

The half-Korean football star **Hines Ward** plays a tremendously big role in the renewed view on immigrants in Korea. Professor Hiwon Yoon explains how and why multiculturalism is rising in one of the top ten economies in the world.

The RISE of MULTICULTURALISM in KOREA

By CAMILLA MEHLSSEN

* When Hines Ward visited South Korea in 2006 it was not just an eye opener for the famous football player who re-experienced the country he had left as a baby almost 30 years earlier. It was also a turn towards tolerance for mixed-blood people in South Korea.

“When Hines Ward visited Korea, he became the catalyst for the rise of the multicultural education issue,” Professor Hiwon Yoon from Seoul National University says. “Before, the view on the half-Korean was very bad. The half-Korean was associated with low class and low status. But this is changing.” Hines Ward was born in Seoul but has lived most of his life in the US. As son of a Korean mother and an African-American father, he knows what it is like to be of mixed races; though not from South Korea where biracial children traditionally have a very low status.

As the 16-year-old boy Min Hyeouk Han tells on the website of the New York Times:

“The life I lived was painful enough to make me think negative thoughts about the world which made me believe that a half-blood cannot be successful in society. However, in 2006, a man named Hines Ward who is half-Korean and half-American was broadcasted in the news as the MVP (*Most Valuable Player, ed.*) of the Super Bowl games. This brought a great impact to Korea. Many Koreans’ misconception towards half-blood changed dramatically and people started to see us and understand us as a part of them.”

With Hines Ward’s success in American football, South Korea embraced him as a full-blooded Korean. During his visit in Seoul, he met many immigrant children and youths, and afterwards he became an advocate for the acceptance of biracial children in South Korea.

Professor Hiwon Yoon explains that Korean researchers have been interested in the issue of multicultural educa-

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tion for some time, but it is only very recently that the public has become aware of it as a great social issue; and the football player plays a tremendously big role in the renewed view on immigrants in Korea. Today, there are around 19,000 biracial children in South Korea – and a lot more will come.

New blood in the veins

Korea has maintained a country of people of a single race for a great length of time but that is changing.

“In Korea, we have been a homogenous country for about 1,500 years. We speak the same language, we eat the same food and we have the same names. In countries like Korea, Denmark and England there is a big difference between the original culture and other cultures. However, the rapid diversification in Korea indicates that the country which was developed around a single race people with one culture must undergo changes,” Hiwon Yoon says.

“In fact, this phenomenon of a diversified culture and society emerged as the Korean society has become more open and its economy has grown up to the top ten



economies in the world. In Korea we need to import workforce from foreign countries. Previously, we did not think foreigners would be necessary for developing Korea, but now we begin to be aware of the important role they play in enhancing our quality of life. We need foreign workers and we need them to be well trained.”

The international traffic speaks its own language. Seven million Koreans live abroad and Korea is experiencing a drastic rise in international marriages as well as an influx of foreign workers and North Korean defectors.

International marriages refer to the marriage typically between a Korean man and a foreign woman in Korea. These kinds of marriages began to boom in Korean agricultural and fishing villages in the late 1990s. In these vil-

lages more than one of every four men becomes married to a foreign woman, often from another Asian country.

This is mainly because there is lack of Korean brides, as an increasing number of Korean women do not get married or have children.

“We call that type of woman for ‘Gold Miss’. She is not an ‘old miss’ but a ‘gold miss’, she is self-supportive and highly educated and she does not need a man around – except for a secretary and a driver! This means there is a lack of Korean brides, so Korean men must import foreign brides,” Hiwon Yoong says.

In rural parts of Korea one third of the children are now from families of international marriages. Being biracial in a very homogenous country is a great challenge.

✘ Half-Korean Super Bowl ‘Most Valued Player’ Hines Ward (bottom line center) waves together with children of mixed racial origins during their meeting in Seoul in 2006. Ward’s trip became a catalyst for the rise of multiculturalism in Korea.

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What is the biggest challenge to multicultural education today?



Professor
Hiwon Yoon

"The biggest challenge is to overcome the unbalanced policy (or project) due to the short-term perspective of policy-makers with neither a particular philosophy nor long-term proper preparation. Multicultural education policy in Korea has to emphasize the education not only for culture and language but also for career and welfare."

wich. The boy often had a jam sandwich for lunch and this is unusual for Korean kids. Therefore, the Korean school children were envious that the American boy had a strawberry jam sandwich for lunch.

"Good Korean children are not to be given sandwiches as a regular meal. That is why the Korean children viewed the boy as someone strange. From a Korean point of view, the mother of the American boy was not a good mother due to the snack for lunch.

This is an example of a complicated judgment that is being reviewed and regulated nationwide," Hiwon Yoong says.

The rise of international marriages has great impact on the education system. At the turn of the 21st century, children of such international couples began to attend elementary schools.

Hiwon Yoon explains that children from multicultural families have gone through substantial difficulties in school. Most of them have not been happy in school because of poor language skills, identity confusion and emotional shock.

"Multicultural education cannot but be an important factor in relieving social conflict as part of the effort to ensure social integration," she says.

Diversity in the school

What does the rise of multiculturalism mean in educational settings? And how do teachers cope with the increased diversity?

"Diversity is not to be taught. The teacher is the one who conveys the culture from generation to generation. We are all highly influenced by our teachers. Our way of thinking and our judgments are highly influenced by teachers. Yet, in many countries, teachers have been raised and educated in non-multicultural environments, and in those cases the teachers are sometimes overly generous to minority children or just nervous about having them in their class," Hiwon Yoon says.

As a Korean-Chinese woman says: "We, Korean Chinese, are neither Korean nor Chinese. Between them, we have our own culture. We cannot fully understand Korean culture because of different thoughts and ideas".

No jam sandwich for lunch

Hiwon Yoon explains an innocent example of the meeting of different cultures:

An American mom who lives in South Korea went to the school principal because her son was feeling a bit alienated in the class. She did not understand why, but the reason was very simple: a jam sand-

"The question is whether we encourage the teachers to educate the minority children to become more similar to Koreans or to keep their multicultural identity. This is a conflict between two different approaches to multiculturalism: the 'melting pot' or 'salad bowl'."

The 'melting pot' policy is to accept and embrace various races and ethnicities into the mainstream culture of the society. These groups pass through a 'melting pot' and are transformed as if they were born in the society.

Another common approach is based on the idea that each ethnic or racial group has its own sense of value and its own process of knowledge formation. In this perspective, the community can be prosperous when the culture of each group is recognized and embraced by the community. It is likened to a 'salad bowl' where each vegetable has its own unique taste and the combination forms a meal of delicacies.

"In contrast to Korea, the Americans and Europeans have had a long history of multicultural education and accumulated research in the field. The USA, especially, has composed a multicultural society of immigrants of different races from the beginning of its formation. Hence, when looking into the case of the USA, we can learn a lot about theories and issues for the multicultural education of Korea, catching the importance of freedom, equality and justice as ideals of multicultural education," Hiwon Yoon says.

Reflective socialization

According to Hiwon Yoon, multicultural education is two sided: One is that multicultural education is necessary for minority groups to ensure human rights. The other is the management of human resources at a government level.

"In Korea, we have about two percent foreigners, so we have to find out how to get the maximum benefit out of their presence. In a sense, we use them to introduce our own children to multicultural education. Having this multicultural population in our country may enlarge the perspective of Koreans. Thanks to the minorities, we can help the domestic population to be more globalised without going abroad," she says.

"We take so many things about ourselves for granted. It is difficult to get an outer view. That is what we call 'reflective socialization'; we have to socialize ourselves reflectively. Earlier, this reflection was made only from our points of view. Now we have other points of views. This 'reflective socialization' should be a guiding principle for better multicultural education policy in Korea," Hiwon Yoon says. ■



HIWON YOON

Professor Hiwon Yoon is Vice President of International Affairs at Seoul National University. She is chair of the ten country IALEI research team (2010) with focus on multicultural education.