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Joseph Mendoza

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# The Influence of Origin Country Characteristics on Immigration Patterns: A Cross Examination Between Mexican and South Korean Immigrants

**Joseph Mendoza**

*Immigration is an avidly discussed topic, not just in the U.S., but on the global stage. Most every country in the modern world of efficient transportation has immigration in and emigration out of their territories. Politically, immigration, its ethics, and protection of the individual migrating have been of great relevance to developed countries that are consistently seeing an accelerated increase of immigration into their interior. With this heightened consciousness towards the topic, the necessity to study and understand the basic functions of the migration system are of greater and greater value. This article will examine how characteristics specific to a migrant's origin country, such as historic identity, geography, and education, act as pushing and pulling forces that shape immigrant groups' unique identity in the U.S. We will analyze this by contrasting and comparing examples of these characteristics in South Korean and Mexican immigrants. These two groups have been strategically selected. South Korea provides us with key characteristics and outcomes that are expected from a more highly developed country. Mexico and its immigration identity offers us a perspective that depicts the characteristics of both a moderately developed, and less developed country. This categorization of nation status is dependent on levels of economic generation or success and developments in areas such as literacy, agricultural development, and much more under the UN guidelines of categorization (United Nations, 2021).*

## INTRODUCTION

In the social sciences, it's generally acknowledged that the identity of the individual and their behaviors coincide with and are in part shaped by the realities of their surrounding society. This is no different in the case of immigrants and their origin countries. By developing as individuals in specific countries of origin, they have been corralled into specific self-perceived interpretations of themselves, unique geographics, dependent levels of provided education, and specific labor capabilities. This article will familiarize the reader with the relevance of these groups and how they are expected to contribute to their new country to which they have migrated. Amongst the many factors that contribute to the driving forces of immigration flow, I have selected the three that I believe uncover a deeper understanding of less obvious

components of the overall immigration process. When understanding immigration as a system, people often base their assumptions off of the current events directly in front or ahead of them in their environment. This rarely explains the full picture the advanced process nor clearly represents the immigrant's unique identity.

The article will first look at the historic components of the first waves of Mexican and North Korean immigrants. This analysis highlights a general idea of each immigrant group's initial purpose for importation by the states, and allows us to see the foundational functions of these individuals within their belonging groups that helped form their

Joseph Mendoza is a Social and Behavioral Sciences major at California State Monterey Bay. He can be reached at [joemen831@gmail.com](mailto:joemen831@gmail.com).

identities today. It is these identities that later determine the cultural expectation of these people, and in effect, the education and labor opportunity of immigrants of these selected groups.

Another factor that will be discussed is geography as an independent variable. The physical geographic locations of the immigrants are integral in deciding what type of labor is entering a country. We will see how the proximity of Mexico versus South Korea directly affects the ratio of high to low skill labor amongst the two groups.

Following this section, there will be an examination of each immigrant group's origin country's education emphasis. This will include the intricacies of each country such as desired exports, dominant labor type, economic stability, and cultural practices and how they determine the immigrants' level of education, and therefore what they are being exported as in terms of their economic value.

### **DEFINING PUSH AND PULL FACTORS**

Push and pull factors can be understood as the variety of reasons that influence an individual to migrate. "Push" factors are the conditions in origin countries that make it less desirable for the migrant to live there, therefore pushing them to emigrate out. Examples of push factors can be lack of job opportunity, poverty, violence, or lack of education. "Pull" factors are the circumstances found in countries outside of one's origin countries that are more promising to migrants desired lifestyle necessity, therefore pulling them in. Pull factors can be good healthcare, education opportunity, job opportunity, and overall more stable economies (National Immigration Forum, 2019).

### **THE IMPORTANCE OF HISTORIC IDENTITY**

The early positions in the labor market for both Mexican and Korean immigrant groups were essential in shaping the U.S.'s interpretation of these people's identity today. Once the Southern U.S. border was secured starting around 1848, Mexican immigrants went straight into lower skilled jobs, primarily in agriculture. Not until 1900 and into the 1930s did Mexican Americans start to enter assistance service jobs for Anglo-Americans (Gutiérrez, 2019). The first interpretations of Mexican immigrants by U.S. citizens, were based on the belief that Mexicans were the ones whose land had been annexed, that they were granted American jobs, and that they were therefore expected to participate within the narrow field of agricultural labor or domestic assistance (maiding, housekeeping). These types of jobs are commonly referred to as the "3-Ds" (Dirty, Dangerous, and Difficult), and are commonly given to the lower-class minority groups even today (Castles et al., 1984). Lack of labor employment and general economic opportunity for Mexicans of this time period was a major push factor that drove them into the needed niches of agricultural labor and lower status jobs in the U.S.

The first Korean Americans came to the U.S. as students and to study Western political structure around 1884, while 7,000 Koreans came to work in manual labor in Hawaii, favored as a cheap alternative over Japanese and Chinese who were protesting Exclusion Acts at the time, the acts which prevented Chinese immigration and economic participation for years. (Gap Min, 2011). Koreans under diplomatic agreement came as individuals to be integrated into school and government. Western education was a major pull factor for Korea's middle to upper classes, while labor opportunity was a more realistic pull factor by lower class

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Koreans short of work in their home country. This early opportunity for Korean immigrants to be depicted as academically able students and scholars helped them diverge from a singular identity of U.S. labor and created the idea that their people were capable of higher-class accessibility. This is pivotal in the U.S.'s acceptance of each minority group and their tolerance of involvement in the higher levels of the class system.

### **GEOGRAPHY AS AN INDEPENDENT VARIABLE**

Another notable characteristic of each of these migrant groups' countries is the geography of their borders. Studies on immigration in Europe have found that the distance between borders was one of three main catalysts for immigrant flow between countries (Baláz & Karasová, 2017). For countries in the Eastern hemisphere, such as South Korea, immigrants experience additional steps upon entry compared to countries that physically border the U.S. This is due to the need for air and boat travel across oceanic boundaries. Within this migratory process, the U.S. utilizes these additional geographic obstacles as a screening to check passports of travelers of boat and plane. This process creates a barrier or buffering zone before the immigrants reach the legal border of the receiving country.

This additional step of interdiction is one example of the many ways that the U.S. border system outsources immigrant groups differently. An immigrant group's ranking within the economic system of the west is dependent on the increased or decreased presence of screening and higher legal expectation imposed on groups from unique geographic origin during the migration process. With more geographic barriers and

therefore increased checking for legal documentation, higher requirement standards may be imposed on Korean immigrants, resulting in an emphasis on obtaining education, economic stability, and higher class belonging prior to leaving their origin country.

In the case of Mexico, the country is the middle barrier for it is a "transit" country that has immigrants migrating up through South America on their way to the U.S. Many immigrants settle in Mexico, influencing economic competition and heightened conflict between native and incoming groups, promoting further immigration out of Mexico to the U.S. (Menjivar, 2014).

The competition and intergroup conflict act as an active set of push factors that commonly motivate native Mexicans out of their own country. With the U.S. border being in the "backyard" of Mexico, Mexican natives have a geographical advantage over the long-traveled immigrants from South America, and they can migrate at higher rates, with no geographic barriers but the harsh terrain and the first line U.S. border control system. It is this geographic advantage that eliminates the need for high education, high labor skill, and even legal citizenship for Mexican immigrants to enter the U.S. Where Koreans generally encounter higher labor-skill expectations and more vast geographic obstacles in order to get into the U.S. interior, Mexican immigrant culture capitalizes on the need for immediate low-skill labor needed by the U.S. and their geographic convenience. The U.S. government understands Mexico's close proximity as an advantage, therefore issuing the demand for easily accessible low level labor opportunities, creating a pull factor for Mexican workers. This contributes to Mexico's lack of emphasis on what cultural

components their origin country chooses to invest in, such as individual pre-migration education.

### EDUCATION

South Korea as a country has made several pivotal choices that have in effect made education a main catalyst of immigration. South Korea first had an economic boom which allowed more women to enter high-level jobs instead of settling into traditional family dynamics and child-bearing. This has since resulted in a significantly lowered population growth which heightened the need for low-skilled laborers in the country. Today, with essentially an excess of high-skilled college educated youth, unmotivated to enter low skill labor and unable to compete in South Korea's extremely competitive economy, they have begun to migrate to the U.S. economic opportunity as a means of obtaining a return on high education is a crucial pull factor that is motivating South Korean immigrants to leave in search of middle- to upper-class jobs with little tolerance for lower-class opportunities (Stokes, 2021). There were an estimated 90,000 international students from Korea to be admitted into the U.S. schooling system just in 2009 alone (Min, 2011).

Today, South Koreans outscore the U.S. on average in areas including economic competitiveness, behavioral conformity and higher education emphasis (Shin & Dovidio, 2017). These variables are an expression of South Korea's starkly different culture from most underdeveloped countries, where uniformity, competitiveness, and channeled into an emphasis on education are key catalysts for an active and involved economy in which individuals can accumulate stability and higher class ranking prior to immigrating.

Although South Korea had a rapid expansion of education, the country has reported a roughly 8% decline in return on education since the mid-eighties most likely due to too steep of an admission curve (Hannum et al., 2019). This is an important push factor for Korean immigrants receiving higher education in higher percentages and seeking work opportunities in the U.S.

This issue can be compared to Mexico's Education struggle, where in 2016, almost half (46.7%) of those aged 25 to 34 had not completed at least upper secondary education. This is 37.9% under the OECD average (OECD, 2018). Even with economic progress within more recent years, this developmentally malnourished state of Mexico's education systems has been a leading cause for their immigrants' dependence on physical labor employment. As of 2019, there were a calculated 39.5 million Mexican immigrants in the U.S., in which 33 percent (12.9 million) of them had a bachelor's degree or higher (Batalova et al., 2021).

### DISCUSSION

The purpose of this paper was to look at immigrants from Mexico and South Korea and understand that the general identity of migratory groups is in part generated by the characteristics of their origin country, effectively dictating their function and migratory patterns. As we can see, South Korea has been selected as a group interpreted as being on the opposite side of the labor spectrum than Mexican immigrants. We understand clearly that the path of South Koreans diverges from other immigrant groups, starting from their first settlers in America. It is clear that America has matched a pre-proposed purpose with each group, and South Koreans are seen as high-skill, highly

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educated imports into the U.S. economy today. Mexico has been assigned a cultural identity that correlates with a labor oriented, low-skill function.

Geographic convenience as well as an emphasis on labor over education opportunity in Mexico has enabled the Mexican immigrant to fill an integral demographic requisite to the U.S. labor force. South Koreans are pulled in as students, Mexicans are pulled in as laborers. South Koreans are pushed from their country by a shortage of job opportunity that fails to satisfy the country's majority population of educated youth. Mexican immigrants are pushed from their country also by lack of job opportunity, but with an absence of education emphasis which diverges their immigration paths away from South Koreans. Economically, this drives Mexican migrants into opportunities of quickly accessible, lower-class jobs, primarily within the blue-collar categories.

### CONCLUSION

As we can see, these determinants of immigration patterns coincide in an apparent cycle. With the introduction of certain factors

such as education emphasis in South Korea, or with the presence of something like geographic convenience as seen with Mexico, the forces change the patterns and therefore the function and identity of the majority populations of these groups. The reason that these pre-proposed identities between the two groups is so defined is because the factors that create these immigrant groups, such as geography and economy, are often very fixed, only changing incrementally with intervention of policy itself.

This piece was written to address the reality that people often look to different immigrant groups in the U.S. and create surface level assumptions about the minority groups' value and function in accordance with their race. It is not as surface as the race of the immigrant; the body is only a vehicle that expresses the key societal components of their origins that dictated their function. Although it is our duty as the U.S. to provide opportunity for those who strive to break the normative function of their identity, it is also up to the countries of origin to develop and invest in their people's cultural attributes.

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