



Original Article

KOREAN CANADIAN STUDENT REFLECTIONS ON IDENTITY FROM TWO CANADIAN CITIES

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents reflections of Korean Canadian students from two Canadian cities on their sense of identity. Drawing on data from a larger exploratory study of anti-Asian experiences of Korean university students from four different sites in North America, we report on a comparative analysis of identity formation among Korean students in Toronto, a large metropolis, and in Saskatoon, a medium-sized metropolis. Specifically, the analysis focuses on the ways in which fourteen Korean students' identity construction is fluid and dynamic and argues for a more blended, interactive, and relational conceptualization. After presenting a brief introduction and conceptual framework and literature review, the paper discusses data and methods followed by a qualitative analysis of the focus group discussions from the two cities. The paper concludes with a discussion of the study's implications for a more nuanced understanding of Korean Canadian identities in the contemporary period.

Keywords: *identity, Korean-Canadians, Canada, Korea, university students, anti-Asian racism*

I. INTRODUCTION

The globalization of higher education and increased mobility of students across the world have complicated the category of "Korean" students in Canadian universities. The subsequent increase in intraethnic diversity among Koreans/Korean-Canadians has created various tensions around what it means to be Korean in Canada (see e.g., Lo, Abelmann, Kwon, & Okazaki 2015; Park & Lo, 2012; Shin, 2012; Pyke, 2010; Pyke & Dang, 2003). Yet, the complexities and varying needs of Korean students are not reflected in institutional policies

and practices at Canadian universities. Furthermore, even though Canada represents one of the most popular destinations for education migration for Korean families and students, little comparative analysis of the experiences of Korean students in different Canadian cities has been conducted.

To fill this gap, this paper examines reflections of Korean Canadian students from two Canadian cities on their sense of identity. Drawing on focus-group interview data from a larger study of Korean university students across four different cities in North America, we report on a comparative analysis of identity formation among Korean students in Toronto and in Saskatoon. In our discussion, we take the view of (Korean Canadian) identity as a fluid, dynamic, and developmental process of boundary making.

The analysis focuses on the ways in which the Korean students' understanding of self is fluid and dynamic, shaped by their experiences in different contexts while they mobilize different linguistic and cultural resources they have at hand (Bourdieu, 1991). The paper concludes with a discussion of the study's implications for a more nuanced understanding of the Korean Canadian identity in the contemporary period. We begin by providing a brief description of the conceptual framework and literature review and research methodology.

II. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Understanding ethnic identity is not a simple task. In this paper, we follow Phinney (1990) and define ethnic identity as a part of an individual's self-concept regarding how the person makes a connection to the native ethnic group and to other ethnic groups in a multiethnic society. Ethnic identity is often captured by ethnic language or belonging to a certain ethnic group (Bayley & Schechter, 2003). Contrary to earlier work that viewed identity as primordial and fixed, which has been outdated for decades (Eller & Coughlan, 1993), we draw on Barth's (1969) anthropological work on ethnic group formation and view identity as constructed through the *processes* of social *boundary* making, and remaking, by social actors. In this sense, identities are products of social action rather than reflective of *a priori* characteristics inherent among group members.

With today's increased capability of movement between places, people travel back and forth between the country of origin and the host country, while maintaining various ties to their home countries (Cho, 2004; Ong, 1999, also see Appadurai, 1996; Giddens, 1991). As such, immigration is no longer conceptualized as a one-way movement where people leave their home country behind to settle in and assimilate to a new host country. Rather, social contexts and transnational communities are increasingly important factors in analyzing the identities of transnational migrants.

In the field of language education, for example, Darvin (2015) illustrates how digital spaces can expand the range of identities available to migrants (e.g. the construction of a cosmopolitan identity) through the case of Filipino youth in a wealthy neighbourhood in urban Canada (see also Darvin & Norton, 2015). Similarly, Kanno (2010) explores identity construction of a Japanese-English bilingual speaking student who worked hard to maintain his Japanese language proficiency as a way to keep his Japanese identity while studying in Canada. As for

international students, Mendoza (2015), in interviews with graduate students from China, Singapore, and different parts of Europe, examines how students' prior knowledge about Western pop culture, academic socialization, and local social networks shaped their identity construction in Canada. In the K-12 education context, Pon, Goldstein, and Schechter (2003) discuss ways in which school can be a locus of linguistic and racial tension by illustrating how the silences of immigrant students from Hong Kong were considered an index of intellectual deficit and a threat to quality education by some Chinese and non-Chinese youth.

As for Korean migrants, previous research on Korean students' ethnic identities focused on how immigrants construct a sense of ethnicity through learning Korean as a heritage language in educational contexts. As well, the increased mobility of people has brought diverse cultural, linguistic, and educational experiences and resources to migrants. For instance, Shin (2012) illustrates how Korean high school students in Toronto mobilized newly-valued varieties of Korean language and culture as resources to construct hybrid identities that are simultaneously global and Korean. Recent scholarship on Korean transnational migrant students in language education presents how the Korean transnational students differently locate themselves on a continuum of "Koreanness" and "Americanness," reflecting different contexts and relationships to Korea (Lo, Abelman, Kwon, & Okazaki 2015; Park & Lo, 2012).

Despite the increased diversity within the Korean community and the category of "Koreans"/"Korean Canadians", there is a lack of research that investigates the intragroup diversity among Koreans in relation to their identity construction in Canada. Furthermore, few studies have explored a comparative analysis of Korean student identities in different Canadian cities to examine how distinctive social contexts may impact students' identities. In our analysis of Korean students' reflections on their identities, we draw comparisons between Toronto and Saskatoon, which present contrasting contexts in terms of the size of Korean population, immigration history and linguistic and cultural diversity.

III. DATA AND METHODS

The data on fourteen students from Toronto and Saskatoon are drawn from an exploratory study of anti-Asian experiences of Korean university students across four sites: Toronto (Canada), Saskatoon (Canada), Halifax (Canada), and Albany (United States). The four sites were chosen based on the research team's connections to students in these cities, differences in local context, and the presence of international students. We held two focus groups in each site in January and February of 2021, one consisting of students who arrived in the country (Canada or the US) over the age of 13 years – labelled the first generation group – and a second one of students who were born in the country or arrived at the age of 13 years or younger, which we call the second generation group. Much has been written and studied about differences across generations according to the age at arrival (Portes and Rumbaut 2001). Among those with Korean ancestry, there may be differences in the connection they have to Canada and the US and unique identity experiences according to the intersection between life stage and migration. With potentially different worldviews, understandings about identity, and

language preferences, it was important to include the perspectives of different generations. During the two-hour discussion, students were encouraged to speak in the language they felt most comfortable, Korean or English, and transcripts were all translated into English for analysis then coded. While most of the questions and dialogue focused on anti-Asian racism and incidents, we began each group discussion with a question about identity and ended with questions about belonging.

For this paper, we rely on the four focus group discussions in Toronto and Saskatoon in which a total of fourteen students participated (see Table 1). In Toronto, there were seven participants in total across the two focus groups; three who self-identified as women and four self-identified men. Students ranged in age from 20 to 28 years old and one was born in Canada. The remaining six were born in South Korea and one was an international student. The profile of students in Saskatoon is remarkably similar, with seven participants in total across the two groups; three women and four men. The students' age ranged from 20 to 31 years old and one of the Saskatoon students was born in Canada. Of the six born in South Korea, one was an international student. Before examining the issue of identity, we briefly describe the Korean community in Toronto and Saskatoon to provide some context for the discussion.

The two census-defined metropolitan areas are vastly different in total population size and size of the Korean population. Toronto is the largest metropolitan area in Canada with over six million residents and it is a key centre of finance, commerce, and social diversity with its proximity to the northeastern United States. Saskatoon has roughly 311,000 residents and it is located in the western region of the country. It is also known for its agriculture and mining industries and for having a larger Indigenous presence with 11 percent of its population compared to less than 1 percent of Toronto (Statistics Canada, 2021a). These differences in urban context shape students' understanding of self and their experiences.

<Table 1> Profile of the study sample in Saskatoon and Toronto

Metropolitan area	Focus group generation	Gender	Age in years	Country of birth	Immigration status
Saskatoon	First	Woman	21	South Korea	Canadian Citizen
Saskatoon	First	Man	22	South Korea	Permanent Resident
Saskatoon	First	Woman	24	South Korea	Visa Student
Saskatoon	First	Man	24	South Korea	Permanent Resident
Saskatoon	Second	Man	20	Canada	Canadian Citizen

Saskatoon	Second	Man	20	South Korea	Permanent Resident
Saskatoon	Second	Woman	23	South Korea	Permanent Resident
Toronto	First	Man	20	South Korea	Canadian Citizen
Toronto	First	Woman	23	South Korea	Visa Student
Toronto	First	Woman	28	South Korea	Permanent Resident
Toronto	Second	Woman	23	South Korea	Canadian Citizen
Toronto	Second	Man	21	Canada	Canadian Citizen
Toronto	Second	Man	22	South Korea	Canadian Citizen
Toronto	Second	Man	23	South Korea	Canadian Citizen

In terms of the Korean population, there are over 218,000 Korean people in Canada according to the 2021 Canadian Census of Population; 65 percent immigrant, 22 percent born in Canada, and 13 percent temporary resident (i.e. students, workers, Refugee Claimants) (Statistics Canada, 2021b). Toronto has the largest concentration of Korean people with over 74,000 or about a third of the Korean population in Canada. In contrast, Saskatoon has a significantly smaller concentration with about 550 Korean people. A comparison of the Korean population in these metropolitan areas reveals that both metropolitan areas are similar in their proportion Canadian born but there are more recent arrivals in Saskatoon (25 percent arriving within the 2011 and 2021 period) and more temporary residents (21 percent), proportionally, than in Toronto (14 percent and 9 percent, respectively). Bearing in mind this general context, we examine students' reflections on their sense of identity.

Specifically, we focus on the following research questions in our analysis: How do Korean students in Toronto and Saskatoon identify themselves? To what extent do they feel Korean, Canadian? And what does this identity mean to them?

IV. THE BLENDED AND INTERACTING IDENTITIES OF KOREAN STUDENTS IN TORONTO

Identity formation is a dynamic process, evolving for a given individual over the life course with shifts marked by events, interactions with others, and transitions. Particularly for those who move to different places, the immersion into a new environment reshapes internal

processes, reflections, and understandings. Participants in Toronto described their identities in ways that demonstrate this interaction of mobility, local context, and life stage, as well as the importance of social networks and spaces where culture and identity are enacted.

The university students in Toronto expressed a bicultural identity of Korean and Canadian and tended to view their dual identity with clearly demarcated lines and as quantifiable in some way, i.e. “half and half” or more of one and less of the other. However, how they viewed themselves was not static as they explained that the fluidity and shifts in their self-definition were dependent on where they grew up and when they moved to Toronto or went to university, as well as with whom they are interacting. Those who were born in South Korea and moved to Canada as teenagers acknowledged a shift from Korean towards feeling Canadian or Western, whereas those who grew up in Canada, and often within less diverse communities, shared that there was little awareness of identity issues while they were younger and they became more connected with their Korean identity when they moved to Toronto.

I lived in a very small town in Canada where there wasn't a lot of Koreans, or any Asians to be honest. And so, I think I've always repressed the fact that I was Asian or even just different than everybody else. Moving to Toronto recently for university I've kind of accepted that I was Korean, I guess. In that sense. I think I've grown out of the, “Oh, I'm just Canadian,” kind of feeling.

(23 year old man, second generation focus group in Toronto)

In other words, identity transitions shifted in either direction depending on when these young adults moved to Canada and where they lived. Their comments reinforce the message that identity is a developmental and dynamic process.

Students' thoughts on identity also reveal its fluid, situational, and relational aspects. Awareness, shifts, and transitions were impacted by several factors including with whom they were interacting, friendships, and family. A 23 year old woman in the first generation focus group shared this: *I attended high school and university here, and when I talk to my Canadian friends, I become aware of my Korean ways of thinking and when I converse with my friends or parents in Korea, I am considered [to be] strongly open-minded.* The term, Canadian, in reference to social contacts, is an ambiguous term given Canada's history of the colonization of Indigenous Peoples by the English and French, and of subsequent immigration. We did not explore its meaning for the focus group participants but in the context of the discussions that took place, we take it to mean non-Korean. Other kinds of interactions were rooted in anti-Asian racism and participants tended to view these public encounters as isolated incidents (Kim et al., forthcoming) and as not having a significant impact on them since they managed the effect of these experiences on their sense of self and place in society. As a 23 year old woman in the second generation group put it: *It's not a matter of my sense of belonging changing because of these experiences... My sense of belonging to the world is just, I am me... How I fit in inside of it, is up to how I shape it. And what I go through doesn't necessarily define how the city is.* There is agency in the processing of their identities and feelings of attachment and connection.

Several students spoke of becoming more or less Korean in high school or university or during a trip to South Korea. The ethnic diversity of students and the realization that diversity was a positive quality along with the feeling of acceptance and cultural similarity with other Korean students allowed them to feel and recognize their Korean identity. This was often expressed in contrast to their lack of connection with non-Koreans, framed as distance and difference. Yet, while trips to South Korea had the effect of bringing students closer to their sense of being Korean, it was not universal. For some students, visits to South Korea were associated with feelings of exclusion and foreignness.

A final theme on Korean Canadian identities is related to the spaces within which identities are felt and manifested. By no means straight-forward and obvious, part of the struggle to articulate one's identities may be related to the way thoughts, values, and behaviours, are blended and interact within a given person. Some students described being Canadian when socializing and also in their ways of thinking, however they act in ways that are Korean.

So, growing up, I didn't have a chance to identify myself as Korean, like when you're 10, you don't think about that. You're just naturally living in the environment that you're living in. So, I've never really thought about it. And now, when I'm asked this question, I'm like, "Okay, so I'm Korean. I listen to Korean songs. I eat Korean food. I speak Korean in my house. I watch Korean shows." But in terms of culture, when I speak to Koreans that just came from Korea, I find a lot of differences in terms of what I think is normal and what they think is normal. So, in terms of that internal cultural thing, I would say, I'm more accustomed to Western culture. But then again, when I'm home, I think I'm pretty much Korean. (23 year old woman, second generation focus group)

There was a sense among students that there are thoughts and values, which are generally private, and also public and private acts of culture and identities, which are not fixed but fluid – the language spoken, the friendships and family, and food, music, and media. Ultimately, identity is not a one-way linear pathway to assimilation as predicted by earlier sociologists but for Korean students, it is bidirectional, emergent, and continually taking shape as expressed by a 21 year old man in the second generation focus group: *I have, I guess, a Korean side to me, in terms of my behaviour, like the way I eat. But I think there are also Western values instilled within me. I guess I'm still trying to figure it out.* The liminality of being in-between, or not belonging to either culture, felt by some, adds to the complex nature of identity. The following section presents the reflections of Korean students in Saskatoon.

V. THE BLENDED AND SHIFTING IDENTITIES OF KOREAN STUDENTS IN SASKATOON

Saskatoon is a medium-sized city in the prairie region of Canada. Although the province of Saskatchewan, including the city of Saskatoon, is becoming increasingly diverse, the Korean

population remains relatively small compared to larger cities with a longer history of Korean immigration such as Toronto. In the year of 2019, the total number of Korean students at the university in Saskatoon, both at the undergraduate and graduate level, was only 70 (data obtained from Reporting and Data Services office of the university, email communication). Therefore, although the overall findings from the Saskatoon groups share some similarities to the stories of Korean students in Toronto, e.g. students tended to view their dual identity as “half and half” or more of one and less of the other, there are also some important differences.

For example, Korean students in Saskatoon tended to express a lower comfort level with a bicultural identity of Korean and Canadian compared to those in Toronto. Whereas all participants in the second generation focus group in Toronto reported that they felt half-half about their Korean Canadian identity, two out of three participants in the same group in Saskatoon identified as more Canadian. One of the three students in the group identified himself as more Korean. This same student also reported that he had encountered a lot of racial discrimination during his first years in Canada such as a snowball being thrown at him, and hearing “yellow monkey” yelled at him by a passing driver.

Given that student respondents in the larger study, from both Canada and the US, generally reported that racism was more overt and severe in smaller cities with fewer Koreans, with targeted persons feeling isolated, it might be more difficult for students in less diverse places to move beyond their given ethnic/racial membership on their own in terms of identity. That is, it might be that students in Saskatoon felt less entitled to claim their in-between identity, their lack of a sense of belonging to either culture, or their feeling of belonging to both cultures, given the lack of social spaces and an institutional support system for such hybrid identities in smaller cities. It might also have to do with the language proficiency of the students given that Saskatoon has more newly arrived immigrants compared to Toronto. When encountered with racial incidents for example, Korean students in Saskatoon did not know how to react from a different identity position, from that of victimized racial/ethnic minority, because they “couldn’t speak English very well” as reported by a 23 year old woman in the second generation group.

In contrast, a 31 year old first generation woman who has bilingual competence in English and Korean claimed “Canadian” or bicultural identity. This student had a very distinct migration journey compared to other Korean students in that she came to Canada on a work-permit, having worked for several part-time jobs in multiple locations in the province of Saskatchewan nearly for ten years before she entered the university for an undergraduate degree. She was the only one who held Canadian citizenship among the first generation focus group:

So, for me, identity... it's a multifaceted thing: it's not just language, it's not just food, or it's not just temperament. So yeah, culturally and ethnically, I am Korean, but personality and value wise, and also in a language aspect, because I am quite fluent in both languages, and I dream in English, so in that regard, I am half and half. But I prefer to say that I am Canadian because people automatically assume that I am Korean, because of how I look. And also because I am quite proud of my Canadian status, because I

earned it by myself, and I am very patriotic about my Canadianism, when I really compare that with any emotions that I have with Korea as a culture or nation. It's really hard to define that identity [in] one sentence. I think it's a really multifaceted thing that's really difficult to put into one sentence. Otherwise, it would be too vague.

For this student, both Canadian citizenship and her English proficiency were identity markers presumably to increase her sense of belonging to Canada. Particularly for those who were born in Korea (first generation focus group), the fluidity and shifts in their self-definition were dependent on their migration trajectory which has impacts on their citizenship status and English language proficiency, and with whom they are interacting.

At the same time, however, like participants in Toronto, students in Saskatoon also described their identity in ways that are not static but fluid and shift across time and space. While first generation students who were born in South Korea and moved to Canada as teenagers tended to present a shift from Korean towards feeling Canadian, frequent traveling back home sometimes reinforced their sense of Korean identity as illustrated in comments by a 24 year old woman in the first generation group: *Like the other two participants, now the feeling that I belong somewhere fully has decreased in comparison to the past. However, still, if I had to introduce myself to someone, I would introduce myself as Korean. Because every time I return to Korea, I feel as though I have come back home.*

Whereas this student's sense of Korean identity was reinforced upon her visit to Korea, it had a different impact on another student whose trip to Korea revealed the construction of an emerging identity of in-betweenness, vis-à-vis Koreans in Korea, as illustrated below:

Until a year or two ago, I thought that I was a hundred percent Korean, but last year, I came back from visiting South Korea. After visiting Korea, my thoughts changed a little. Because South Korea changes fast, and because I had been away from it a while, I began to think that I am not exactly the same as the people in South Korea. So, I still think that I am Korean and don't really think that I am Canadian, but I would now describe myself as a Korean that has been influenced a little more by Canadian culture. (24 year old man, first generation group)

For him, although he had felt as though he was slightly Canadian upon his visit to Korea, realizing he is different from Koreans living in Korea after having spent some of his 20s in Canada, he identified himself as a Korean vis-à-vis Canadians in Saskatoon. The following excerpt from the interview further illustrates the fluid, situational and relational aspects of the student's thoughts on identity:

So, the reason that I identified myself as a Korean is because ... if you were to ask someone with dual citizenship or an immigrant, "What country do you think you're from?" Another way of asking that is when you watch sports or cheer for a sports team, which team do you support? For me, I

never support a Canadian team. Really, internally, I can't describe what I feel in a word but I'd totally hope a Korean team would win... I wouldn't be able to neatly summarize what I feel in a sentence. But, I think, because I was young when I lived in South Korea, at the age that my identity was forming, I feel this way... I can't explain exactly, but when I consider where my heart naturally goes, I don't think I can say that I am "Canadian." (24 year old man, first generation group)

When asked by another participant whether he would not cheer for the Blue Jays (a Canadian professional baseball team based in Toronto), he commented that:

If it's between the US and Canada, I do cheer for Canada. I do have a longing for the Jays to do well in the Baseball League, but if a South Korean team and a Canadian team were facing each other, out of those two, I don't think I would cheer for the Canadian team.

Student comments from Saskatoon demonstrate how their identity is fluid, situational, and relational across time and space. Their life trajectories including when they moved to Canada, their transnational ties to Korea and Canada, and people they interact with, as well as citizenship and language proficiency, all have impacts on the shifts in their identity. Like students in Toronto, for Korean students in Saskatoon, identity is not a one-way linear pathway to assimilation but it is a developmental and dynamic process continually taking shape. As such, creating more social spaces where such hybrid identities may emerge and further nurtured, would be a way to promote equity as represented in comments by the 31 year old woman in the first generation group: *And I was also a part of the Korean culture club... and everybody really liked what we offered to the student community. I think maybe having those culture clubs and supporting those student clubs would be a great way of supporting those students who sometimes feel marginalized or feel lonely or feel that they just need help from fellow students.*

VI. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Illustrated above are portraits of Korean university students' reflections on their identities in Toronto and in Saskatoon focusing on how different social contexts may impact their identity construction. The first generation group and the second generation group discussions in each city show shared and distinctive characteristics in terms of social belonging and identity. However, we recognize the limitations of the findings from this small-scale case study. For example, we do not have adequate information about what role Korean parents and families played in the Korean students' identity formation in childhood. Still, our examination of the diversity and complexity that exist within the category of "Korean" students in Canada will add to the emerging scholarship about the Korean diaspora and education migrants.

One question we would like to raise is whether there are systemic and individual differences between the two cities in terms of community and social network buffers as well as support

and activism out of their identity work. Interestingly, while students in Toronto experienced anti-Asian incidents, they did not directly relate these experiences to their thoughts on identity and they generally felt they had control over how they were affected by racism. At the same time, it is likely that these types of experiences had some impact on feelings of distance and difference from non-Koreans. It may be the case that the larger ethnic community in Toronto and greater opportunities to make Korean friends and join Korean student clubs – as one participant shared, act as buffers in this respect. In a smaller city like Saskatoon, where there is a lack of institutionalized Korean Canadian organizations or social spaces, as well as a lack of personal and institutional support systems compared to Toronto, the students may feel less empowered to voice their concern moving beyond ethnic/racial identity imposed on them. It may be the case that there is heightened race awareness in Toronto compared to Saskatoon, given its high level of diversity, a longer history of Korean immigration, and a more established Korean Canadian community.

Being a place with a long history of Indigenous Peoples, and a shorter history of White settlers and immigrants from multiple nations, issues of identity in Canada are of significant concern. This small study of Korean university students in two cities reveals some important findings about the kinds of experiences and encounters that shape ethnic identities, the influence of life stages, and the discourse with which we speak about these issues. Areas of future work lie in the latter two items. First, the study includes young adults who spoke about their present self partly in terms of their past – the composition of where they lived and schools attended, their encounters with members of different groups, and visits abroad. Identity is a developmental process and must be viewed through a life course lens. Examining identities past the adolescent and young adulthood stage then, is critical for understanding how they are constructed and reconstructed over time. Second, there is a need to shift from binary thinking and discourse about identity and culture to a more blended and interactive version. A person's ethnic identity is not zero-sum and it is not fixed. Along with the prior shift to conceptualizing identity as fluid and situational is the need to explore the ideas and language of identities in a way that more accurately describes its complex nature.

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