

The historical Korean presence in the city of Tijuana

Volume 7 Issue 2 - 2022

Nohemí Rodríguez Cota

Degree in History at the Autonomous University of Baja California, Mexico

Correspondence: Nohemí Rodríguez Cota, Degree in History at the Autonomous University of Baja California, Mexico, Tel +52 664 587 4899, Email rodriguez.nohemi@uabc.edu.mx**Received:** August 17, 2022 | **Published:** September 08, 2022

Currently, South Korean music, television and artist content in general have aroused great interest around the world and Mexico is no exception. We could say that this is due to the history that unites South Korea with Mexico, which extends to more than a hundred years. Among the Mexican cities that have a historical relationship with the Korean community is Tijuana, a border city located in the northwest of the country in the state of Baja California. To understand their relationship, this work aims to present a historical tour of the Korean presence in the city.

Tijuana, where “the homeland begins” is recognized as a multicultural¹ Mexican city. Its proximity to the American Southwest and its industrial condition makes it a metropolitan area, strategic for trade. Compared to other metropolitan cities in the country, Tijuana

¹Understanding the “multicultural” meaning as the presence of different cultures in one same place, whether they relate or not each other.

is quite young since it was founded in 1889, beginning as a city of passage and debauchery, designed for foreigners and not so much for Mexicans. Because of that, from its beginnings, the city of Tijuana was populated in greater numbers by foreigners of various nationalities, in addition to Mexicans from other states. At present, the foreign-born population of the city is almost half of the total population.

Among the foreign communities settled in the city are the American, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, Jewish, Russian, and Haitian, among others. Some of these communities have their own centers and associations, since their presence extends for more than fifty years as is the case of the Korean community.

Although, the first contact between the Korean peninsula and Mexico happened during the first decade of the twentieth century, when a shipment of 1,031 Koreans arrived in the state of Yucatan to work in the henequen plantations, the arrival of Koreans in Tijuana occurred a few decades later. To understand Korean immigration in Tijuana it is necessary to consider the following.

On the one hand, the researcher Alfredo Romero Castilla mentions three important waves of Korean immigration in Mexico: to Yucatan, to Mexico City and to Tijuana. Of the Koreans who remained in the country after their contract in the henequen plantations ended, some migrated to these cities and to a lesser extent, to other states of the republic.² However, these migrations did not necessarily occur immediately upon hiring.

It is known, at least through oral history (in the absence of other sources), it is known that the first Korean families arrived in Tijuana in 1950 (or even earlier), although the truth is that there are no other sources that support it. The only quantitative source that reinforces this idea is the 8th General Census of Population and Housing of Baja California Norte (in Spanish, “VIII Censo General de Población y Vivienda. Censo de Baja California Norte”), which corresponds to the year 1960.³ It shows the presence of 26 Asian people, without regard

to which country they were from which, at least for the author, is due to the events of the Korean War, which after the end for some was uncertain the nationality with which they identified.⁴ Of these possible residents it can be ruled out that they were Chinese or Japanese, since at that time the existence of these communities was quite common in the region.⁵

On the other hand, the sociologist Sergio Gallardo has pointed out that Korean migration in Mexico does not constitute a continuous or long-lasting process⁶, since this has been sporadic given the reasons why they have decided to migrate. This can be considered when talking specifically about Korean migration in Tijuana, since as we will see later, it has regularly occurred for reasons of work and economy.

One of the consequences of World War II in Mexico was the creation of the Bracero Program (1942-1964), which generated jobs for Mexicans in the United States. This program generated the migration of many Mexicans (and foreign residents) to the north of the country in search of opportunities, whether or not they crossed into the neighboring country. Among those who came from the Bracero Program, we can consider the Koreans.

Now, it should be clarified that the first Koreans to arrive in Mexico, as well as the immigrants were subjects of the Kingdom of Joseon (the last dynasty that reigned in Korea), while those who arrived directly from that country after the 1950s were citizens of the newly formed “Republic of Korea” (South Korea).

General de Población y Vivienda. Censo de Baja California Norte. México: INEGI. Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Geografía e Informática, p. 68. The image of the table is annexed at the end.

⁴Kim Il Sun. (1978). “Testimonios: una visión del problema coreano”, en “Estudios de Asia y África”, núm. 13 (1): 114-143.

⁵The researcher Alfredo Romero Castilla mentions that some Koreans entered the country posing as Japanese, which may have influenced their identification as Koreans. See Alfredo Romero Castilla (2012). “México y la República de Corea: reflexiones en torno a sus 50 años de historia”, en México y la Cuenca del Pacífico, septiembre-diciembre, p. 27.

⁶Sergio Gallardo García. (2017). “La inmigración coreana en México (1960-2015)” en Cruzando océanos y fronteras. Migración interna e internacional, Raquel Ofelia Barceló Quintal (comp) México: Universidad Autónoma del Estado de Hidalgo,

²See Patricia Arriaga Jordan. “Los que llegaron –Coreanos” Canal Once, 23 de febrero de 2012, video, 22min58s https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AmDTrvddD_8

³Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Geografía e Informática, (1960). VIII Censop. 169

The formation of the two countries after the Korean War would lead to the need to establish formal relations with other foreign countries. With Mexico, South Korea established diplomatic relations in 1962, while North Korea did so in 1980. The establishment of formal relations between Mexico and South Korea would be a watershed, not only because it opened the doors to economic and industrial development beneficial to both countries, but because it contributed to a more visible South Korean presence in the country and, therefore, in Baja California.

The establishment of the Korean consulate in Tijuana was an important part of that development and growth. Although, the Embassy of South Korea in Mexico was established since 1962, in Tijuana the consulate would be established in 1974 and in charge, the honorary consul, Mr. Pedro Díaz Corona.⁷ It is worth mentioning that Mr. Díaz has been the only consular representative of the first Koreans who arrived in Mexico.

Through the Official Gazette of the Federation (in Spanish, "Diario Oficial de la Federación"), it is possible to verify that he held the position of Honorary Consul of Korea in Tijuana from 1974 to 2007, although oral sources allow us to know that his work for the community began years before.⁸ He was of great help to the Korean community established in Tijuana during those early years. This background allows us to understand that nothing that would come next would be built on its own, because it was thanks to those first and important steps that the South Korean presence would have such an impact. Such an impact can be observed in different situations, activities, and contexts of various kinds such as those presented below.

As for the cultural, the development and growth of the community has not only constituted the multiculturalism that identifies the city, but the interculturality generated from it. The result of this is the cultural appreciation that Mexicans have had of South Korea and vice versa. The celebration of "Chuseok" (Korean Thanksgiving Day) for example, has been carried out not only in the privacy of homes, but also outdoors (literally) for the entire community of Tijuana and Baja California in general.

Religious activities have also contributed to this growth. The first Korean Christian missionaries (of Adventist denomination and Presbyterian) from Tijuana, ordained from Yucatan and/or South Korea, arrived in the city during the decades of the seventies and eighties of the last century, in order to serve the Tijuana community in general. Although today some of the churches founded by them have passed into the hands of other people who remember them little or know about them, the legacy of the first missionaries has remained, especially in the collective memory of the community.⁹

On the other hand, sports activities have also been part of that cultural appreciation. Taekwondo is a sport of South Korean origin currently practiced in many parts of the world. In Mexico the teaching of taekwondo was introduced in the early 1970s, while in Tijuana classes would begin to be taught from 1987, when the teacher José Martín López Rosales founded the state taekwondo association in Baja California. At present you can find dozens of schools that teach taekwondo in the city.

As for the economy, South Korean companies have been established and remained since the eighties (as is the case with Samsung and Hyundai), benefiting the economy and the generation of jobs; they have even managed to cross borders, as is the case of business activities that occur in the San Diego-Tijuana border region.

The arrival of these companies brought with it not only new employment opportunities for "Tijuanans", but bosses and co-workers of Korean origin, a situation that has increased the interaction and visibility of the community in the city. In Tijuana it is common, for example, that Korean restaurants are frequented by Koreans and "Tijuanans" of Korean origin, who after their workday decide to socialize there. The same happens with other "Tijuanans" who decide to frequent the same places at the same time, as it happens with Asian convenience stores, which are frequented by all public, whether knowledgeable or curious, where they have for sale items of South Korean origin.

So far, we can identify two groups that have made up the Korean community of the city: those who arrived from the remigration movements, that is, the first Koreans in Mexico and their descendants, as well as those who arrived later, either for work, new opportunities, etc. Undoubtedly, these two groups have caused an impact not only contributing to the growth of their own community, but that of the city in general, since from their beginnings they opened the way to new possibilities that until now have benefited Tijuana socially, culturally, and economically.

Therefore, it is worth mentioning another precedent to the current interactions, at least for the author, which is the twinning achieved in 1995 between the cities of Busan and Tijuana. An event that has managed to broaden the connections between South Korea and Tijuana even more. It was on January 17 of that year that the then mayors of Tijuana and Busan, Héctor G. Osuna Jaime, and Kim Ki-Jae, respectively, signed a sisterhood agreement between the two cities, which to date remains in force.¹⁰

The sisterhood of (international) cities is considered, at least in Mexico, an instrument that fosters harmonious and collaborative relations between cities in all countries. Through the Law on the Conclusion of Treaties (in Spanish, "Ley de Celebración de Tratados") published by the Official Gazette of the Federation in 1992, the sisterhood agreements that occur between Mexican municipalities and cities in other countries are regulated.¹¹

In Tijuana, the antecedents of national twinning date from 1989, while the international one dates from 1993 when the sisterhood agreement with San Diego, California (United States) was first signed. Two years after its first international sisterhood, it signed the second with Busan.

Namely, Busan is a historic city. Since South Korea's independence and search for development, the city of Busan has played an important role. During the 1960s to 1980s, its economic and industrial growth was significant, laying the foundation for the country's restoration after the Korean War. Moreover, during the crisis of the 1990s, which affected much of the country, Busan faced economic misfortune.¹²

¹⁰XX Ayuntamiento de Tijuana. (2012). "Planeación, Gobernabilidad y Participación Ciudadana", Segundo Informe de Gobierno, p. 258

¹¹Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores. (2002). "Modelo de acuerdo de coordinación política. Programa Mexicano de Ciudades Hermanas y Cooperación Internacional Descentralizada, p. 1 https://coordinacionpolitica.sre.gob.mx/images/stories/documentos_gobiernos/mahaaini

¹²Busan Metropolitan City. "History of Busan" (Busan Metropolitan City). Retrieved April 10, 2021. <https://english.busan.go.kr/bshistory>

⁷SEGOB. Diario Oficial de la Federación "AUTORIZACIÓN", 1978

⁸See Foro Corea 2021. "Primer día. Inauguración Foro Corea 2021 y mesa 'Logros hermanamiento de amplio alcance (M.A.H.A.A.)", Programa Mexicano de y agenda de la diáspora coreana en México" CMEC, 7 de octubre de 2021, video <https://www.facebook.com/CMEC.edu/videos/1524957364510731>

⁹Dinorah Lizeth Contreras Aragon. (2020). "Hananim en la frontera: un estudio pdf

sobre iglesias coreanas en Tijuana, Baja California". Tesis de maestría, El Colegio de la Frontera Norte, pp. 87-111

In the work “Global Knowledge and Local Practices: Reinventing Cultural Policy in Busan, South Korea”, the author mentions that it was in 1995 when a system of local autonomy was introduced in Busan, the year in which the government also focused on the industrial and infrastructure development of the city. One way to achieve this, also mentioned by the author, was through international connections, one of the reasons why the government could, then, have established a connection with Tijuana.

In 2016, then-Busan Deputy Mayor Jung Gyung-jin visited Tijuana. During their visit, in the company of the then mayor of the city, Dr. Jorge Astiazarán Orcí, they emphasized the commercial and economic activities that were carried out in the city. They also spoke of the importance of maintaining a strategic partnership among themselves, as well as with the first level localities. What was expressed by both in that visit allows us to identify the effort to meet the sisterhood objectives that have been established.

Finally, we can say that, in addition to these precedents, for the first decade of the twenty-first century and the following, the presence and visibility of the South Korean community in Tijuana increased, as well as the interest towards it on the part of the Tijuana people. Currently the community is quite active and that is perceived with the naked eye. Without neglecting the cultural impact that “Hallyu” (the wave of Korean culture) had and continues to have in the country and in the city, we can affirm that from the presence of an established and visible South Korean community, and a Tijuana community attracted by Korean culture in recent years, interactions have increased.

Conclusions

The presence of Tijuana’s South Korean community has written its history, contributing to the city’s very history. The relationship emanating not only from multiculturalism, but also from interculturality¹³ has allowed the South Korean community to not only conform it but make it and carry it out. This tour allows us to account for it.

As we have seen, their presence has contributed to the social, economic, cultural, and diplomatic development of the country, as are relations and treaties, including migration. Also, to the creation of jobs that has arisen from the establishment of both macro and micro enterprises. Most importantly, their presence has contributed to the interculturality of Tijuana society.

The fact that there is such an active community in the city of Tijuana has provoked not only new migratory flows and new experiences, but an openness and education for the cultures of the world. Coexisting with one or ten different cultures is not an easy task when one’s own is also made up of all of them, and then tries to know them and to determine their role in history, our history, for a full coexistence.

¹³Understanding “interculturality” as the presence and equitable interaction of diverse cultures and the possibility of generating shared cultural expressions, through dialogue and mutual respect.

Conflicts of Interest

Author declares there are no conflicts of interests.

Acknowledgements

I thank the journal for the opportunity and support to participate in this number. Likewise, to the Mexican Circle of Korean Studies, which encouraged me to develop this work. To PhD Sergio Gallardo, who at the time helped me improve this work. In the same way, to all those who have supported me during the process. Thanks.

**CUADRO II
EXTRANJEROS RESIDENTES EN MUNICIPIOS DE LA ENTIDAD, CON ESPECIFICACION DEL PAIS DE SU NACIMIENTO**

MUNICIPIOS Y PAIS	HABITANTES		
	SUMA	HOMBRES	MUJERES
TECATE	264	137	127
ALEMANIA (1)	5	4	1
ARABIA SAUDITA	1	1	
ARGENTINA	5	2	3
REINO UNIDO DE GRAN BRETAÑA	2	1	1
CANADA	5	2	3
CUBA	3	2	1
CHINA	11	10	1
ESPAÑA	16	8	8
ESTADOS UNIDOS DE AMERICA	151	65	86
FRANCIA	3	2	1
GUATEMALA	2	1	1
ITALIA	13	10	3
JAPON	8	6	2
LIBANO	2	1	1
POLONIA	2	1	1
OTROS PAISES DE EUROPA	8	5	3
OTROS PAISES DE AMERICA	8	5	3
OTROS PAISES DE ASIA	5	4	1
OTROS	2	1	1
SE IGNORA	12	6	6
TIJUANA	6 744	3 508	2 936
ALEMANIA (1)	40	31	9
ARABIA SAUDITA	14	11	3
ARGENTINA	64	18	46
REINO UNIDO DE GRAN BRETAÑA	8	6	2
CANADA	23	12	11
CUBA	32	17	15
CHINA	173	153	20
ESPAÑA	215	135	80
ESTADOS UNIDOS DE AMERICA	5 385	2 838	2 547
FRANCIA	10	5	5
GUATEMALA	23	12	11
ITALIA	51	36	15
JAPON	24	19	5
LIBANO	0	0	0
POLONIA	24	13	11
OTROS PAISES DE EUROPA	170	97	73
OTROS PAISES DE AMERICA	60	34	26
OTROS PAISES DE ASIA	26	18	8
OTROS	7	4	3
SE IGNORA	86	45	41

NOTA: (1) INCLUYE ALEMANIA ORIENTAL Y OCCIDENTAL.

“FOREIGNERS RESIDENT IN MUNICIPALITIES OF THE ENTITY, SPECIFYING THE COUNTRY OF BIRTH”. The arrows point to the legend that says: “Other countries of Asia”, and next to it, the arrow that points to the 26 inhabitants of that moment. Among them, 18 men and 8 women.