# The Intersection of Gender and Nationality within South Korean Universities, 1970-2010

In this paper, I examine the intersection between gender and nationality within South Korean universities through changes in gender and nationality of academic teaching staff in South Korea. This is a preliminary quantitative examination of the intersection of race and gender in South Korean higher education, which will provide the basis for more qualitative research in future. Academia is an interesting example of this intersectionality as this is an area in which there are clearly visible numbers of international and female staff. South Korea is highly ethnically homogenous – the 2005 census reported that “foreigners” (*oegug-in*) accounted for only half a percent of the population (Kyoengje Kihoegweon 2010: 172). However, foreigners academics accounted for over 4% of all university faculty in 2010 (Gyoyugbu 2010: 646). While women account for over half of the total population of South Korea, they accounted for only 32.22% of all academic staff in 2010, and were largely clustered in lowest level ‘Teaching Assistant’ roles. Foreign women accounted for 1.16% of all academic staff in 2010, though the positions they held were not published within the 2010 *Gyoyug Tong-gye Yeonbo* (Statistical Yearbook of Education). There was a significant increase in the number of foreign, female and foreign/female staff between 1970 and 2010, leading to more gender equality and racial diversity amongst academic staff at South Korean universities.

## Introduction

Higher education in South Korea expanded rapidly between 1970 and 2010: in 1970, there were 71 universities (*daehak*), at which 146,414 students were taught by 7,473 staff (Mungyobu 1970: 564–565). Not all of these staff were equal, however: out of 7,473 total academic staff, only 958 (or 12.82%) were female[[1]](#footnote-1) and only 1.35% (or 101) of academic staff were foreign nationals. There were only 33 foreign national women working in academic positions in South Korea in 1970, and they accounted for 0.44% of all academic staff. The majority of international staff were from the United States of America – including 24 women (Mungyobu 1970: 617). Although the university sector in South Korea has since expanded, marginalisation of female and foreign staff continues. In this case study, I provide a preliminary quantitative examination of foreign and female academics as a basis for further research into intersectionality in South Korean higher education.

Female teaching staff at South Korean universities are often marginalised in terms of institutional status and decision-making power (Kim 2005: 97), and foreign academic staff are denied tenure (Kim 2005: 94). Thus the intersection of nationality and gender in the form of the foreign female academic provides a case study of a highly marginalised group. Although foreign nationals are denied tenure within South Korean universities, it remains common for South Korean academics to seek graduate training abroad, particularly in the United States of America (Kim 2005: 93), creating a situation where internationalisation is supported by academic staff in terms of their own training, but is resisted in other ways.

## Theoretical Background

The expansion of the tertiary education sector in South Korea is a local reflection of the global trend of converting higher education from an elite to a mass system (Frank and Meyer 2007: 289). This transition has been driven by the conception of higher education as having a key role in knowledge-based socioeconomic growth (Frank and Meyer 2007: 292–300), and the twin forces of educational globalisation and internationalisation. Educational globalisation can be defined as “the economic, political, and societal forces pushing 21st century higher education toward greater international involvement”, while internationalisation covers the specific programs and policies instituted by countries and educational institutions to cope with the increasingly global education market (Altbach and Knight 2007: 290; see also van der Wende 2007: 275). While globalisation is often thought to include only late-20th and early 21st century movements, it has a long history through colonialisation (van der Wende 2007: 275).

Colonial impacts express themselves on higher education through such issues as the language of instruction and an emphasis on foreign staff (Huang 2007: 422). As the modern education system in South Korea is largely the result of the Japanese colonisation of Korea from 1910 to 1945 and American influence since the end of the Korean War, we can see that the Korean educational system has a long history of engagement with internationalisation, even if Korea’s authoritarian military governments did not include the internationalisation of higher education as a specific policy goal (Altbach 1989: 11). The Brain Korea 21 project, launched in 1999 and explained in detail below, marked a significant departure in South Korean educational policy through establishing a specific policy of internationalisation (Byun and Kim 2011: 475), as did the recent change allowing foreign educational providers to establish South Korean branches of their institutions (Altbach and Knight 2007: 298–299).

Internationalisation has many forms, from traditional student exchanges to establishing cross-border collaborations and branch campuses (Altbach and Knight 2007: 290). The form of internationalisation that I focus on in this paper is the employment of foreign staff in South Korean universities. Foreign academics are essential cross-cultural translators and improve the score of a university in international ranking tables, becoming increasingly necessary in today’s highly globalised world. The number of foreign academic staff has slowly increased within South Korean institutions.

This rise in the number of foreign staff in South Korea has been accompanied by an increase in the number of female staff. Equal employment opportunities for women in developed countries such as South Korea are (almost) universally politically supported, even if in practice they do not always occur (Wirth 2001: 153–164). Equal opportunities as a concept derives from a “liberal political philosophy which asserts the rights of the individual to universally applicable standards of justice and citizenship” (Webb 1997: 159), and the right to equal employment opportunity for men and women is enshrined in South Korean law (see, for example, Cho, Kwon, and Ahn 2010: 264; Gelb and Palley 1994: 10). Equality of opportunity does not always lead to equality of result, however, and while discrimination on the basis of sex is illegal, there are large differences between legal and broad social changes (Gaze 2010: 110), particularly with regards to gender and socioculturally endorsed norms of gendered behaviour.

While gender is often presented as an “immutable category of difference” (Butler 1997: 14), in reality gender is produced, endorsed and modified through ongoing social and cultural processes and interactions, rather than by individuals in isolation (Panteli, Stack, and Ramsey 2001; Scott 1988). Gender is socially and culturally constructed as a divider used to classify and partition the population commonly based on stereotypical imaginings of what ‘women’ or ‘men’ are ‘best suited’ or ‘able’ to do, rather than on empirical evidence of similarity.

Regardless of a lack of measurable differences between men and women on a range of abilities (Carothers and Reis 2012), beliefs surrounding gender difference are so deeply embedded within society that “individuals’ occupational aspirations tend to become limited to alternatives regarded as appropriate for their gender” (Cejka and Eagly 1999: 415). These beliefs pay little attention to the needs or abilities of individuals are instead presented as “fundamental differences” (Scott 1988: 168). Gender is thus used as a category to restrict and control sectors the population (Thornton 1990). As social penalties for violating societal norms or stereotypes of gendered behaviour can be severe (Heilman and Wallen 2010; Okimoto and Brescoll 2010; Tyler and McCullough 2009), sociocultural norms of gender can be highly resistant to change – including norms of employment for women.

One of the most important theoretical shifts in gender studies in recent years has been the emergence of intersectionality as a major paradigm of analysis (McCall 2005: 1771). Intersectionality is the location in which multiple identities and experiences of exclusion and subordination interact, and describes how diversity within groups leads to differing levels of marginalisation (Davis 2008: 67–68). Intersectionality can also be a positive aspect of identity, “opening up access to rewards, status, and opportunities unavailable to other intersections” (Shields 2008: 302). Despite the popularity of intersectionality as a feminist theory, quantitative and empirical research has been slow to fully adapt to the multiplicative forms of difference contained within intersectionality (Hancock 2007). The case study presented here is a preliminary examination of intersectionality: it describes the combination of nationality and gender within academic staff in South Korean universities in preparation for future work that is more detailed in nature.

## Graduate Education in South Korea

Graduate education in South Korea remained relatively under-developed until the mid-1960s, when American influence following the Korean War rose in South Korea (Lee 2004: 161). During the 1960s to 1980s, many graduate students chose to study in the United States rather than Korea, partially due to the scarcity of postgraduate education available in South Korean universities – of the 18 million people aged 14+ in South Korea in 1970, only 518 students were enrolled in doctoral programs, with a further 6122 in Masters degrees (Mungyobu 1970: 670). Following the Korean War, there was increased contact with Americans and American scholars, who encouraged study in the United States; this was supported by scholarships offered by American universities for Korean students as well as a professor-exchange system developed as part of the United States’ technical aid to South Korea (Bark 1984: 278).

Graduate education in South Korea has since expanded: in 2010, there were 53,533 doctoral candidates and 263,100 Masters students enrolled at Korean universities (Gyoyugbu 2010: 750). This has unfortunately led to a situation where there are more people with graduate qualifications in South Korea than there are academic jobs. Many young academics are employed in part-time teaching or research assistantships, and financial strains are causing universities to rely more on casual than permanent teaching staff (Lee 2004: 165). Increased professionalisation of the academic workforce in South Korea has seen the holding of a Doctoral degree has become the norm for (particularly male) faculty at four-year universities. In 1970, only 32.31% of academic staff held doctoral degrees (34.53% of male and 11.03% of female staff). By 2010, these proportions had increased significantly: 86.31% of total staff (87.98% of male and 79.10% of female) held doctoral degrees (Mungyobu 1970: 602–603; Gyoyugbu 2010: 632–633).

### Changes in the Graduate Student Body

One significant change in South Korean graduate education is the percentage of female graduate students. In 1970, women accounted for 13% of Masters students, and only 28 women were enrolled in doctoral programs (5% of all doctoral candidates). By the early 1980s, it was “socially expected for women to graduate from high school, generally expected and always accepted to get a BA or BS, [and] somewhat occasionally necessary for women to get MA” (sic) (Kim and Cha 1982: 11). However, PhDs and other high level professional degrees were “considered unnecessary and often undesirable for a woman to obtain if she is to remain within the purview of social acceptability” (Kim and Cha 1982: 11–12). The number of women seeking postgraduate qualifications has increased significantly since then: in 2010, women accounted for 50% of all Masters students and 20,327 women were enrolled in doctoral programs, accounting for 38% of all doctoral candidates.

Another significant change in the increase in the number of foreign graduate students. In 1970, there were only 53 international graduate students studying at South Korean universities – 5 of whom were female (Mungyobu 1970: 564). The majority of these students (24) were from China, followed by Japan. By 2010, the number of international graduate students had increased exponentially: the 14,697 international students accounted for 4.64% of the graduate student body (Gyoyugbu 2010: 611). The majority of international students in 2010 were Chinese (8,198), followed by Vietnam (1,068) and Mongolia (1,038) (Gyoyugbu 2010: 611). Women accounted for over half of all international graduate students in South Korea in 2010, but for less than half of graduate students overall.

## The Academic Workforce in South Korea

Initial recruitment for academic posts in South Korea increasingly relies on a candidate having a doctorate qualification and a record of research achievements, and “being below forty years of age” (Lee 2006: 171). According to Lee, academic careers in South Korea begin at the Assistant Professor level, where new academics will be given a five to six year probationary period, before being promoted to Associate Professor (often with tenure). After a further four to six years, Associate Professors can seek promotion to the Professor level (Lee 2003: 187). Promotion is based on teaching, research and service, with increasing weight being award to student evaluations of teaching as a tool to measure performance (Lee 2003: 188).

While Lee does not distinguish between the academic careers of men and women in South Korea, there is a clear difference between the genders. There are five levels of full-time staff reported by Gyoyugbu (the South Korean Department of Education): Professor (*gyosu*), Associate Professor (*bugyosu*), Assistant Professors (*jogyosu*), Lecturers (*gangsa*) and Teaching Assistants (*jogyo*). All but Assistants are reported as full-time faculty, with non-full-time faculty including part-time lecturers (*sigan gangsa*), guest professors (*gaeg-won gyosu*), honorary professors (*myeong-ye gyosu*) and conditional professors (*daeu gyosu*) (Gyoyugbu 1990: 578–579). At higher education institutions, “most men hold the position of professor while most women are instructors,[[2]](#footnote-2) even if women entered teaching with the same graduate degree as men” (Lee 2001: 222). This disparity is not unique to academia – the uneven career distributions of women and men with similar qualifications is noted in several works on South Korean women and employment in general (see, for example, Brinton and Lee 2001: 132–136; Lee and Hirata 2001: 114–115).

The disparity between the number of male and female staff at South Korean universities has begun to decrease, although differences remain within male and female employment at the different teaching levels. The number of staff at Korean universities has increased since 1970 as the Korean education system has expanded, as has the proportion of female staff (Figure 1).

In 2010, there were 179 universities in South Korea, at which 2,028,841 students were taught by 83,817 academic staff (Gyoyugbu 2010: 706, 718–719). The percentage of female staff has increased to 32.22% of total academic staff (27,010 female staff), and the 83,817 foreign nationals accounted for 4.22% of academic staff. Foreign female staff remained a minority, as the 1103 foreign female academics accounted for only 1.32% of all academic staff in 2010. The majority of foreign staff continue to be from the United States of America, followed by China, Japan and Canada (Gyoyugbu 2010: 646).

Figure Total Academic Staff by Gender, 1970-2010[[3]](#footnote-3)

While the proportion of female staff at South Korea universities has increased, disparities remain between the proportion of male and female staff at the different staff levels. Figure 2 gives the distribution of academic staff at South Korean universities in 1970, and shows that a large percentage of female staff (37.37%) were employed as Teaching Assistants, followed by Instructors (21.61%), Assistant Professors (17.64%), Professors (12.42%), and Associate Professors (10.96%). The largest proportion of male staff was employed as Professors (30.71%), followed by Assistant Professors (21.55%), Instructors (19.26%), Associate Professors (15.73%), and Teaching Assistants (12.74%).

Figure 2 Distribution of Academic Staff by Level, 1970[[4]](#footnote-4)

The differing distributions of male and female staff in 1970 created divergent gender balances across the staff levels: women accounted for 12.82% of total academic staff, but only 5.61% of Professors, 9.29% of Associate Professors and 10.74% of Assistant Professors (Figure 3).

Figure Total Academic Staff by Level and Gender, 1970[[5]](#footnote-5)

Although women accounted for a greater proportion of academic staff in South Korea in 2010, inequalities between male and female staff remain. While women accounted for 32.22% of academic staff in 2010, 60.67% of female academic staff were employed in Teaching Assistant (*jogyo*) positions in 2010 (Figure 4). After Teaching Assistants, the next largest category of female staff in 2010 was the Professor level, where 12.42% of female staff were employed, followed by Assistant Professors (10.49%), Associate Professors (7.94%) and Lecturers (7.17%).

Figure 4 Distribution of Academic Staff by Level, 2010[[6]](#footnote-6)

For men, the most common staff level was Professors (42.76% of all male staff), then Teaching Assistants (20.47%), Associate Professors (16.92%), Assistant Professors (13.87%), and finally Lecturers (5.99%). The differences in the distribution of male and female academic staff suggest that women’s academic careers in South Korea are highly constrained by social norms and expectations.

Figure Total Academic Staff by Level and Gender, 2010[[7]](#footnote-7)

Although women accounted for 32.22% of academic staff in 2010, the proportion of female staff differed at each level (Figure 5). Women accounted for 58.49% of all Teaching Assistants, 36.28% of Lecturers, 26.46% of Assistant Professors, 18.24% of Associate Professors, and only 13.25% of Professors. In short, the higher the rank, the lower the percentage of women.

## Foreign Staff at South Korean Universities

It is only in recent years that the percentage of foreign academic staff at South Korea universities has remained higher than two per cent (Figure 6). This is largely due to changes in the internationalisation policies of higher education, as until the late 1980s, South Korean higher education policies addressed internationalisation “only in reference to sending students and scholars abroad to obtain an education from one of the developed countries, particularly the United States” (Byun and Kim 2011: 469). Overseas travel was opened to ‘ordinary citizens’ as part of the liberalising reforms of Roh Tae-woo’s (b. 1932) Sixth Republic, which began in 1988 and lasted until 1993 and marked a departure from the authoritarian military governments of previous Republics (Lee 1996: 24–25; Byun and Kim 2011: 469), which marked a turning point in the internationalisation of South Korean education.

Figure Total Academic Staff by Nationality, 1970–2010[[8]](#footnote-8)

While internationalisation policies of the 1990s focused on increasing the number of international students choosing South Korea as their destination of education, the Brain Korea 21 project has dominated higher education policies in the 2000s. Launched in 1999, the Brain Korea 21 project focused on transforming South Korean universities into world-class research institutions through special research grants. Seventy-five percent of the budget was to be allocated for “supporting graduate schools in certain fields in the natural and applied sciences, humanities, and social sciences” (Moon and Kim 2001: 99). In reality around 67 universities (all of which had Doctoral programs in science and engineering) received the majority of the funding (Shin 2009: 670).

The Brain Korea 21 project was deemed so successful that a second stage of the project was launched in 2005. The second stage aimed to “develop 10 world‑class, research oriented universities and make Korea one of the world’s top 10 countries” in terms of research output by 2012 (Byun and Kim 2011: 475). Under this project and the World Class University Project (launched in 2008), internationalisation was pushed to the forefront of South Korean educational policy, and recruitment of foreign national academics was encouraged (Byun and Kim 2011: 475). As part of the internationalisation process, the use of English in academic settings in South Korea has become more common, with around 9,000 English Language Medium courses being offered in 2006 (accounting for 2.2% of the 410,000 total courses offered at universities that year), and a majority of universities now require their students to pass a certain number of English Medium courses to graduate (Byun and Kim 2011: 478). The increased usage of English within Korean academia has encouraged the hiring of foreign national academics, as well as foreign-educated Koreans.

Although the number of foreign academic staff has increased and they account for 4.22% of total staff, the proportion of foreign staff is different at all staff levels.

Figure Academic Staff by Nationality, 1970[[9]](#footnote-9)

In 1970, 1.35% of all staff were foreign nationals, however the ratio of foreign to domestic staff differed between the staff levels (Figure 7). The staff level with the highest proportion of foreign national staff was the Professors level, where non-Koreans accounted for 1.75% of all Professors. Non-Koreans accounted for 1.42% of Associate Professors, 1.14% of Assistant Professors, 1.71% of Instructors and only 0.42% of Teaching Assistants (there were only 5 foreign Teaching Assistants in 1970).

Although the total number of foreign staff employed at South Korean universities was reported from 1970 to 2010, the final year that foreign staff was reported in terms of their staff level was 1986. Even though this was prior to the liberalisation of South Korea, some significant changes in the proportion of foreign national academic staff can be seen.

Figure Academic Staff by Nationality, 1986[[10]](#footnote-10)

In 1986, foreign nationals accounted for 1.58%, which is not a large difference from 1970 (Figure 8). What is different is the distribution of these non-Koreans over the various staff levels. For example, there were only two foreign Teaching Assistants in 1986, meaning that foreigners accounted for 0.03% of staff at this level. The largest proportion of foreign staff was found at the Instructor level, where 124 non-Koreans accounted for 3.79% of all staff. The ratio of Korean/foreign staff was not significantly different in 1986 than in 1970: non-Koreans accounted for 1.84% of Professors, 1.89% of Associate Professors and 1.54% of Assistant Professors in 1986. It is not clear from the data why there were so many foreign Instructors in 1986, and this could be an area for future research.

## The Intersection of Gender and Nationality

From the data already presented, it is clear that there are significant differences between the number of male and female academic staff, and the number of Korean and foreign national academic staff. The intersection of both gender and nationality is telling: foreign women are rare in academic positions in South Korea overall, but in 1970, non-Korean nationals accounted for a larger proportion of female staff than they did of male.

Figure Male Staff by Level and Nationality, 1970[[11]](#footnote-11)

Non-Korean nationals accounted for only 1.04% of all male academic teaching staff in 1970 (Figure 9). There were only 3 foreign male Teaching Assistants, who accounted for 0.36% of the 830 total male Teaching Assistants that year. There were 11 foreign male Instructors (accounting for 0.88% of all male Instructors) and 11 foreign male Assistant Professors (0.78% of all male Assistant Professors). The 13 foreign male Associate Professors accounted for 1.27% of all male Associate Professors, and the 30 foreign male Professors accounted for 1.50% of all male Professors. Although non-Korean nationals accounted for a higher proportion of female staff (3.44% in 1970), they were less in total number (Figure 10).

Figure Female Staff by Level and Nationality, 1970[[12]](#footnote-12)

There were only 2 non-Korean women working as Teaching Assistants in 1970, who accounted for 0.56% of 358 total female Teaching Assistants. The largest number of non-Korean women worked at the Instructor level, where the 14 non-Korean women accounted for 6.76% of all female Instructors. There were 7 non-Korean women working as Assistant Professors (4.14% of female Assistant Professors), 3 non-Korean female Associate Professors (2.86% of female Associate Professors) and 7 non-Korean female Professors (5.88% of all female Professors). This creates the interesting situation where although there were less foreign women working in South Korean universities in 1970 than foreign men, they accounted for a larger proportion of total female staff than foreign men did of total male staff.

As mentioned previously, 1986 was the final year that foreign staff was reported in terms of their staff level. Although the number of staff – of both genders and either nationality – increased between 1970 and 1986, foreign women accounted for a smaller proportion of total female staff in 1986 than they did in 1970, while foreign men accounted for a higher proportion of total male staff.

Figure Female Staff by Level and Nationality, 1986[[13]](#footnote-13)

There was a total of 120 foreign female staff in 1986, however none of these women worked at the Teaching Assistant level (Figure 11). Forty-nine foreign women worked as Instructors (accounting for 9.25% of all female Instructors), 28 as Assistant Professors (2.76%), 23 as Associate Professors ( 4.41%) and a further 20 foreign national women worked as Professors (accounting for 4.56% of all female Professors).

Though the total number of foreign men working as academics (308) was double that of the number of foreign women, foreign men accounted for a smaller proportion of male staff at each staff level, with the exception of at the Teaching Assistant level. While there were no foreign female Teaching Assistants in 1986, there were 2 foreign men working at this level (Figure 12), who accounted for 0.04% of all male Teaching Assistants.

Figure Male Staff by Level and Nationality, 1986[[14]](#footnote-14)

The 75 foreign male Instructors accounted for 2.73% of all male Instructors, which was the highest proportion of foreign/Korean staff amongst male academics. The 80 foreign male Assistant Professors accounted for 1.33% of all male Assistant Professors, while 60 foreign men accounted for 1.55% of male Associate Professors and another 91 accounted for 1.63% of all male Professors.

Although the number of foreign staff by level was not reported from 1987 onwards, the number of total and female foreign staff was still reported. As with the number and proportion of total foreign staff, there was a steady increase in the number and proportion of foreign female staff in the 2000s (Figure 13). In 2010, there were a total of 1103 non-Korean female academics working at South Korean universities, a significant increase from the 33 employed in 1970. As foreign female academics accounted for only 1.3% of total academic staff at South Korean universities in 2010, however, aspects of their identity as intersectionalised marginal others within higher education remain significantly different to that of other academics within the same location. Further research should be undertaken so as to explore their specific contexts of marginalisation, and to locate areas in which these academics need more support to further their careers.

Figure Total Foreign Female Academic Staff, 1970–2010[[15]](#footnote-15)

## Conclusion

Between 1970 and 2010, the number and proportion of female, foreign, and foreign/female academic staff at South Korean universities has increased. Despite this, sources indicate that these workers are subject to levels of marginalisation based on their sex or nationality status. Women accounted for 32.22% of all academic staff in 2010, and foreign academics accounted for 4.22% of total staff. The 1103 foreign female staff working in South Korean universities in 2010 accounted for 1.3% of total academic staff, and continue to constitute a minority amongst academic staff. The intersection of foreignness and gender makes for a unique aspect of academic experience in South Korea, and deserves more detailed analysis in future.

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1. In studies of gender equity, it is often female participation which is problematized – for example, statistics relating to employment will often report “total” and “female” numbers, thus highlighting the female worker as unusual (see, for example, Mungyobu 1970). While I argue that the gender disparity issue is more often due to male over-representation than female under-representation, I have examined female participation in this article so as to provide easier comparison with existing research in this area. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Lower level lecturers or tutors. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Data sourced from Mungyobu (1970–1989) and Gyoyugbu (1990–2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Data sourced from Mungyobu (1970: 600). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Data sourced from Mungyobu (1970: 600). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Data sourced from Gyoyugbu (2010: 630). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Data sourced from Gyoyugbu (2010: 630). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Data sourced from Mungyobu (1970–1989) and Gyoyugbu (1990–2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Data sourced from Mungyobu (1970: 600–601). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Data sourced from Mungyobu (1986: 512–513). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Data sourced from Mungyobu (1970: 600–601). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Data sourced from Mungyobu (1970: 600–601). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Data sourced from Mungyobu (1986: 512–513). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Data sourced from Mungyobu (1986: 512–513). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Data sourced from Mungyobu (1970–1989) and Gyoyugbu (1990–2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)