

Keeping Tradition and Accepting Transformation: Interviews of Korean Women in the Philippines

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This research note ruminates on how Korean women in the Philippines maintain their cultural identity ('Koreanness'), how they perceive Philippine society, and how living in the Philippines has affected them in different ways. It relies on in-depth interviews conducted with five Korean women from different fields—media, academe, business, hospitality, and government. At the time of the interview, the age of the women ranged between 25 and 40; all had been residing in Metro Manila for at least eight years.

The Interviewees

The interview respondents came to the Philippines for different reasons. Three did so because the heads of their respective families were seeking business opportunities in the country (for two of them, the head of the family referred to the father, while one meant the husband). The other two initially came to study English, as it is relatively cheaper to enroll in a school in the Philippines. Two interviewees reside in Makati, one each in Pasig, Mandaluyong, and Manila. During the interview, the ages of the respondents were 27, 31, 33, 34, and 35. Three of them are from Seoul, one is from Chungcheongbuk-do, a province near Seoul, and another is from Busan, a major Korean city.

Two of them had been in the Philippines for more than eight years during the time of the interview, while it had been 14, 15, and 18 years respectively for the other three. Three respondents return to Korea at least once a year to visit their relatives. One of them rarely does so since she no longer has any living kin in the country. Another respondent travels back to Korea two to four times a year to visit family and attend Korean Women's International Network conventions.

Among the respondents, one studied in the Philippines from elementary to college. Two graduated from Philippine universities. One completed graduate studies at a prestigious Philippine university and one studied English at a school owned and operated by a fellow Korean.

Two are married to Koreans who also work in the Philippines. One is dating a Korean guy who grew up in the US. One is single and is not dating anyone. Another divorced her Korean husband with whom she came to the Philippines.

Korean Women's Roles and Status: From Past to Present

The roles of women in the highly stratified traditional Confucian Korean society are restricted to the household, where they have to be submissive wives and mothers.¹ However, certain historical events paved the way for specific transformations in the social roles and status of women.

The coming of Christian missionaries towards the end of the Yi Dynasty enabled Korean women to receive formal education and to adopt the idea of gender equality in the eyes of a Supreme Being (God) [Soh 1987, 37]. Second, rising demand for labor in the 1960s allowed women to join the workforce as the economy began to industrialize (Soh 1991, 20). They still, however, experienced discrimination in the workplace, receiving lower salaries and limited jobs or positions (Chang 1994, 14). Third, the democratization of South Korea in 1987, and the economic globalization that came with

the IMF bailout after the 1997–1998 Financial Crisis further transformed the role of women in society, along with their views on education, employment, political participation, marriage, reproduction, etc. (Yoon 2003, 3).² Advancements in information technology also boosted Koreans' access to western culture and ideas, including feminism and gender equality (Lee MJ 2008, 173).

Indeed, Korean women garnered many achievements in different fields. However, many of them feel that gender discrimination still exists (Choong 2007, 136). The interviewees said that the notion of the “ideal Korean woman” remains traditional: to be a good cook, and to be a submissive wife, mother, and daughter-in-law. She is expected to be feminine (with very fair skin to be considered beautiful), wise, silent (must not show emotion), and physically strong. Once married, she must serve her in-laws and perform her household duties perfectly—from rearing the children to doing the chores. As a woman younger than the mother-in-law, she is ranked lowest in her husband's family and will only be viewed better after delivering a son.

In dual-earning families, working mothers are still expected to fully perform household duties (Lee OJ 2008, 181). In recent years, having a “good job” is now essential to being an “ideal wife” and is said to be one of the main reasons why modern Korean women delay marriage; if they are single, they do not have to carry as much burden. At any rate, one interviewee, after turning 30, was pressured by her family to get married. Evidently, family values have been changing, yet traditional ones remain dominant (Eun 2008, 147).

On Maintaining Korean Identity or ‘Koreanness’ in the Philippines

Continuous interaction with fellow Koreans in the Philippines was very important in maintaining the interviewees' Korean identity, as is living with their families. One of them lived with a Korean pastor who is her

father's friend; two often meet their Korean friends and chat with their family and other friends in Korea during the initial period of stay in the Philippines. Two respondents eventually married Korean men they met in the Philippines. Four of them also speak Korean at home. And for four of the respondents, working with Koreans helps them maintain their identity. Two of them work for Koreans (forwarding company and government). One handles Korean accounts (hotel), while another writes articles in Korean that are published in Korea.

Membership in Korean organizations also contributes to maintaining the Korean identity of the respondents, as does churchgoing for two of them. In church, they meet other Koreans, worship in the Korean language, and hold activities, such as communal readings of Korean books. One interviewee participates in activities organized by the Korean Embassy and other associations in the Philippines. Another interviewee is a member of the Korean Women's Association in the Philippines.

All of the respondents eat Korean food at home, often visit Korean restaurants in the Philippines, and consume Korean products in the country. Two of them also taught their Filipina house helpers to cook Korean food at home, and four mentioned that they buy Korean products from Koreans. One admitted that she visits Korean salons to have her hair done and buys clothes from Korea.

All of them shared that they maintained their Korean identity through cable television channels (KBS, MBC, SBS, etc.) where they watch Korean news, Korean dramas, etc. They also receive updates on Korean society back home via the internet (news, shows, TV series), especially through Korean websites (Daum, Naver, Yahoo! Korea, etc.). Apparently, media and technology not only paved the way for changes in the status of women in Korea but also served as a means to preserve their Korean identity in a foreign land.

Reflections of Korean Women on Living in the Philippines

Fashion and Food Preferences

Two respondents are often mistaken by other Koreans as Chinese-Filipina to the extent that they would even talk to the respondents in English. Another two are no longer used to the cold weather in Korea; one even avoids the country during winter because it is already too cold for her. Also, one changed her fashion during her stay in the Philippines, buying from local Filipino shops and not feeling the need to change her hairstyle as often as other Korean women. She even tanned her skin, which is considered less feminine by Korean men. Another does not feel the need to always eat Korean food and instead prefers Filipino food.

General Views and Attitudes

All the respondents admitted that they feel less stress and less pressure in the Philippines than in Korea. One commented that “life is simple” as everything goes on a “natural and relaxed pace.” In Korea, everything has to be “*ppali ppali*” (fast fast) and “it’s all work, work, work,” said another respondent. One interviewee observed that coming on time is not strictly practiced in the Philippines, but she tries to come to the office early and go home late to set a good example to all her colleagues. The interviewees also became more tolerant of tardiness, but they still feel the pressure to work hard and come on time or earlier when they work with other Koreans in the Philippines.

One admitted that she now has a more positive attitude in life; even her friends in Korea noted that she looks very happy and relaxed. She mentioned that back in Korea, she would always have to plan things and worry about her life and her future. But after staying in the Philippines, she learned to live spontaneously without worrying too much about the future. Another respondent remarked that “Filipinos do not care about the past and do not worry about the future,” unlike Koreans who are always pressured to work hard and succeed in a society that is afraid of failure. One noticed that she became less uptight after staying in the Philippines for more than five years.

The respondents consider the Philippines a free and open-minded society; they describe Filipinos as “kind/hospitable to foreigners,” “friendly with other countries,” “sweet and friendly,” “generous,” and a “happy people.” Two respondents became more open-minded and understanding of other cultures because of their stay in the Philippines. One mentioned that she learned to respect other cultures and points-of-view, including those of Filipinos. Another said that staying in the country allowed her to think globally and become friendly to strangers. One grew more tactful, since Filipinos can be sensitive, and learned the (Filipino) custom of inviting visitors to their homes to have a meal.

Unlike in Korea wherein everyone is in a rush and do not care about other people, the respondents said that Filipinos acknowledge strangers. “When Filipinos catch the eye of another person, even if they do not know them, they will nod at each other or smile,” remarked one respondent. Another admitted that whenever she goes back to Korea, she feels the individualism and the lack of warmheartedness. “I feel like a foreigner whenever I go back to Korea,” confided one interviewee. Another respondent spoke about learning to smile or nod at strangers after living in the Philippines. One said that her friends noticed that, after residing in the country, she is already like a Filipino, who is always smiling.

Views on Gender and Marriage

They observed that women and men in Philippine society are equal. One of them said that men and women can be friends here because “sexuality does not come into play.” They note that gays are common and are even accepted. One respondent admitted that she hated seeing gay men when she was still in Korea, but it became acceptable for her after living in the Philippines. One respondent now has gay friends.

The respondents unanimously observed that women are more empowered and respected in the Philippines. One of them even said that the “Philippines is a good country for women” and that “lady first” is commonly practiced. One of them said that “I think Filipino women are

higher than Filipino men.” She recalled one Filipina colleague who became the financial provider because she was earning more than her husband, who had just quit his job. Another interviewee notes that Filipino women are considered the center of the family and are not required to be submissive to their husbands. One discussed that the responsibilities of taking care of parents in the Philippines fall to daughters, who, they perceive, are thus valued in the family. The reverse is true in Korea, where sons care for their parents and are given importance.

They all agree that there is less pressure on women in the Philippines than in Korea. Two respondents stressed that as Koreans, they are expected to be a “superwoman” who handles all the responsibilities and meeting expectations perfectly. One of them stressed that Filipino women can pursue a career path, unlike their Korean counterparts, who are bound to the household and need to make a lot of considerations before making any career decision. There is tremendous pressure on Korean women in Korea, especially if she is a working mother. “(It is) physically exhausting to be a woman in Korea because all the responsibilities go to the woman,” said one. “It is very difficult to be a woman in Korea,” added another. In the Philippines, working mothers can employ house helpers so that they can focus more on their careers. Two working mothers among the respondents emphasized that house helpers allow them to worry less about household chores and the care of the children.

“Life of a woman here is easier” (in the Philippines) because they can hire house helpers, drivers, etc. Food preparation is simple as well, with one dish and rice, unlike Korean cuisine, which requires a lot of side dishes. Because one can get help and food is cheaper and easier to prepare, one respondent admitted that she is no longer adept at preparing Korean meals. Another mentioned that in Korea even if women can afford to employ a house helper, older women will say, “why does she have a maid? Look at me, I’m already old yet I can still work.”

One respondent said that she “enjoy(s) life as a woman” here in the Philippines. She feels more valued as a woman and feels that her male coworkers, both Filipinos and Koreans, respect her. “I am more comfortable here as a

woman and as a human being,” shared one respondent. Staying in the Philippines gave her a stronger belief that men and women must be equal.

Four of them mentioned that they became more open to marrying foreign men; two respondents defined the typical Korean man as macho and domineering, respectively; another respondent said that a traditional Korean man wants a woman to be a housewife, works hard to provide for the family, does not share any responsibility at home, and has at times a social license to cheat on his wife. One woman stressed that if she will marry again, it will not be to a typical Korean man; and that if she will have children, she does not want them to grow up in Korea because she does not want them to undergo the pressure she experienced.

Three respondents mentioned that their parents were not open to the idea of having a foreign son-in-law. And one of them is afraid for her children to marry a non-Korean because they might encounter problems arising from cultural differences; she is, however, willing to consider such a union as long as they “love each other.” One respondent said that she does not want to marry a typical Korean man, but coming from a family with traditional values, she would probably marry one anyway, since it would be more acceptable to her parents.

After residing in the Philippines for an extended period of time, all of the women interviewed were transformed in different ways. One even stressed that she “fell in love with the Philippines” to the extent that she is thinking of changing her citizenship.

Closing Remarks

Staying in the Philippines has modified the attitudes, behavior, and values of the interviewees even as they maintain their Koreanness. The advancement of technology and communication through the Internet and cable TV has kept them up-to-date on Korean news, shows, and trends. The Korean women observed that Philippine society values women more, and living in the country has empowered them as women. Filipinos have been interacting with Korean women living in the Philippines. But do they,

Filipinos, really take the time to understand why these women stay in the country? Many would only see them as foreigners, but they do not fully understand the transformations these women are undergoing the longer they stay and interact with Filipinos—glimpses of which has been presented. There have been many studies made on Korean society in general, but few, if any, have been published on Korean women living in a foreign country.

Notes

- ¹ Women in the Korean society are traditionally considered second-class citizens. Some of the exceptions include *Mudangs* (priestess) and *Kisaengs* (female court entertainers) who are allowed to perform jobs outside the household.
- ² Part of the package provided by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) after the South Korean economy was badly affected by the 1997–1998 Asian Financial Crisis was the opening of the market globally which included access to Western culture and ideas.

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