

Special Section

Gradual, Diverse, Complex—and Unnoticed: Korean Migration in Europe¹

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Compared with the Americas, Australia, and New Zealand—the “new West”—the “old continent” of Europe has had a different pattern of immigration history. From the late fifteenth century up to the late 1960s, European countries were primarily sources of emigration, sending large numbers to the Americas, Australia, and Southern Africa. Migration into and from Europe—migration or settlement from Europe to colonies or migration from former colonies to Europe—are closely related to its colonial past, and they increased numerically, and diversified in terms of country of origin, after World War II. Today many European nations, especially in Western Europe, have sizeable migrant populations from former colonies and elsewhere. As part of contemporary processes of globalization, migration to Europe has accelerated in speed and scale. Since 2004, European Union (EU) citizens have been able to move around and reside freely within EU territory without having to go through immigration processes. The twenty-first century has seen a significant increase in non-EU citizens coming into Europe—not only permanent but also temporary and undocumented migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees—making the region more diverse and dynamic, and also more complex. At the same time, negative, even hostile, attitudes towards migration have strengthened together with a surge in right-wing populism in Europe. Numerous studies have been carried out to understand the multi-faceted phenomena and processes of migration, forced relocation, human rights, discrimination, and integration in Europe, and many new policies have been developed and implemented to address problems and issues associated with these phenomena.

Korean migration to Western countries began in the mid-twentieth century, with the Americas and Europe the preferred destinations for postwar Korean migration. In 1962, the South Korean government adopted a new policy encouraging emigration, with two main purposes: to relieve population pressure and to secure foreign currency through overseas remittances.² When the door opened to the United States in 1965, the Koreans who moved there were primarily those seeking social mobility, with the majority coming from the educated middle class and having been white-collar workers in Korea.³ Compared with the United States, Europe and the rest of the Americas were less-favored destinations for postwar Korean migration. The early stage of Korean migration to Europe,⁴ in the 1960s and 1970s, consisted of three main groups: 1) orphans and children sent to Northern and Western Europe as adoptees, 2) miners and nurses who arrived as guest workers in Germany, and 3) seamen and their families who settled in Las Palmas, Spain.

Korean migration to Europe can be said to have started with Korean adoptees, although this phenomenon has not been widely acknowledged and does not commonly figure in the history of Korean migration. The practice of international adoption of Korean children began spontaneously during the Korean War (1950–1953), when orphans were taken care of by United Nations soldiers at military bases, some of whom were eventually adopted out to other countries, primarily the United States. During the war, the first Western-style orphanages were also set up, and these went on to play a vital role in the subsequent mass international adoption of Korean children. In the 1960s and 1970s, international adoption found a new supply of adoptees from Korea among the tens of thousands of biracial war children as well as abandoned children. In total, more than 50,000 Korean children were sent away to North America and European countries such as Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Belgium, the Netherlands, France, Switzerland, and Germany over those two decades.⁵

As has been well documented in the Korean diaspora literature, Korean migration to Germany started in the 1960s when the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany; hereafter Germany) invited nurses and miners from South Korea to come as *Gastarbeiter* (guest workers) to help fill the labor shortage resulting from the German economic boom. The Korean government, in turn, expected a rise in overseas remittances and a decrease in unemployment. As a result of an agreement between the two countries, approximately 11,000 nurses and nursing assistants and 8,000 miners went from Korea to Germany between 1963 and 1977 as migrant workers.⁶

In stark contrast, the case of Korean migrant workers who went to work on deep-sea fishing boats based out of Las Palmas, Canary Islands, Spain, has been

largely absent from histories of Korean migration. In Las Palmas, those Korean migrants who worked for the ocean fisheries industries established a community from 1966 and initially developed their most important economic base.⁷ Many brought their wives and children over and settled in Las Palmas; by the 1970s, nearly 15,000 Koreans resided there. With the decline of the deep-sea fishing industry in South Korea in the 1990s, the Korean population in Las Palmas shrank dramatically, down to 1,292 individuals by 1999.⁸ The majority returned to Korea, with others leaving for major cities in Spain such as Madrid and Barcelona.⁹

In the 1960s and 1970s, in addition to the Korean seamen in Spain and nurses and miners in Germany, a small number of chicken sexers and Taekwondo masters moved to the United Kingdom, Germany, France, and Spain.¹⁰ However, large-scale Korean migration into Europe only started in the 1980s, when the Korean government introduced new policies, notably in 1980 and 1989, allowing Korean citizens to travel, study, and work overseas.¹¹ As a result, in the 1980s and 1990s, the number of Korean students and expatriate workers sent by Korean companies significantly increased, especially in the UK, France, and Germany, which host the largest numbers of Korean migrants in Europe.¹² Korea's economic development and export-driven structure eased the way for Korean companies to establish branches in Europe and dispatch increasing numbers of workers there. At the same time, Koreans were setting up more private businesses in Europe, while education-driven migration increased steadily, with students comprising another important migrant group.

Unlike North America, where massive migration was the result of favorable regulations towards Asian immigrants, in Europe, immigration regulations were relatively strict, information related to immigration was less widely circulated, and Korean immigrants' networks and connections were much looser. For these reasons, whereas most Koreans left for the United States or Canada to settle there permanently, in Europe they tended to take a more gradual approach. For instance, many Korean immigrants who moved in that period to London or Frankfurt, the cities with large Korean communities, stated that they arranged to migrate individually after their employment arrangements or work with Korean companies ended or found ways to stay during or after completing their studies.

As an English-speaking country, the UK was the preferred European destination between 2003 and 2016 until Germany overtook it in 2017. Large numbers of Koreans began to settle in London in the 1980s, especially in New Malden—so-called Koreatown—on the southern outskirts of the city. The area features Korean restaurants and supermarkets as well as various services such as hairdressers, cleaning, construction and moving companies, and traditional Korean medical clinics. While Korean permanent residents tend to run small- or

Table 1 Overseas Koreans in Europe

	United Kingdom	Germany	France	Sweden
1993	6,049	28,010	8,965	876
2001	15,000	30,492	10,485	1,070
2009	45,295	31,248	14,738	1,434
2011	46,829	31,518	12,684	2,050
2017	39,934	40,170	16,251	3,174
2021	36,690	47,428	25,417	13,055

Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Korea 2022. Chaeoe Tongpo Hyŏnhwang [Status of Overseas Koreans]¹³

medium-sized businesses in the UK, temporary migrants include expatriates sent by Korean companies, international students, and sojourners pursuing educational opportunities for their children.

In France, one of the particular features of Korean immigration has been a transition from being degree-driven to economy-driven.¹⁴ Because of hostile immigration policies in France, students were initially the main Korean migrant group there. While the number of workers dispatched to France by Korean companies gradually increased from the 1980s, until the early 1990s, 70% of Korean migrants to France were students.¹⁵ Another group in France is children adopted from Korea into French families. Because of the increase in Korean tourists to France since the 1990s, tourism services, such as travel agencies, restaurants, and accommodations, have prospered.¹⁶ Notably, women accounted for 67.9% of all Koreans in France in 2021 and were engaged in art or in the service industries such as beauty, clothing, and cooking.¹⁷ In recent years, the number of Korean restaurants has risen dramatically, with over 200 in Paris and nearly 100 in other cities as of 2017.¹⁸ Many Korean migrants in France have found that Korean restaurant businesses are more stable than other tourism-related businesses and also offer a pathway to staying in France on a permanent basis.

According to the most recent census data on overseas Koreans published by South Korea's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 47,428 Koreans were living in Germany in 2021. That puts Germany as the Western European country with the largest number of Korean residents, ahead of the UK. According to statistics from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Korea (Table 1), there were 36,690 Korean residents in the UK, 47,428 in Germany, and 25,417 in France in 2021.¹⁹ While the Korean population in the UK in 2011 was Europe's largest, numbers started gradually decreasing after 2011, and the number of Koreans in Germany has

been increasing and ranks as the largest number in Western Europe since 2017 (Table 1). The change in Korean migrants' preference to Germany seems to be the result of economic and social factors, with Germany offering more opportunities, especially for young people, despite the language barrier. In recent years, there has been a significant increase in the number of Korean students, skilled migrants, and working-holiday visa holders in Germany as well as in the number of Koreans moving to Germany for the education of their children.

Finally, a recent Korean immigrant group to Europe is that of North Korean refugees, with the UK receiving the largest number. Most of the North Korean migrants who have settled in the UK are less fluent in English and less familiar with the local labor market than their South Korean counterparts, so they tend to find work in South Korean-run restaurants, supermarkets, moving companies, construction companies, or other small- or medium-sized businesses. Because of the high concentration of North Korean migrants in London and their particular settlement patterns within the South Korean community, Korean scholars have been more interested in their case compared with other topics related to Korean immigration in Europe.²⁰

According to a report on Koreans overseas published by South Korea's Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2021, since the Covid-19 pandemic, while the number of Koreans abroad decreased sharply in South Asia (−17.39%), the Middle East (−24.98%), Central and South America (−12.86%), and Africa (−12.93%), the number of Koreans in North America has increased (+2.96%). Europe also showed a decline but the smallest global rate of decline at 1.44% compared with its previous report from 2019.²¹ The gradual growth in the number of Korean migrants in Europe, except for the pandemic period, can mainly be attributed to a rise in the number of those going for study, business, or deployed by their employer in Korea, and secondarily for a working holiday, employment, or marriage. Relations between Korea and the EU had developed into a bilateral strategic partnership by the third decade of the twenty-first century.²² Europe has attracted diverse groups of young Koreans seeking better career development, including Korean women escaping gender inequality,²³ seeking educational opportunities for their children,²⁴ or wanting to start a small business, such as a Korean restaurant or a Korean-style bed and breakfast (*minbak*) in a major tourist city such as Barcelona, Paris, or Prague.

Despite the long and interesting migration history of Koreans to Europe and the constant and increased mobilities and movements between the two regions, in general, migration is an area that has been substantially understudied, even in terms of the three major destination countries of the UK, Germany, and France. For Korean scholars, the various European languages constitute a major barrier to research, rendering access to information sourced directly from each country

difficult, and the lack of research networks and resources makes long-term research projects in Europe even more difficult. At the same time, this topic has not attracted local scholars in migration studies, as the number of Korean migrants in each European country, including the top three, is much less significant than those of other major minority groups, such as Indians and Pakistanis in the UK, Turks in Germany, and Algerians and Moroccans in France. However, as we have shown here, Korean migration in Europe has had a variety of motivations and followed dynamic trajectories in each European nation. For this special issue, four scholars based in Europe have carried out long-term archival and ethnographic research in the countries in which they reside and work. These four studies help make up for current deficiencies, addressing particular issues previously underexplored and contributing to the development of existing theories and concepts in migration studies.

Tobias Hübnette explores how the first wave of Korean adoptees to Sweden were perceived and represented in political debates and contributed to Sweden's social transformation from one of the Western world's most racially homogeneous countries to the highly diverse society that exists today. For Sweden, 1968 was a landmark year, with transnational adoptions from Korea taking off on a mass scale, followed by a dramatic surge in numbers in the 1970s and 1980s. Korean adoptees constituted the first and largest Asian immigrant group in Sweden in the 1960s and 1970s, and the phenomenon brought about huge social debate. Unlike previous studies on Korean adoptees overseas, which focused on the experiences of the adoptees and the contexts and factors in terms of Korea as a supplying country, this case study focuses on the perspective of the adopting country, using Swedish-language empirical materials such as newspaper and magazine articles, government reports, parliamentary debates, and attitudinal surveys—materials that are difficult for non-Swedish-speaking scholars to access and study. It illustrates how Swedes' attitudes to immigrant groups were significantly transformed by the 1960s debates around Korean adoption, a transformation that continues to reverberate in Sweden today.

Yonson Ahn's empirical study discusses maternal social discourses of women from different sociocultural backgrounds with empirical data on the experiences of Korean healthcare migrant mothers in Germany and the challenges they faced and strategies they employed. She examines diverse childrearing practices and childcare provisions and arrangements within transnational families, focusing on how mothering is negotiated and experienced by Korean migrant mothers in gendered family roles. Exploring how these mothers navigated obstacles and strove to manage the upbringing of their children and their transition to adulthood, Ahn explores their use of family resources, available local and transnational care

support networks, flexible work arrangements, goal-oriented education, and cross-cultural mothering in which they endeavor to bring up their children to be culturally competent in both the home and host countries.

The next article, by Jihye Kim, examines the relationships North Korean migrants have established with their South Korean counterparts in the UK. Drawing on first-hand accounts, the study analyses how North Korean migrants construct the Other in the course of secondary migration from South Korea to the UK. The study demonstrates that the multiethnic environment of their workplaces, along with the shift from a majority–minority relation between the two in South Korea to a minority–minority relation in the UK, contribute to an improved relationship, with prejudice and discrimination on the part of South Koreans against North Koreans significantly diminished. At the same time, in the UK, North Koreans continue to find it difficult to establish close personal relationships with South Koreans, pointing to subtle cultural differences and a lack of shared experiences and memories, translating into an enduring invisible boundary between the two groups. While delineating the North Korean migrants' shifting relationships with South Koreans, Kim elucidates how the two groups intersect and shape their relationships as members of nations, ethnicities, and minorities in the new migration context.

In the context of the rising popularity of Korean foods in many Western cities, Helen Kim explores the ways in which Korean immigrants in London construct “authentic” kimchi and thus cultivate an “authentic Koreanness.” Looking at New Malden’s Kimjang Festival, a cultural event centered on kimchi making that includes classes and demonstrations, tastings of locally made kimchi, and the exhibition of regional Korean food items, Kim examines how this event provided a space for Korean migrants to negotiate cultural meanings around kimchi. In particular she analyzes the processes and discourses around the co-organization of the festival between a Korean migrant organization in London and a university in Korea. Her study explores the construction of authenticity that reflects a commonly held view that there is a hierarchical relationship between diaspora and nation, where the nation is seen as the origin and thus the source of purity and the diaspora as a mere imitation of an original national culture. The study looks at why and how the Kimjang event, despite not being directly sponsored by the Korean government, had several elements that reflected nationalist claims and state interests in its promotion of kimchi and Kimjang in the diasporic context.

This special issue brings together four case studies on Korean migration in Sweden, Germany, and the UK in a rare attempt at investigating these under-represented aspects of Korean migrant communities in Europe, each article reinforcing and developing the empirical and conceptual aspects of their topic

and methodological approaches, thus shining a light on the diverse and dynamic trajectories, lived experiences, motivations, and adaptation or integration issues of these communities. This endeavor to strengthen work in under-researched areas will help us better understand the continually changing and challenging processes and patterns and complex problems and issues around Korean migration in Europe. We hope this special issue serves as inspiration for scholars in Korean diaspora studies to strengthen their engagement with the issues raised by these communities and expand the scope of research to the whole of Europe, including Eastern Europe, to foster new research.

Notes

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