are these women subjugated but their mixed race children rendered 'exceptional' legally and 'non national' socially. This can also be seen in the usage of words like 'Kosians' and 'Kyopos' to describe 'other' Koreans, positioning them with an ontological identity and positioning Korea as a spatial temporal center apart from the peripheral rest.<sup>11</sup>

## Interviews

According to statistics released by the Education Ministry, as of 2018, a total of 142,200 international students are currently studying in Korea. In just four years, there has been an increase by 67.5 percent from 2014.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>9</sup> Mary Lee, "Mixed Race Peoples in the Korean National Imaginary and Family." *Korean Studies* 32 (2008): 56-85.

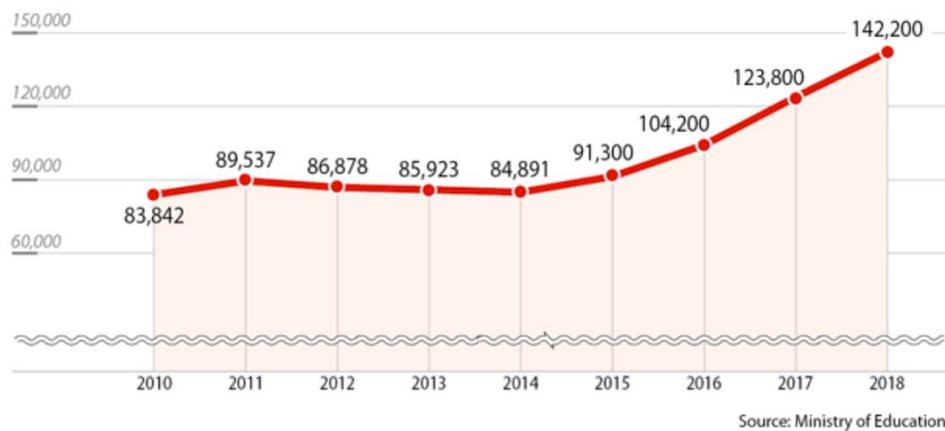
<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ministry of Education, 2018.



Figure 2: Number of International Students Studying in Korea



Source: Ministry of Education, 2018.

Personal interviews were conducted with four such individuals on self identity, Koreanness and assimilation. These individuals have been provided the following pseudo names due to privacy concerns: Patrick, Bella, Anya and Elsa. This report sheds light on the issues highlighted above through the experiences of these students and their unique perceptions of identity and in particular, Korean identity.

### I. Patrick: A Korean National Who Has Studied Abroad for Many Years

Despite living in the United States for almost a decade during his formative years, **Patrick** identifies as Korean for several reasons. He describes his home environment in the US as Korean since his family spoke Korean, ate Korean food and maintained the Korean culture.

In addition to this, he describes his upbringing as a Korean male to be unique in the context of the mandatory Korean military service. He describes this as an experience only Korean males can fully relate to and a huge part of what shapes them as Korean men. Discussing their experiences at the army or their expectations about upcoming army service is the main topic of conversation for Korean men at social gatherings as well. This expectation of Korean men is instilled in them from a young age when they're told that in order to be a real Korean man, one must complete the compulsory military service, as was the case in Patrick's experience.

In the event that military enlistment would cease to be compulsory, Patrick believes that their Koreanness would still be solidified in the values they hold close. Such as being good to their parents and putting an emphasis on education. He also emphasised on the expectation from men to be the '*kajang* (가장)' or highest position holder in the family, which means they have the responsibility to take care of the family.



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What it means to be a Korean woman is harder for him to describe, however he points out that the concept of '*hyodo* (효도)' or filial piety is expected of Koreans as a whole, but especially emphasized more for Korean women.

He also described Korea as a country where people unite really quickly in order to achieve a mutual goal. From the IMF gold collection exercises to presidential impeachment petitions and recently fighting the coronavirus epidemic, there are several historical instances of Koreans uniting together for common good. Patrick also pointed out that this isn't limited to the geographical confines of South Korea, they also tend to support Koreans abroad, like baseball players Park Chan Ho and Yoon Young Jin.

Like Patrick, Korean Americans or *Kyopos* he interacted with in the US also had within them a sense of Korean pride. Although he describes them as closer to being American than Korean, they still spoke some level of Korean and were raised with Korean values in the household.

Patrick described that while he believes he might feel a bit differently about being Korean if he had not returned to Korea, due to his household environment and desire to carry on Korean tradition, a physical disconnect from Korea would not change how he identifies as a Korean.

When asked how he would compare his experiences in the US to that of Korea in terms of assimilating, he pointed out that US being a multicultural society, his friends were from diverse backgrounds even though their citizenship was American. However in Korea, it's more about understanding the language. Even though he is more fluent in English and it was difficult in the beginning to navigate life in Korea, he still feels that it was easier assimilating here in Korea.

He also feels that to be American means to be who you are as an independent individual, whereas Korea is more group oriented. Koreans are expected to look alike whereas in the US, uniqueness is considered as a positive trait.

When asked if he ever found himself having a different persona while in the US and while in Korea, he responded that this was definitely the case. Even while speaking English within Korea he feels himself forming a different persona. He believes that this is because of the in-built hierarchy in the Korean language. While he has to talk to people 'above him' in Korea. In the US, he can talk more casually and people wouldn't take it seriously, whereas if he does the same thing in Korea, people will get offended. He feels that he can show his real personality to certain friends who understand English and the jokes he makes.

## **II. Bella: A Korean National Who Has Studied Abroad for Many Years**

**Bella** has been living in Korea as a student for two years. Her interest in East Asia was piqued by wanting to try something new and a desire to learn about different cultures.

As a white person of Polish descent, she describes her experiences in Korea as one of privilege. Despite small misunderstandings, she enjoys the feeling of freedom and the absence of invasion of privacy. She feels that foreigners in Korea believe Koreans pardon them for things they perhaps wouldn't pardon fellow Koreans for.

When asked about the existence of Koreanized foreigners, she feels it has less to do with symbols and appearance and more about the way one acts. Similar to acting in an overly logical manner is embedded in her Polish heritage, to



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be Korean is to have '*noonchi* (눈치)' or the observation and awareness about thoughts and feelings of those around one, and the ability to adapt to them.

Bella believes that if a foreigner acquires '*noonchi*' that they can become Korean. "I personally consider myself as able to become Korean because I follow the culture." She feels it would take her at least twenty more years to understand what it truly means to be Korean, but she has the ability to adapt and emulate them. This emulation, she feels, is what it means to be Korean.

However, she does feel that this is not a tradeoff with her unique individuality. Adapting and blending in come naturally to her, while also holding close to her deeply hidden conceptions and ideals, similar to how each individual Korean person has a distinct identity.

"Many people in Korea don't eat kimchi and that doesn't make them any less Korean."

Then, when it comes to foreigners not being granted the ability to apply for Korean citizenship, she feels that it is an administrative problem, which will at some point, anger those foreigners who choose to call Korea their home.

When asked about the influx of Polish brides in South Korea, Bella associates this to Korea being a prospective country and the spread of '*hallyu* (한류)' or the K-wave across the world. This has allowed people to become exposed to different standards of beauty and music. Consumer fashion has influenced them to desire to become a part of what is now considered to be cool. This also extends to dating and relationships. She also recognises the growing acceptance of multicultural relationships in Korea and the demand for foreign brides, although she doesn't feel that this is specific to Polish women. She feels that the 'riding a white horse' expression might soon fade away as Korea becomes more accepting of diverse cultures.

When asked if she thinks foreign brides feel accepted into Korean society, she feels this is definitely not the case. She finds that there are several problems they face in their relationships due to their quick progression and perhaps the mindset they hold about Korea. Relationships built upon external factors like appearance don't allow for strong bonds that can last through issues related to race and nationality. A difference in skin colour and appearance makes it harder to assimilate in comparison to East Asian brides. She identifies a tendency for Korean people to approach those with East asiatic features with the assumption that they would be proficient in Korean as a bi-product of being Asian.

She also finds that an inequality exists in the sharing of Polish and Korean cultures between households in Korea. She associates this to traditional gender roles where the brides stay at home and look after the household and children while the men are the sole earners of the household. While this is a traditional way of life, she finds that in most cases this is not by choice. Even with high education levels, they are unable to match the work requirements in Korea. Despite trying for years, the competition makes it even harder and once they have children, their priorities take a shift.

The Korean government provides integration classes for foreign brides that teach them about Korean language, cuisine and culture, however there is no equivalent for Korean men to learn about their spouses' culture and language. Bella feels that it would be difficult to organize classes for men because they come from a diverse range of places. Even within the same country, regional differences exist, which would also be impossible to cover. Despite this she identifies that there are men that take the initiative to learn about Polish culture and the language. However there is a lack of necessity and various other commitments that they need to cater to, which creates this inequality.



### III. Anya: An Indian National Who Has Studied in Korea for Two Years

**Anya** has not only studied in Korea for two years, but prior to this she has worked at a Korean company in her home country, India, for almost 4 years. Her interest in Korea stems from a desire to travel and study abroad, and explore the relationship her India has on a global scale, which also led her to pursue her undergraduate studies in England.

As a brown person of South Asian descent, she describes her experiences in Korea as mixed. She describes several instances where she has felt ‘othered’ or reduced to her nationality or appearance. She believes that this stems from a general lack of awareness about the South Asian subcontinent and its diversity.

When asked about what Indianness means to her, she expressed her inability to describe it in simple terms. The history of the South Asian subcontinent is a long and complicated one, colonization and migration has shaped what it means to be Indian and she feels that this definition is not only different for each individual but also constantly evolving and changing.

Her ancestry is linked to the region of Punjab which now lies divided between India and Pakistan, however she has been raised in India’s capital city, New Delhi. While living in the capital city has allowed her to experience India’s diverse culture as this is a migration hot spot in the country, a lack of exposure to life in Punjab has left her with a sense of loss and yearning for her ancestral roots.

Anya’s experiences living in England and South Korea have also shaped her identity and how she feels about her Indianness. She finds that identity is a multidimensional concept that can change over time based on life experiences. Her exposure to the Indian diaspora has also led to an appreciation for the evolution of culture through migration and the existence of a transnational identity.

When asked if she is treated differently by Koreans when she speaks the language, she responded that this has definitely been the case. Speaking Korean has allowed her to form lasting bonds with Korean people which she feels would otherwise not be possible. She feels that languages have cultural contexts that can unite people and their experiences. On a personal level she finds that she can fully express herself in English and while she can speak Korean and Hindi fluently, she feels that her unique personality and identity cannot be expressed in its entirety.

When asked if she believes she herself could become Korean, she finds that her belief has changed post living in Korea. While she believed that this could be a possibility, similar to becoming an American or Canadian citizen, after living in Korea for two years, she feels differently.

She finds that people in Korea follow a system of categorization. When it comes to something as simple as referring to each other, Koreans call each other not by their name but by their hierarchical position in relation to themselves. People are categorized into positions like ‘*unni*’ (언니 or older sister), ‘*oppa*’ (오빠 or older brother) even if they have no familial relation. Similarly, elders are called not by their names but by specific terms like ‘*ahjussi*’ (아저씨 or older uncle), ‘*ahjumma*’ (아줌마 or older aunt). Colleagues also have specific names based on hierarchical positions within a company and taking each others’ names is considered disrespectful.

Anya points out that this tendency to categorize people could stem from a belief that everyone has their specific place in society. She finds that outsiders do not fit into these pre-established categorizations and are left with much broader labels like ‘*waegukin*’ (외국인 or foreigner), ‘*honhyol*’ (혼혈 or mixed blood), ‘*kyopo*’ (교포 or korean living



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abroad). She believes that these labels are often presented as precursors to the individual's identity, which reduces their value.

For these reasons, Anya finds that while foreigners could integrate into Korean society by adapting and emulating them, she feels that perhaps it is too soon to say that they can become Korean. Korea has yet to accept people that don't fit the widely accepted Korean mould, even if they were born Korean. The pressure to fit in through one's appearance drives Korean men and women to go under the knife, making Korea the plastic surgery capital of the world. Mixed race Koreans that have been raised in Korea still find it hard to be accepted if their appearance doesn't match this mould. She finds it hard to envision 'others' being accepted as Korean at least in her lifetime.

#### **IV. Elsa: A Swedish National Who Has Studied in Korea for a Year and a Half**

**Elsa** is of Swedish descent and has lived in Korea for the least amount of time, a year and a half. Her decision to come to Korea and study stems from a desire to explore an Asian country.

Her experience in Korea as well as other Asian countries is that of a constant feeling of being an outsider and foreigner. Since she appears European, she blended in during the time she lived in France, but there is no 'blending in' in Korea.

When asked what it means to be Swedish, Elsa is very methodical in her categorisations. She believes that one is Swedish if they are either born in Sweden, have lived in Sweden for a long time or have Swedish citizenship. She bases this from her own personal experiences as her mother was born in Denmark and moved to Sweden at 15. While her mother doesn't have Swedish citizenship, Elsa still considers her to be Swedish since she has been living there for a long time.

She feels that similarly, to be Korean, one must either be born here, have lived here for a long time or acquired citizenship. With these categorizations, she feels that foreigners too can become Korean if they choose to, however, she isn't sure that Korean people would accept these people as Korean.

While Patrick, Bella and Anya emphasized on the importance of learning Korean in order to assimilate, Elsa feels that due to her appearance, she is treated as a foreigner or differently than Korean people in the same situations, despite speaking in Korean.

#### **Conclusion**

The interviews in this report provide four unique viewpoints towards identity. A Patriarchal view, highlighting identity as a product of upbringing and tradition, a Societal view, highlighting identity as a product of ability, an Evolving view, highlighting identity as a product of experiences and an Official/State view, highlighting identity as a product of existence.



The small scale of the study does not allow for the incorporation of various perspectives and frames of reference. However it provides detailed and personalised insights that cannot be attained through large scale surveys and polls. Thus, it highlights the need for more personalized interviews in conjunction with large scale data collection in the future.

In addition, studies on Korean identity tend to focus on South Korea and the relationship it has with the international Korean diaspora. The lack of access to North Korean data doesn't allow for insights into the North Korean perception of Korean identity and the historical evolution of this identity. There is a need for further research into the North Korean perspective as it could be beneficial in formulating policies related to the unification of the Korean peninsula. ■

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