

# Internationalization Of The Curriculum: Understanding Korean Culture In The Other Peninsula Through A Journey Down To Memory Road.

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## ABSTRACT

The objective of this case study is to characterize how younger people and future generations can understand Korean Culture from historic information, vestiges, buildings and icons present in the city of Mérida in Yucatán, México to maintain diplomatic relations over time. Internationalization is a process of integrating an international dimension to enhance the quality of education. This educational process requires that certain initiatives are implemented to secure inclusive and equitable quality education but also the development of Cultural Diplomacy. A concept that has allowed the inclusion of Korean immigrants' descendants, and the inhabitants of Mérida to thrive together after the signing of an agreement as international partners at official levels. This case study was carried out using the documentary review, literature review, and participant observation techniques. The findings show that several activities and initiatives are carried out to foster Cultural Diplomacy which in turn has helped maintain diplomatic ties, between the two countries over the time.

**Key words:** Internationalization, Internationalization of the Curriculum, Cultural Diplomacy

## Introduction

The first Korean settlement registered was in 1905 when approximately 1033 Koreans arrived to the Salinas Cruz port, Oaxaca to be later transported to Merida, Yucatan, a state located in the southeast of Mexico, with a promise of a job offering. Years later, a commercial agreement was signed by Mexico and Korea mostly because of a historical background or the following dark passage in history (Rangel Delgado, 2007).

Those Koreans's reasons for leaving their homeland is because they were convinced to do so with the idea of better living conditions and complying with a four-year contract in the henequen industry in local haciendas due to the sugar fever, which was an increasing sector and sustained the local economy. Despite complying with the term of their contracts, the possibility of return was null, due to Japanese occupation in their country and high-rate tickets from Mexico to Incheon, many of them opted for staying and adapting to their new environment (Dávila Valdés, 2010).

When the contract, given by a British recruiter named John Meyers, was terminated (Kim, 2011), they found themselves homeless, some others with some money saved, but not enough to go back to Incheon, deciding to go back the work they were already accustomed to in the haciendas. For others, another migration occurred to the neighbor states: Quintana Roo, Campeche, and Veracruz; some others decided to migrate further to the island of Cuba (Dávila Valdés, 2015).

Another powerful reason for leaving and not returning home was a political internal situation due to first occupation by China and then an invasion from Japan. Situation which was considered necessary for other countries to refrain Russia from invading Korean territory, the Japanese empire established and formalized a protectorate in Korea in 1905 (Dávila Valdés, 2018).

Another motivation derived from a classified ad where the promised land was advertised, posted by Japanese labor brokers presumably to lure them out of their country. This group of people took a month-trip from Chemulpo Port in Incheon to their destination by train to Progreso Port in Yucatan to be finally distributed into the 1000 haciendas controlled by 400 Mexican families. (Choi, 2018). By 1962, a second migration took place after 1962 due to migratory policies that conditioned the entrance of Asian people into the USA soil,

finding a temporary stay in Mexico (Gallardo García, 2017). Year that marked a special international relation between Mexico and South Korea, thus establishing the foundations for friendship and diplomacy, as well as cultural, economic, commercial, and investment agreements. A term understood as Cultural Diplomacy (Pajtinka, 2014) which is a set of activities directly by or in collaboration with diplomatic authorities of state to promote foreign policy interests.

If a country is looking for increasing competitiveness levels, bilateral relations play an important role for maintaining cooperation bonds. Mexico and South Korea have benefitted from this agreement and have increased their commercial transactions and investments since the first decade of the XXI century, occupying a relevant position in the international economy. However, the balance scale has favored South Korea in recent years, since the incorporation of technical progress into productive processes; a technological transference is in order, as well as the acquisition of that knowledge (León Manríquez, 2022).

The objective of this case study is to characterize how younger people and future generations can understand Korean Culture from historic information, vestiges, buildings, and icons present in the city of Merida in Yucatan, Mexico to maintain diplomatic relations over time.

The findings reveal that the city of Merida has diverse Korean vestiges for future generations to understand this culture, the reasons or motivations why these people had to leave their country in search of better life conditions and got stranded instead in a different land and whose descendants can call their home today. The relevance of this study lies in the Cultural Diplomacy showed by both nations through history, the strategic alliances created over time that has led to mutual understanding as well as for the existing bilateral agreements.

### **Internationalization around the world**

This concept has changed over the years due to economic, social, and political phenomena; the International Association of Universities [IAU] adopted the following definition by De Wit et al. (2015) where the authors mentioned that Internationalization is an intentional process of integrating a global, international, and intercultural dimension in purpose in order to enhance the quality of education.

### **Internationalization in México**

This educational process requires that every aspect of education creates an impact in the economic sectors by forming global citizens who can face a more globalized society and a more competitive scenario. Some of the strategies that can be implemented, according to geographical and economic factors, are: institutional culture, curriculum, mobility, and strategic alliances (Nava-Aguirre, 2023).

### **Internationalization of the Curriculum**

According to the Karolinska Institutet (2024) it is an increasing form of securing inclusive and equitable quality education and the development of global, intercultural, and international skills or competences, by raising awareness around the formal, hidden, and informal curricula, content, pedagogy learning activities and assessment.

-Formal curriculum: It is related to courses, training, assessment and learning activities students participate in, which is documented in a syllabus.

-Informal curriculum: Learning experiences from other agencies such as student-led initiatives, student support services, social and educational activities, and the main characteristic is that they are extracurricular activities.

-Hidden curriculum: It is related to processes, pressures, constraints, which are not articulated, and they are implicit either academic, social, or cultural messages that are communicated to students.

### **Cultural Diplomacy: the conduit for dialogue**

Cultural diplomacy has its beginnings from the coined term of Soft Power by Joseph Nye (UNESCO, 2023). The difference between diplomacy and cultural diplomacy lies in the following aspect: diplomacy understood as peaceful relationships whereas cultural diplomacy is about an exchange for mutual understanding:

Diplomacy is the art and science of maintaining peaceful relationships between nations, groups, or individuals, so representatives can discuss issues such as conflict trade, the environment, technology, or security (National Geographic Education, 2024).

Cultural Diplomacy is the exchange of ideas, information, art, language and other aspects of culture among nations and people in order to foster mutual understanding as defined by Milton Cummings (UNESCO, 2023). Based on this premise, the state of Yucatan has tried to maintain Cultural Diplomacy over the last century with its international partner South Korea, implementing certain strategies to disseminate the relevance of this culture in Mexican soil.

For instance, there is a Commemorative Korean Museum of the Korean Migration in Merida. This museum concentrates photocopies of documents from 1905, a replica of the boat called Geobukseon, personal items from Korean migrants, and a photograph the SS Iiford ship which the group of immigrants were transported from Chemulpo port in Incheon to Salina Cruz port in Mexico. There are other preserved documents such as a surviving passport from a person named Chon Sun, and protest letters from the Korean government to the Mexican one due to the living and working conditions of their people in the new and promised land. The government of Alvarado from 1915-1918, helped eradicate slavery and allowed Koreans to improve their living

and working conditions, by forcing hacendados to pay them with national currency (Novedades Yucatán, 2015).

About those living and working conditions, Turner (2015) narrated how he infiltrated the privileged Yucatecan class and could observe the terrible reality of the Korean labor force or slaves in those henequen plantations. Despite the way they were treated, Castillo Gómez (2010) described how the presence of those Koreans had a great impact since the first migration, especially on arts, medicine, politics, and economics. The following waves have also tried to improve the places where they had settled down such as in Tamaulipas, a state located in the northeast coast zone of Mexico.

Another relevant point to highlight is a commemorative plaque for the 72-year anniversary of the Constitution of the Korean Republic, and the naming of a main avenue República de Corea or Korean Republic Avenue. This was done as a symbol of great friendship and brotherhood between the two peninsulas and a way of maintaining an international and diplomatic bond (LectorMx, 2017).

In the spirit of Cultural Diplomacy, on May 4<sup>th</sup>, 2019, the mayor of the city declared that day as the Korean Day in Merida, excluding the slavery practices and focusing on the courage of immigrants, their work and love for the land, adapting to local traditions, way of life and collaboration with the Yucatecan society (Cámara Ríos, 2019). An official document from the Government of Yucatán issued in July 2019 stated that the date was approved as the State Day of the Korean Republic and civic acts will commemorate the day after the decree was made public, but there will not be any suspension of activities all over the state (LXXII Legislatura de Yucatán, 2019).

A sculpture called the Greetingman was placed in Merida, it symbolizes a greeting among Korean inhabitants and a gesture of friendship to other nations, because the basis of communication is a greeting. It is the creation of a South Korean artist named Yoo Young-ho. It can be observed in Altabrisa neighborhood on 7<sup>th</sup> street, between the 18<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>. The installation of the sculpture, along with the naming of the Korean Republic Avenue, is a way of ratifying the mutual commitment between the two countries, in particular, to the city of Mérida, to continue working with development projects that benefit the city as well as to the Korean community that still lives there (Novedades Yucatán, 2021).

Another strategy implemented, during the commemoration of the 116<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the arrival of immigrants, was a commemorative plaque placed at Casa de la Cultura in Progreso Port, as this building served as a first refuge, as a reminder not only of their arrival but as a symbol of solidarity and brotherhood between nations (Izamá Noticias, 2021).

Due to the existing diplomatic tides, the ambassador of Korea expressed his interest in Yucatán as a potential state for future investments, because of its competitive advantages and level of security. Offering to promote this destination to Korean Enterprises as well as providing a number of scholarships for international postgraduate programs, and to commemorate the 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Mexico-Korea bilateral relations, remembering the kind gesture when Mexico opened its doors to more than 1000 Korean immigrants in 1905 (Gobierno de Yucatán, 2021).

To this day, Korean companies such as Posco, Kia, Inzi, Samsung, LG, Soeco, Pantech, Nieco, Hyundai, Dyos and Kepco have invested around US\$8.4 billion in the construction of plants and factories in Mexico (MexicoNow, 2023). In a significant move towards expanding their global operations, two leading South Korean banks, Shinhan Bank and Hana Bank, will soon begin operations in Monterrey, Nuevo León, México. As a response to the relocation of supply chains by Korean manufacturing companies to various countries, including México (Invest Monterrey, 2024). The Foreign Direct Investment [FDI] from South Korea to Mexico is US\$ 641 millions, the states which received FDI are: Nuevo León, Ciudad de México and Coahuila de Zaragoza. Same states that have the highest concentration of immigrants: 363 people in Nuevo León, 332 in Coahuila de Zaragoza and 239 in Ciudad de México only in 2020 (Gobierno de México, 2024).

### **Methodology**

This case study (Stake, 2005, p. 11) searches for “the particularity and complexity of a single case, to understand its activities in important circumstances”. The research question was: How can younger people and future generations understand Korean Culture from historic passages? The objective of the case study is to characterize how younger people and future generations can understand Korean Culture from historic information, vestiges, buildings, and icons present in the city of Merida in Yucatan, Mexico. The study was carried out from January 2021 to July 2024, during this time the information was collected with the documentary review (Restrepo y Tabares, 2000), literature review (Purdue University, 2023) and participant observation techniques (Spradley, 1980). The participant observation was carried out during a visit to the city of Merida in July, where information was noted down when visiting the Korean colony known as Barrio de Santiago.

The first technique was used to gather documentary information about the history of the Korean immigration, their motives or reasons for moving, quantity of people, year of the migration, and the real reasons why they were drawn to this part of the country. The second technique was implemented to revise recent works on the topic and the state of the art, to provide different findings or results to those presented by other authors. The last technique was implemented in different sections of the city: restaurants, churches, the museum of Korean culture, plazas, markets, Chemulpo corner, and Barrio de Santiago, to observe or hear about the history of the immigration and people's comments.

The information collected through participant observation was registered in a field notebook, information which was contrasted with the one obtained from the documentary review or indicated by other authors in the literature review. The analysis was conducted with closed coding based by Adell (2008) to characterize the historic path of this culture in the Mexican peninsula.

### Findings

In the city of Mérida, several activities and initiatives are carried out to foster Cultural Diplomacy which helps maintain cultural and diplomatic ties, with their historical and strategic alliance with the country of South Korea. One of the extracurricular activities implemented by the public library "Manuel Cepeda Peraza" is a literary collection of Korean Stories, and an exposition called "From Seoul to Mérida. Freedom 2022". Works by Jeongseng Kwon among other Korean and local artists to promote the environment, Korean food, culture, and philosophy.

**Figure 1** Activities at the public library "Manuel Cepeda Peraza"



Note: Taken from Gobierno de Yucatán web page, July 12, 2024. [https://www.yucatan.gob.mx/saladeprensa/ver\\_notas.php?id=6382](https://www.yucatan.gob.mx/saladeprensa/ver_notas.php?id=6382)

These stores were told by young Korean descendants based in Mérida who are willing to share their cultural traditions among other Korean Families and Yucatecan ones through pedagogical diverse activities. State authorities from Yucatán, México, and from South Korea celebrated and ratified their diplomatic ties, with the 60th Anniversary of the agreement between the two nations. During the event, it was highlighted the relevance this agreement has, because it has also led to resume the Commercial Free Trade which had been suspended for 15 years. The ambassador added that after 117 years, despite the geographical distance, this friendship has grown older, therefore he was moved and honored, and mentioned to be sure their diplomatic ties will continue to be prosperous.



**Figure 2** 60th Anniversary of the agreement between México and Korea.



Note: Taken from Gobierno de Yucatán web page, July 12, 2024. [https://www.yucatan.gob.mx/saladeprensa/ver\\_notas.php?id=6112](https://www.yucatan.gob.mx/saladeprensa/ver_notas.php?id=6112)

“It is reassuring to observe this type of interactions at official levels, so the Korean community feels more than welcome, but part of the Yucatecan community”. This is the feeling expressed by locals in different spaces along the city during the participant observation.

The Commemorative Museum of the Korean Immigration in Mérida holds different activities around the year. Through their Facebook web page, the activities are promoted and shared by this Non-Governmental Office [NGO]. From the variety of activities, the following are highlighted:

**Figure 3** Parade: Korean Day



**KORYUC TE INVITA AL:**

**DESFILE DEL DIA DE COREA**

Participan los grupos de danza Mugunghwa y Ka'ambal

**DOMINGO 19 DE MAYO DEL 2024**

**18:00 HRS**

Inicio en "La esquina del Chemulpo" (C. 57 x 72)  
Col. Centro, Mérida, Yucatán.  
Finaliza con un festival en el Palacio de la Música.

¡Ven con tu hanbok!





Figure 4 *White Night: Music Fest*

**mérida**  
unida por más  
AVILACAMINO 1975-2021

**13** SAB.  
**MAYO**

**MÚSICA**

**Hallyu Ensemble.**  
21:00 hrs.

**El violinista Eli Park.**  
22:00 hrs.

**Dinámica con el público asistente.**  
23:00 hrs.

**LA NOCHE BLANCA** 15 años  
*Arte a tope*

**MUSEO CONMEMORATIVO DE LA INMIGRACIÓN COREANA A YUCATÁN**  
Calle 65 no. 397 A x 44 y 46. Centro

[www.merida.gob.mx /nocheblanca](http://www.merida.gob.mx /nocheblanca)

Cuidarse es responsabilidad de todos y todas

Figure 5 *From Seoul to Mérida*

Juntos transformemos  
**Yucatán**  
GOBIERNO DEL ESTADO

FROM **SEOUL**  
TO **MÉRIDA**  
FREEDOM 2022

It was an exposition by 45 artists showing diverse painting techniques where brilliance and contemporary plastic art were present.

**Figure 6** Online workshop for preparing kimchi

Kimchi is a typical Korean dish, and it has been around for hundreds of years in the state. It can be made from a variety of vegetables, and it was popular because of its versatility, the facility of obtaining the main ingredient cabbage, and also for being considered a healthy dish, commented some other locals who were also descendants from immigrants.

**Figure 7** The Chemulpo corner/tavern

Note: Taken from [Korea.net](http://Korea.net)

The Chemulpo tavern was one of the most commented historic places by the locals, the story of how the owner moved by the sadness of Koreans who visited the tavern wept and cried out `Chemulpo`. The owner decided to change the name for The Chemulpo tavern, nowadays known as the Chemulpo corner, as the tavern no longer exists, is one landmark in the Barrio de Santiago, the colony of the Korean community.

Locals expressed that they feel regret for how those Koreans were treated in the past from what they have learned at the museum, from pictures and articles, but mostly from the stories the descendants used to tell, so the information was not lost or worst, erased from history books.

### Conclusions

The dark and shameful story of the city of Mérida is a constant reminder of the deception and misleading information Korean immigrants received so hacendados could attract work force from the other side of the globe. Their reasons for traveling were similar to any immigrant person, better life conditions and a future for their descendants.

Despite this somber passage in history, Cultural Diplomacy has remained present and both nations have honored their agreement. Same that can be observed through the different cultural, economic, social and political initiatives to maintain this strategic alliance over the century.

If México wants to become a competitive country as its partner South Korea, there is much to be learned, and all the information is impregnated in the historical sites, buildings, books, music, food, museums, and people. It is an advantage that there are still Korean descendants in the city and in other states such as Monterrey, Coahuila, and Ciudad de México, to learn and understand their language or culture in general.



This bilateral agreement is going to provide better job opportunities as well as educational opportunities and scholarships for the people in México. People could learn in depth about how their minds work, how they solve problems, and how they thrive in the technological world, so the transference of knowledge takes place, as long as recipients are ready to accept the information and then, put it into practice. The Commercial Free Trade may be the entrance of a new Korea to the country, but it should be observed as an area of opportunity for México to become as competitive and prosperous as its international partner.

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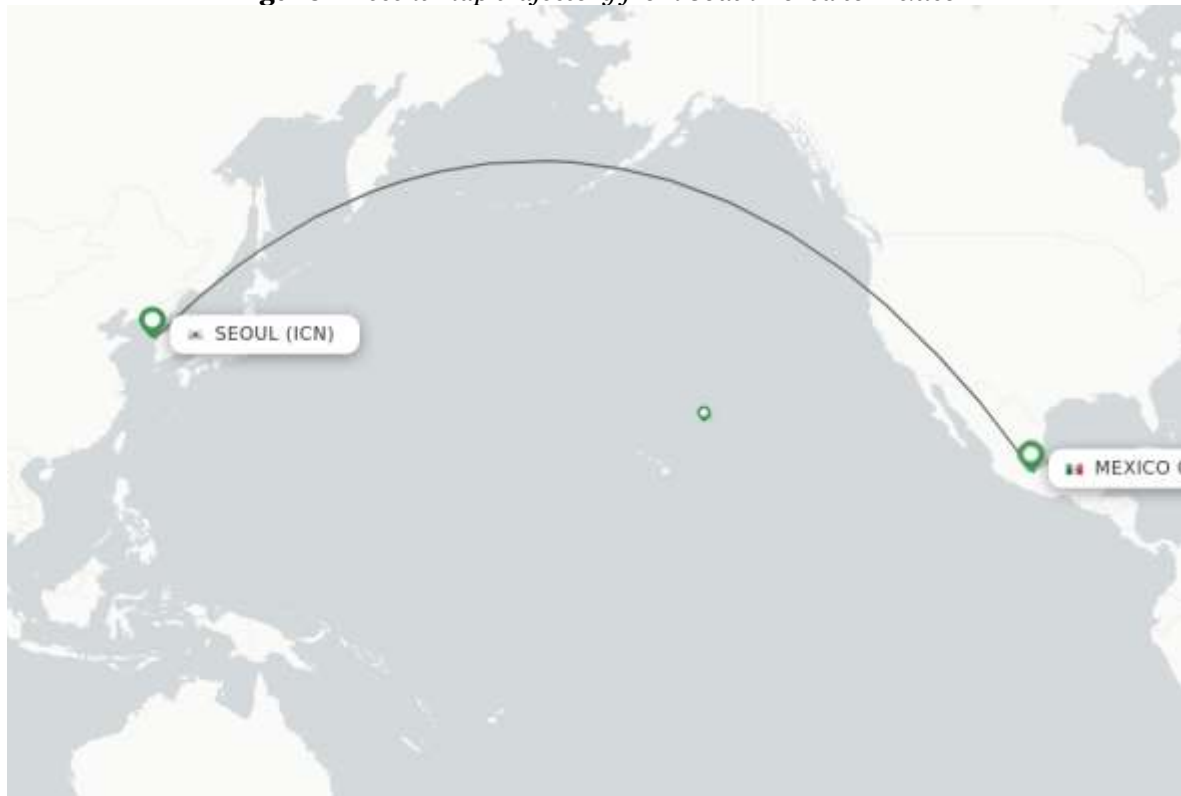
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## APPENDIX

**Figure 1** Recent map trajectory from South Korea to México



Note: Flight route provided by [FlightsFrom.com](https://www.flightsfrom.com)

**Figure 2** Commemorative plaque for the Korean immigration at Progreso Port in Mérida, Yucatán



**Figure 3** Korean Republic Avenue sign



**Figure 4** Greetingman sculpture in Altabrisa neighborhood



**Figure 5** 'The Chemulpo' corner of Korean immigrants: commemorative plaque

