

*Diaspora and the Politics of Sameness and Difference:
The Korean and the Chinese Diaspora in a Korean Context*

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Abstract

In this research, I would like to start with mapping out current theories on diaspora from Safran to Homi Bhabha; and then I will proceed to analyze the significance of two diasporas in relation to their homelands: First, Korean Americans in relation to South Korean politics, and second, Chinese diaspora on the Korean peninsula. What I hope to achieve through these case studies is to expose the schism that splits a single diaspora from within, or to expose the inner heterogeneity that paradoxically composes and, at the same time, deconstructs the ethnic minority as a monolithic cultural entity. The conclusion of this study is that the historical differences within a supposedly single diaspora need to be addressed more seriously by diaspora scholars; and in order to avoid reifying diaspora, they should always place their object of study in its specific historical context.

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Introduction

Diaspora has established itself as one of the major topics in the literary and cultural studies of the twenty-first century. If earlier scholarship defined diaspora in a paradigmatic way, classifying it into a few models such as catastrophic and trading diaspora, later scholarship has become more inclusive. One of the classic theories on diaspora was elaborated by William Safran. In this research, I would like to start with mapping out current theories on diaspora from Safran to Homi Bhabha; and then I will proceed to analyze the significance of two diasporas in relation to their homelands: First, Korean Americans in relation to South Korean politics, and second, Chinese diaspora on the Korean peninsula. What I hope to achieve through these case studies is to expose the schism that splits a single diaspora from within, or to expose the inner heterogeneity that paradoxically composes and, at the same time, deconstructs the ethnic minority as a monolithic cultural entity. The conclusion of this study is that the historical differences within a supposedly single diaspora need to be addressed more seriously by diaspora scholars; and in order to avoid reifying diaspora, they should always place their object of study in its specific historical context.

Old and New Views

The key concept of Safran's theory on diaspora, which has influenced almost all of the subsequent studies on diaspora, is "homeland attachment." Our conventional understanding of this phenomenon derives from it. In the so-called man on the street's view, diaspora is understood in terms of an immigrant group's desire to return to its homeland. It is characterized 1) by dispersion from the center to the periphery, 2) sharing of myths and memories about the homeland, 3) the belief that the immigrants are not genuinely accepted by the host society, and 4) idealization of the homeland (Safran 83-84). If the dispersion is attributed to great disasters like an enemy nation's invasion, it is categorized as a "catastrophic" one. Diaspora may also be caused by people's voluntary move for profit-making. A most prominent example of the first type is the Jewish diaspora. There are, of course, other catastrophic diasporas such as Cuban diaspora, modern Armenian diaspora, and Palestinian diaspora. The Jewish diaspora, along with Greek diaspora, being probably the oldest in human history, has become a prototype upon which classic diaspora theories, including Safran's, are based. Ironically, the solution the Jewish diaspora took in the form of a Jewish state creation after the World War II, as is well known, gave birth to another catastrophic diaspora, the Palestinian diaspora, also known as "al-Nakba." However, diaspora is not always forced but could also be voluntary, as mentioned above. The Armenians who started spreading out all over the world for trading since the 4th century BC exemplify the trading diaspora.

If the old perspective on diaspora focuses on the immigrants' attachment to the homeland, the new perspective highlights their relationship with the host society. According to one of these new views, diaspora is regarded either as a liberating space unmoored from the repressive national identity-formation or as a state pregnant with rebellious energies against the authority of the assimilative host society. One example is Homi Bhabha's theorization of the culture of an ethnic minority in a metropolis as a subversive space, or what he calls "a third space." This theory is premised on the alleged non-conformism of an ethnic minority. Another example is Stuart Hall's conceptualization of "the cultural difference" of ethnic minorities as making a

“disrupting” effect upon the homogeneity or the “naturalizing effect” of the metropolis (Hall 221-22).

Another new perspective on diaspora is voiced by Rogers Brubaker. According to him, the meaning of this transnational movement has lately proliferated so much that diaspora the term itself has gone through a semantic or conceptual diasporization. As a solution to the confusion evolving around diaspora, Brubaker suggests that we should speak of diasporic instances, projects, claims, idioms, and practices instead of speaking of “a diaspora” or “the diaspora” as an entity (13). These old and new views have, of course, both merits and limitations in accounting for the numerous historical occurrences. And I would like to show in this paper where these views, old and new, come short.

Harboring a Wish to Return?

Unlike Safran’s classic model of catastrophic diaspora, the modern diaspora is not necessarily predicated on the immigrants’ desire to return to their homeland. What is worth noting here, however, is that this does not mean that the immigrants are not interested in the social situation of their place of origin. For instance, in 2008, the South Koreans fearful of the mad cow disease protested against their government’s decision to open its market to the beef from the US cattle 30 months and older. The South Korean government tried to push the import bill by assuring the public of the safety of the US beef. As a counter-discourse to the proliferating scare stories about the American beef, the government argued out that the Americans, especially the Korean Americans who have been eating the US beef for many decades, did not have any single known occurrence of the deadly disease. What is interesting takes place after this. A group of Korean American women, members of an internet club called “mizworld” (<http://club.limeusa.com/mizworld>), countered the South Korean government’s official discourse by spreading through the internet the information that the Korean government did not want its public to know, that is, the fact that the beef from cows under 24 months only is allowed for consumption in the US. According to this revelation, the South Korean government agreed to import the kind of beef whose sale is forbidden in the U.S. market.

These Korean American women, mostly homemakers, made a tremendous impact on the politics of South Korea during 2008 – 2009. Their counter-information, released in early May of 2008, added fuel to the already volatile political situation of South Korea. On the days like June 6th of 2008(Korean Memorial Day), the number of the people who took to the streets holding candle lights in protest reached 200,000.

These Korean American women engaged in South Korean politics not because they harbor a wish to come back to South Korea. Although they have no desire to return, they were still deeply concerned about the social and political agenda of their homeland. In this regard, they constitute a diaspora deviating from both Safran’s and Bhabha's models. Anderson once remarked of a group of immigrants who act as a kind of "absent patriots" in relation with their home country:

[E]lectronic communications, combined with the huge migrations created by the present world-economic system, are creating a virulent new form of nationalism, which I call long-distance nationalism: a nationalism that no longer depends as it once

did on territorial location in a home country. Some of the most vehement Sikh nationalists are Australians, Croatian nationalists, Canadians; Algerian nationalists, French; and Chinese, Americans. The internet, electronic banking and cheap international travel are allowing such people to have a powerful influence on the politics of their country of origin, even if they have no intention any longer of living there. This is one of the main ironic consequences of the processes popularly called globalization. (42)

Anderson's long-distance nationalism and Safran's classic model of diaspora, despite their apparent differences, converge on some kind of homeland orientation, whether it takes the form of a teleological desire to return or a patriotic engagement with the social agenda of the motherland. Despite the prominence of these diasporas, however, attachment to the homeland does not account for all of the numerous, diversified phenomena designated by the single term, diaspora.

Differences within Sameness

The new perspectives on diaspora, such as Brubaker's and Bhabha's, point to a new direction in understanding the phenomena by suggesting that homeland attachment may be a necessary condition for diaspora, but not a sufficient one. Yet, one major problem I have with Bhabha's theorization is that it does not ask why the ethnic minorities do cling to their cultural difference. The culture of an ethnic minority, simply because of its difference from the hegemonic culture, is equated with resistance and subversion in Bhabha's account. The question that Bhabha fails to raise is raised and answered by Marlon Ross in the following terms:

People do not struggle to survive as a group in order to possess a culture--that is, they do not struggle to survive in order to preserve their cultural identity. To the contrary, they struggle to preserve their cultural identity as a way of surviving, as individuals, the acts committed against them as a cultural group. They recognize that to survive as individuals depends on their ability to cohere, politick, and speak as a collective body experiencing assault because of their group identity. (836)

Seen from this perspective, the priority of immigrants is not to preserve their ethnic identities but to survive. And what maximizes individuals' survival is for them to live and fight as a collective body.

Another crucial dynamics of diaspora that neither Bhabha nor Brubaker encapsulates in their theorizations is the presence of heterogeneity within the one and same ethnic collectivity. The cultural homogeneity, which a diaspora is believed to preserve at all costs for the sake of the continuity of self-identification, becomes an insidious cause for intra-group repression, an ideological straightjacket so to speak. The historical trajectories of immigrants can be starkly different from one group to another, depending upon the period of immigration and the place of arrival. For instance, the overseas Chinese in South Korea, in the U.S. and in Singapore are very different from one another in their attitude towards China as well as in their self-identification. A fine example of the overseas Chinese's disaffection with, or detachment from, China is witnessed in an episode at an international conference held in Singapore years ago. After an American scholar gave a presentation on the topic of diasporic/transnational Chinese, one Chinese Singaporean scholar stood up and maintained that he is only a

Singaporean, neither diasporic nor transnational (Dirlik 173). This incident illustrates that homeland is no longer a point of reference in self-identification among certain diasporas. Of course, this Singaporean scholar does not speak for the overseas Chinese who have lately emigrated to the U.S. and thus retain a relatively stronger attachment to China.

The overseas Chinese in South Korea present a little more complicated case than this. First, there are two separate groups of overseas Chinese in South Korea: Kuhwagyo (舊華僑) meaning the old overseas Chinese, and Shinhwagyo (新華僑) the new overseas Chinese. The former group is composed of the descendents of those who migrated to the Korean peninsula over the period from 1881 to 1949, the period roughly covering the late Joseon dynasty and Japanese imperial rule. Some of these Chinese migrants settled in what is now North Korea; while others came further south. The year of 1949, when People's Republic of China was established, marks the cessation of Chinese migration to the two Koreas. The new overseas Chinese in South Korea are those who came to South Korea since 1992, the year when South Korea established diplomatic ties with China. These three migrant groups' points of national identification are quite interesting to compare: the nationality of the new overseas Chinese in South Korea is Chinese; that of the old overseas Chinese is Taiwanese; and the old overseas Chinese in North Korea is either Chinese or North Korean. The difference of homeland for these groups indicates the presence of stark difference within the same ethnic minority. What is worth noting about the old overseas Chinese in South Korea, is that they have lately started to speak of the possibility of changing their nationality from Taiwanese to Chinese. This is due to the discrimination that they have received from the Taiwanese government. Unlike the Taiwanese in Taiwan, this group finds it very difficult to receive a travel permission from their government; the benefits of the no-visa-treaty, for instance, that Taiwan made with other countries are not available to this particular overseas group (Hwagyodül i). If the old overseas Chinese's difference from their new counterpart indicates the heterogeneity that splits the allegedly monolithic entity of the overseas Chinese, the discrimination that they receive from their homeland exposes a hierarchy within the same ethnic group. And this hierarchy is, in turn, responsible for the changeability in the diasporic group's national/homeland affiliation.

Speaking of hierarchy, differentiation and discrimination are found operating even within the same diasporic group. Differences do exist in gender, sexual orientation, politics, religion, and family backgrounds within the same ethnic group. It is a universal phenomenon. However, some of these differences may be tolerated while others are not, depending on the group's situation and political agenda. Within a diaspora, for instance, explorations of different cultural values and new identities are more severely repressed than those of other differences, partly due to the minority group's strong desire to hold on to their collective identity as a kind of asset or resource to fight against the hostile host society with. In other words, discrimination within is generated by discrimination without. Lisa Lowe speaks of this intra-group hierarchy within the same racial minority in the following terms:

[C]ultural nationalism's affirmation of the separate purity of its culture opposes assimilation of the standards of dominant society. Stories about the loss of a "native" Asian culture tend to express some form of this opposition. At the same time, there are criticism of this cultural nationalist position, most often articulated by feminists

who charge that Asian American nationalism prioritizes masculinity and does not account for women. (75)

Conclusion

What diaspora studies of today should be weary of is to understand and use diaspora in an abstract way, dissociated from the historical context. When the scholars put down their guards, they run the risk of allowing one particular diaspora to speak for other diasporas. And the regional and historical differences of a diaspora are drowned within a few universalized occurrences. This study suggests that diaspora should be understood as a continuum or spectrum of historical phenomena stretching between two points, with Safran's classical model at one end and localization at the other end. After surveying classic and latest theories of diaspora, this study discussed the Korean diaspora and the Chinese diaspora in relation to their respective homelands. These two Asian diasporas, I hope, help to bring out the elements within the ethnic sameness that resist a reified structure, in other words, the presence of what Derrida might call "différance" that contests, destabilizes, and delays totalization. This study ultimately aims to foreground the schism, irregularity, and heterogeneity that split diasporas from inside and, in so doing, it hopes to issue a warning against the reification of diasporic occurrences. Perhaps, one way of drawing a balanced picture about diasporas is to loosen up a little the hyphen that connects the origin and the national membership of the immigrants and place them back in a historical context. Understood this way, the politics of diaspora often gestures towards a post-ethnic horizon rather than the predetermined teleology of return to the homeland or even cultural survival.

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