



IDENTITIES IN EXILE

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13,000 of them have left their country to settle in France. Or fled, to be precise. The war has nothing to do with it. Nor does history. The social pressure was sufficient. In exile to become themselves: this is the struggle facing Koreans today.

A restaurant in Paris' 13th arrondissement. A clatter of saucepans comes from the kitchen. Lee Young-kyung, 35, whirls from bar to kitchen in her brightly-colored apron. In Korean, "Young-kyung" means "capital of the face". A round, smiling face in this case, covered in a film of perspiration. In her own country, Young-kyung was a sculptress. Ceramics, metal, blown glass, she tried everything. In France, her dexterity tends more towards grated radish and pickled cucumber.

These young women with their lack of make-up and paucity of jewelry represent the majority of the 13 000 South Koreans living in France. A country they actually chose. So they would have a lot to say about national identity. But this is a community which prefers to remain discreet. Yes, this was "chosen" immigration. But above all, it was survival immigration: they left their homeland to exist, according to their creed.

Since South Korea opened up its borders in the 1990s, it has become the world's third largest exporter of students, after China and India. Approximately 8 000 of them live in Paris, mostly young women. Their families, who are often well-off, subsidize their studies. Otherwise, they work something out and go into business, like Young-kyung. At the risk of sacrificing their artistic ambitions on the altar of financial survival.

Their main purpose in coming to France, however, is to leave South Korea. "*I wanted to leave my country.*" Min-jung, 27, hopes to return in a few years time, at the end of her photography course. So what was the point in leaving? To escape, even for a short time, the strictures imposed by the *chemyon*. A purely Korean concept, which poses a real problem to the translator: the *chemyon* is the image one projects, the family honor. Parents pay a fortune for evening classes which keep junior high-school students up until 2 a.m. What is their dream? To see their child enter the hallowed portals of the University of Seoul. Getting admitted is "*just crazy*" according to Ji-yun, 21, who was born in France of Korean parents. "*And even if you do make it, there's no guarantee of a stable job.*" Ji-yun attended school in France, where she lived with her mother, brother and sister, while her father remained behind in Korea to work. A common occurrence back home. The families go their separate ways, the mother taking the children to the United States to ensure they become totally bilingual. A prerequisite in the competitive stakes imposed by the university market. Ji-yun's parents, however, chose to do the reverse, in order to shield their children from the educational pressure in

Korea, which leads to a high number of suicides. Over 16 000 students committed suicide between 2006 and 2008, according to a Ministry of Health report.

"It's not easy to live in Paris." Min-jung hugs her cat more closely. Her French is stilted and she is biting her lower lip. Speaking French exhausts her. She doesn't *"have many French friends"*. Most Koreans arrive without speaking the language, which makes their integration all the more arduous.

In Korea, couples *"holding hands is already..."*. The modesty of an unfinished sentence. Back home, it is common for several generations to live together. Parents, grandmother, brother, wife and child: a list worthy of a game of Happy Families but a reality in Korea. 27 year-old Yun-ju's entire family shares the 130 m² apartment. She will be going back there herself, as soon as her music course ends.

In Paris, the Korean community gets together at church. Unlike the Koreans who have emigrated to Germany, Koreans in France are not really structured in terms of politics and unions. The church has the prerogative as a meeting-place. For Oh Suk-hee, Vice-Chair of the ARCF [Association des Résidents Coréens en France], the church is the *"best enemy"* of Korean integration. *"How do you expect them to meet French people?"* Indignant in her elegant cloche hat, this professionally-trained violinist, who has been living in France for nearly thirty years, riles against a cocoon which reassures as much as it isolates. A cocoon which is nevertheless divided between two Parisian churches, one Catholic, the other Protestant. Yun-ju has lost touch with her former roommate. They didn't attend the same church.

On Sundays, the Korean Baptist Church in the rue de Provence is full to bursting. Min-jung says she was too *"lazy"* to attend church in Korea. But in France she regained her faith and above all her friends. *"Some people attend even though they're atheist."* Inside is a functionally furnished rectangular room. All the signs are in Korean. Sitting on a child's chair, Yun-ju finishes her catechism class. Her pupils run around, chattering in Korean. A middle-aged woman brings her a steaming cup of coffee. She responds with a quick *"gam sa ham ni da"*, the Korean for "thank you". *"Chun man hae yo"*, "you're welcome". Yun-ju raises the blue plastic cup to her lips. *"Parisians are nasty"*. She imitates horns. The Koreans, drawn to the capital for the French culture, find themselves up against a blank wall. *"I don't like the French"*, admits Min-jung with an embarrassed laugh.

Most Koreans go back to their home country. But they don't always stay there. Keep up appearances or be ignored, that is the alternative offered by a South Korea embroiled in relentless materialism. The reward for the new female graduates? Eyelid surgery and a new nose. At home, *"there are far more luxury cars than in France"* adds Ji-yun. Forget Paris' Velib cycle hire scheme. To Suk-hee, the situation is an example of Korean *han*. A sense of the tragic which permeates a country riven by Japanese and American occupation. Today, in Seoul, access to the neighborhood near the American base, which was set up in 1953, is still forbidden to Koreans.

Although unemployment in South Korea only affects 3.8 % of the population, it hits the elite particularly hard. Social pressure has created a country with a plethora of over-qualified PhDs who can't find work. Yet they have to survive. Without bringing shame on the family. Consequently, it is out of the question for a PhD to lower himself by going into trade.

So they return to France. *"It's better to be a tramp in Paris than a shopkeeper in Seoul."* *"I'm a retailer myself, can you believe it?"* Suk-hee is preparing her PhD thesis. She owns a few Christmas chalet stalls on the Champs-Élysées and in the Trocadéro area. During the Christmas vacation, young PhD students work for her selling bags, scarves and hats. *"I pay them a bit more, but they don't realize."* *"My university friends worry about me a lot. I've given up almost everything. But I don't regret it."*

Some settle down and have children, who go through the state school system, for want of a Korean school. But they're not allowed to forget their origins. *"It's very important to my parents that I speak Korean."* Ji-yun attended language classes at school until her final year.

At lunchtime the main hall in the church is turned into a dining-room. Plastic plates get passed from hand to hand, full to the brim with rice and vegetables. A lone Western figure rises above the others and makes its way through the crowd. The man is carefully carrying two plates, one for his Korean wife and the other for their baby in its stroller. Little by little, the Korean community is opening up to the outside world.

But it's a long road. *"I've acquired citizenship but I have difficulty considering myself as French"*, admits Ji-yun, who was born in Aix-en-Provence. Most Koreans decide to keep their Korean passport. All the more so because Korean law forbids them to take out dual nationality. If you are born Korean, you remain Korean... Except as far as military service is concerned. It currently lasts two years, driving many young men into permanent exile. The government is considering reducing the service period.

In Young-kyung's little restaurant, which celebrated its fourth anniversary in 2010, French customers are queuing up at the bar. A few years ago, she exhibited her sculptures in Korea and also in Japan. The proprietor of a design magazine even bought one of her works *"2 000 Euros. It was for his wife's birthday."* A regular customer orders ravioli, at 6.90 Euros for six. Young-kyung chats away happily to him. Ten minutes later the customer leaves, a still steaming plastic bag in his hands and a smile on his lips, and Young-kyung makes her way back to the kitchen.