

# Between Two Homelands: Diasporic Nationalism and Academic Pilgrimage of the Korean Christian Community in Jerusalem

**Irina Lyan**

**The Hebrew University of Jerusalem**



# Abstract

This article brings a transnational approach to the concept of diasporic nationalism, often narrowly conceptualized through the paradoxical link between displaced nation and territory. Based on a one-year ethnographical account of the Korean Christian community in Jerusalem, the article aims to challenge the already troubled concept of diasporic nationalism through the prism of a religious supranational “homecoming” to the Holy Land that might both enhance the national identity and transcend the very significance of nation and nationalism.

Rather than viewing diasporic individuals as brokers, educators, and even as “exemplary citizens” or ambassadors of their historical homelands, I suggest moving away from a “hypernationalist” framing of diaspora as an extended nation toward a nuanced understanding of diasporic action and agency. By juxtaposing national and religious nostalgia for “imagined homelands,” I argue that while national identity makes Korean community members outsiders in an unwelcoming Israeli society, their status as Christians brings them back to their religious origins through what I call an “academic pilgrimage.” I ask how the Korean Christian community, modeled on the concept of nation-within-nation, negotiates its multiple identities and porous national and religious boundaries that can reinforce, overlap, or contradict one another both inwardly and outwardly.

**Keywords:** academic pilgrimage, diasporic agency, diasporic nationalism, homecoming, imagined nostalgia, Korean Christian diaspora

# Introduction

Diasporic nationalism, also known as “long-distance nationalism” (Anderson 1992), usually questions the link between just two major parameters—displaced nation and territory. Loosely defined as “nationalism which effectively spans the globe and which, by utilizing modern global communications networks, crosses ethnonational borders with unprecedented ease” (Skrbiš 1999, xiii), it is already a paradoxical term, as “nationalism by definition minimizes the significance of diaspora” (Lie 2008, 172). In this article, I endeavor to further challenge this troubled concept through the prism of a religious supranational “homecoming” to the Holy Land that might both enhance the national identity and transcend the very significance of nation and nationalism. The ambiguous and complicated relationship between religious-national diasporic realities is embedded in the genealogy of the concept. Initiated as a religious term—at first, diaspora referred to Jews and Judaism and the loss of their homeland—the original meaning has been slowly eliminated and/or superseded by the national vocabulary of loss of a specific national territory (Lie 2001).

Nationalism is broadly defined by Benedict Anderson (1983) as the diverse ways in which nation-states are imagined and come into existence, and is often closely connected to territorial borders. Yet in both the case of Korea (North and South) and that of Israel, their respective nation-states were first imagined and fueled by the dreams of Christian-influenced Koreans and Judaism-united Jews without nation-states before their actual establishment in 1948 (Lie 2001, 2008; Richard S. Kim 2011). The narrow understanding of diasporic nationalism in its essence—“performing popular national identity by and for overseas Koreans by exhibiting traditional cultures through ‘authentic’ arts, foods, objects, scenes, and sounds” (Lyan 2019, 3765)—underlines the exaggerated importance of national categories as the major motivations behind diasporic agency.

Yet rather than a patriotic drive to promote one’s nation, nationalism can be explained by a variety of factors beyond

nationalism-as-patriotism. According to this essentialist logic, diasporic actors are viewed as homogeneous and isomorphic representatives of their nation-states who could and might promote a national positive image; further, they are expected to act as brokers, educators, and even as “exemplary citizens” or ambassadors of their historical homelands. Yet the link between diaspora and nationalism as an imagined family and home that one is supposed to promote is far from obvious. In South Korea (hereafter, Korea), it has mainly been the government and industrial institutions that have strengthened this link to rationalize, among other reasons, the economic contribution to Korean development by developing networks with Koreans around the world (e.g., Chung 2008; Hye-Kyung Lee 2005).

Despite the “hypernationalist” discourse surrounding the Korean diaspora, which relies on “the essentialist reification of the nation as a privileged unit of analysis and identity” (Lie 2001, 358), the empirical studies reveal more than ambiguous relations between diasporas and homeland, especially among younger generations (e.g., Yoon 2019). Even if motivated by the goal of promoting Korea’s image abroad, diasporic nationalism might be explained by a variety of motivations besides national reasons. By juxtaposing nation and religion, I suggest moving forward from an essentialist framing of diaspora as an extended or displaced nation toward a nuanced and complex understanding of diasporic action and agency.

Based on the ethnographical account of the Korean Christian community in Jerusalem, this article strives to contribute to diaspora studies by examining a unique case of the reversal of roles between guests and hosts, or migrants and locals, through national and religious nostalgia for imagined “homelands.” While national identity makes Korean community members outsiders in a rather unwelcoming Israeli society, their status as Christians brings them back to their religious home through what I call an “academic pilgrimage.” I ask how the simultaneous attempt to return to both “homelands”—national and religious—shapes and reshapes diasporic community building. More specifically, I question how the Korean Christian community, modeled

on the concept of nation-within-nation, negotiates its dual identity and its porous national and religious boundaries both inwardly and outwardly.

## Korean Diaspora, Nationalism, and What Is In Between

The overseas Korean population is estimated at 7,493,587 in 181 different countries, the majority of whom reside in China and the United States, with more than two million each.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the common expectation that diasporic populations will seek acceptance in the hosting society, it depends on the specific context and environment (Barth 1969). For instance, ethnic Koreans in China are known for their pride in national identity, which leads them to distance themselves from Chinese ethnic groups, claiming intellectual and cultural superiority over the hosting society, despite the physiological similarities (S. Choi 2008). Similarly, in Kim-Yoon's (2015) study, the participants among five Korean families with children felt superior to Israelis in their "Korean" social behavior, such as courtesy and respect shown toward one's elders. Unlike the Korean diaspora in China, physiological similarities put ethnic Koreans in Japan under pressure to assimilate even to the point of becoming "invisible" (Lie 2008; Shin 2016).

In Western countries, such as the United States and Canada, ethnic Koreans—famously labeled a "model diaspora" (Abelmann and Lie 2009)—often find themselves in negotiation between keeping their historical identity and attempting to belong to the mainstream hosting society, all the while facing prejudice and discrimination based on stereotyping of both the Asian and Korean Other (Chae 2004). The difficulties involved in becoming part of the hosting society—in this case strengthened by physical differences and hostile incidents such as the Los Angeles riot of 1992, where Koreatown was targeted by African Americans, and more recent attacks in 2020 from the #BlackLivesMatter

<sup>1</sup> "Chaewae tongp'o hyŏnhwang"  
[Current status of overseas Koreans],  
Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic  
of Korea, March, 2018, [http://www.mofa.go.kr/www/wpge/m\\_21507/contents.do](http://www.mofa.go.kr/www/wpge/m_21507/contents.do).

movement and anti-Asian sentiment throughout the Covid-19 pandemic—have encouraged a variety of diasporic responses in non-Asian countries.

At first applied to the experience of the Jews, the term of “diaspora” has gradually replaced the vocabulary of both forced and voluntary migration, including temporal rather than permanent migrants such as foreign workers and students. The recent “education fever” of Korean students has further complicated the relations between newly emerging diasporas and new homes, as well as the very definition and borders of diaspora itself regarding the category of temporal education-oriented migrants. Rather than being negatively associated with loss, exile, or longing for lost homelands, the concept of diaspora has shifted toward gaining new possibilities and resources (Chung 2008). By 2019, 213,000 Korean students were enrolled in higher education institutions in China, the United States, Japan, and Canada.<sup>2</sup> Besides these robust numbers in international higher education, especially in relation to Korea’s population of more than 51 million, taking pre-college children to study abroad lent this phenomenon the name “education exodus” (Hakyoony Lee 2010; Lo et al. 2017).

<sup>2</sup> “Kugoe yuhak” [Overseas education], Ministry of Education, Republic of Korea, November, 2019, <https://www.moe.go.kr/boardCnts/view.do?boardID=350&ev=0&statusYN=W&s=moe&m=0309&optype=N&boardSeq=79010>.

With the growth of overseas students’ mobility, promotion of traditional Korean culture, such as the celebration of Korea Days, has gone beyond the borders of local diasporic communities and government-supported Korean Centers to become a part of universities’ landscapes. Through the practice of “national days,” international students from around the world are encouraged to exhibit their own culture by means of individual booths at campus fairs (Lyan 2019). This merges with the common view of the supportive role of diaspora in creating cultural ties with the homeland, as demonstrated in Son and Rhee’s special issue on Korean diasporic art that, at times, nostalgically reimagines the homeland (Son and Rhee 2018, 6). In the realm of popular culture, Sangjoon Lee (2015) explores the role of ethnic Koreans in the United States in the spread of popular culture since the 1970s by bringing “home” Korean-language TV stations and video rental stores.

As for the role of religion, studies of the Korean diaspora

clearly recognize its overlap and mutual enhancement in local community-building efforts as either ethnicization or Christianization of local communities. For instance, several studies recognized ethnicization of Korean churches among second-generation Korean-American Christians, in which—in addition to the place of the prayer—diasporic churches provide ethnic fellowship and social services. In addition, churches often go beyond providing shelter and comfort regarding diasporic minority status by forming a positive ethnic identity and promoting traditional Korean values and moral standards (Chong 1998; Rebecca Y. Kim 2004). For instance, according to Min (1992), diasporic churches serve four social roles: providing membership and belonging; retaining the Korean culture, especially among the younger generation; providing social services; and lending social status to the church members (Min 1992, 1370).

Other studies reveal the Christianization of ethnic Korean churches, as well as of other community-oriented groups during the socialization. In Min's study, for example, about 40 percent of participants reported that they had converted to Christianity following their migration to the United States (Min 1992, 1376). In all, rather than (or in addition to) inward diasporic nationalism and ethnicization, the missionary force of Korean diasporic churches around the world is a well-established fact (Kim and Ma 2011; Rebecca Y. Kim 2015). In general, Korea is second in the world in missionary work after the United States, with more 28,000 missionary workers in 171 countries.<sup>3</sup>

Such symbiotic relations between religious and national motivations of diasporic members call for further exploration of nationalism, diaspora, and religion (1) beyond the common geographical logic regarding ethnic Koreans in place X; (2) beyond either ethnicization or Christianization of the diasporic community; and (3) beyond inward activities aimed at community building such as ethnic churches, calling for a close examination of both inward and outward diasporic agency.

<sup>3</sup> "2019 nyŏn 12 wŏl han'guk sŏn'gyosa p'asong hyŏnhwang" [The status of Korean missionaries as of December 2019], The Korea World Mission Association, January 17, 2020, [https://kwma.org/?module=file&act=procFileDownload&file\\_srl=37367&sid=60ca9fb0d7fda b017ee0c5bb577daee2&module\\_srl=33956](https://kwma.org/?module=file&act=procFileDownload&file_srl=37367&sid=60ca9fb0d7fda b017ee0c5bb577daee2&module_srl=33956).

## Methodology

This research is based on a one-year ethnography conducted in 2006, during which I visited, at least once a week, Korean churches, schools, and private apartments of community members in Jerusalem and participated in cultural events such as food fairs, Korea Days, and other public events. In addition to ethnography work, I conducted several semi-structured interviews with key members and numerous informal talks with other community members. I also studied community-related texts such as websites, media articles, and leaflets produced by community members, including a 2004 book written by one of the former heads of the Korean Association in Israel about the Association's activities in the period 1990–2004.

To the community members, my motivation for research has been “written on my face.” Born to a Russian-Korean father, I have, since the late 2000s, enacted diasporic nationalism as a part of my own ethnic identity through study, work, and volunteer activities. Beginning in 2012, during my PhD studies, which focused on Korean international management, I took an active role in seven Korea Days, contributing in various areas from managing logistics to giving Korea-related lectures.

Through a close content analysis of the above-mentioned data, as well as my own experience as a participant/observer, I will first introduce the Korean Christian community in Jerusalem. Second, I will focus on inward and outward diasporic nationalism enacted by the community. More specifically, I will follow Clifford Geertz's (1973) ethnographic approach of “thick descriptions,” with its focus on a single event wrapped into “webs of meaning,” to unfold hidden hierarchies and social complexities, to examine two representative events: the General Meeting of the Korean Association in Israel from 2005, and Korea Day, organized by the Korean community in 2004.

# Academic Pilgrimage: Korean Christian Community in Jerusalem

In relation to Korean diasporic communities in the world or to other educational migration routes of Korean students abroad, the Korean community in Jerusalem represents a unique case study of a religious, temporal, and relatively small community. As of 2019, 179 Korean students studied in Israel (115 males and 64 females) among 702 Korean residents,<sup>4</sup> as compared to 1992, when only 74 Koreans lived in Israel, according to statistics published by the Korean Association of Israel. The first Korean family arrived in Israel from the United States at the beginning of the 1980s in search of missionary work and established the Association of Koreans in Israel in 1985.

Due to Israeli immigration laws such as the Law of Return (1950) and the Israeli Citizenship Law (1952), only ethnic Jews and their non-Jewish spouses are able to immigrate to Israel. Therefore, the number of ethnic Koreans permanently living in Israel is limited to several dozen people and consists, for the most part, of Korean wives from South Korea or diasporic Korean spouses, generally from the former Soviet Union. The rest arrive with a student, tourist, work, or volunteer visa for a limited period of time. As neither immigrants nor foreign workers, Korean students belong to a separate category, and only in recent years have 42 Koreans received the right to permanent residency in Israel, thus settling as Korean-Israelis. Their children, for example, must serve in the Israeli army.

Korean students, mostly Protestant men and their families who have been in Israel since the mid-1990s, comprise the majority of the Korean community. A Korean Catholic congregation does exist in Jerusalem, but is relatively small. In general, Korean Christians consider themselves “Lovers of Zion,” with special feelings toward Jews, Judaism, and the land of Israel rooted in Christianity rather than in a wish to convert to Judaism (Kim-Yoon 2015). Before the mid-2010s, Koreans constituted the largest group among students from Asia. Besides sharing their religious common denominator,

<sup>4</sup> “Chawae dongp'o hyōnhwang” [Current status of overseas Koreans as of 2019], Ministry of Foreign Affairs, December, 2018, [http://www.mofa.go.kr/cntntsDown.do?path=www&physic=2019\\_overseas.pdf&real=2019\\_overseas.pdf](http://www.mofa.go.kr/cntntsDown.do?path=www&physic=2019_overseas.pdf&real=2019_overseas.pdf).

most of the students are married men aged 30–40 with a relatively high level of education and income since, in order to become a Protestant pastor, a B.A. degree and a M.Div. (Master of Divinity) degree are required (Kim-Yoon 2015). Some members humorously describe their community as “the community of pastors.” For religious reasons, most of the students learn subjects related to Christianity—such as Bible studies, archaeology, and history. In 2020, 38 pupils studied at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem; about 35 at the University of the Holy Land in Jerusalem, a private Christian university that teaches in English; 25 at Bar Ilan University; and 43 at the Rothberg School for International Students, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

In this “academic pilgrimage,” religion-related studies legitimize the community’s sense of homecoming, as Christianity is perceived as “imported” religion learned mostly through European Christians in translation. As one of the community members explains, “there is a problem in Christian belief in Korea since it’s imported. To make it authentic, the believers wish to come to Israel. In addition, it’s important to teach Christian Korean pastors the original religion—both Old and New Testament—something they can’t do in Korea.”<sup>5</sup>

Most of the students live in Jerusalem, often residing in the Hebrew University neighborhoods of French Hill and Pisgat Zeev, humorously called by the community “Korea Town.” Some families live together, creating small communities within the larger community. About one-third of Korean residents in Israel also live in the central Gush Dan area with their children. They are mostly employees of the Korean Embassy (located in Herzliya) or the large Korean corporations, and their stay in Israel averages between two and four years. Koreans also live near Haifa University and in kibbutzes in the south of Israel. Students’ stays range from 5 to 17 years, depending on their degree and resident status (student visas are issued for 5 years). In some cases, the studies are sponsored by Korean churches as an addition to their goal of advancing their own position in a religious career; some are also engaged in missionary work.

Since the 2010s, the community has become more

<sup>5</sup> Yehiam Slutsky, “Korea lev” [Korea heart], *Pi Aton: Jerusalem Student Newspaper*, 2006, 12–13.

diverse. There are currently more younger 20s BA-level students, more female students, and more students enrolled in degrees that are not related to religion studying in Hebrew unlike the older graduate students, who usually study in English. In addition, there are students who relocate to Israel for other than strictly religious reasons, such as those seeking an Arabic-language education. In 2010, BA students even established the Hebrew University Korean Student Association (HUKSA) to differentiate themselves from graduate students.

Despite the temporality of the Korean community, it is institutionally well organized, having its own Association, Korean language school, Korean Culture Center, one restaurant, and seven congregations,<sup>6</sup> while some of the members belong to a Messianic congregation consisting of Jewish-Christians—so-called “Jews for Jesus” (Jews who believe in Jesus)—which also welcomes Christian members. Unlike churches or synagogues, a Messianic congregation aims to strike a balance between the Old and New Testaments from a Jewish and Christian point of view (Kim-Yoon 2015).

The community organizes events that are directed inward (community-building and strengthening activities such as the General Meeting annual event) as well as outward (promoting Korean culture to Israeli society through events such as Korea Day). Regardless of the declared openness or closeness, as the findings section herein will demonstrate, the boundaries between them are flexible—even erased, sometimes reversed, and far from permanent.

## Findings

According to a joke told by one of the community members, “overseas Chinese have a closed community, Japanese don’t have any community at all, and Koreans are both open and closed.” In what follows, I will introduce (1) the close or inward diasporic nationalism, modeled on a nation-within-nation structure that promotes an ethnicreligious community-building process, and (2) an open or outward

<sup>6</sup> “Hanin kyohoe” [Korean churches], The Korean Association in Israel, <http://israelhanin.org/%ed%95%9c%ec%9d%b8%ea%b5%90%ed%9a%8c/>.

diasporic nationalism aimed at the hosting community for both religious and national reasons.

### *Inward: Nation-within-nation*

Language, physical appearance, and religious identity have served to keep the borders of the Korean community closed off to outsiders. The community's borders are already threatened by the temporality imposed by the student visa, the Jewish immigration laws, and hostility toward outsiders, in addition to security issues and possible danger arising from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Due to the Jewish-religious character of the Israeli state, such hostility toward others includes Christians, especially those who are engaged in missionary work. For example, Korean children in Kim-Yoon's (2015) study reported harassment for being Christians, including Messianic congregation members, from Israeli schoolchildren and Israeli secular schools, and showed a general reluctance to reveal their religious identity to non-Christians. Such hostility has become evident following an incident in which 12 presumably infected Korean Christian pilgrims visited the Holy Land at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic in February 2020, causing the immediate cessation of all Korean Air flights and the refusal of local tourism industries to host Korean Christian tourists.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Daniel Adelson, "12 tzaliyanim nosafim shebikru beisrael nidbeku benagif hakorona" [12 additional pilgrims who visited Israel were infected with Covid-19], *Ynet News*, February 24, 2020, <https://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-5683364,00.html>.

In addition, despite their relatively high economic status, Koreans are often confused for low-economic-status foreign workers from other Asian countries, including China, the Philippines, and Thailand, who work in Israel in low-paid occupations. For foreign workers in Israel, for example, the closed religious communities often provide a safe space and even a refuge from the unwelcoming host society. This might explain why, unlike the Korean Christian community, the foreign workers, who are attracted to work in Israel for religious reasons, seldom welcome strangers into their communities (Kemp and Raijman 2003; Sabar 2004).

In what follows, I will introduce border-keeping institutions such as the Korean Association in Israel (hereafter, the Association), Korean churches, and Korean language schools. I will examine their ambivalent dynamics, including

their ethnically closed but religiously open orientation and goals.

## The Korean Association in Israel

Established in 1985 with its headquarters in Jerusalem, the Association represents Korean residents in Israel. Its three main goals, as stated in its constitution, are: (1) to provide opportunities for fellowship among its members, (2) to maintain close relationships with the Korean governmental offices in Israel, and (3) to promote friendship between the Korean nationals and the people of Israel. Besides the annual General Meeting in December, the Association holds Executive Board meetings and runs a Korean language Friday school that is funded by the Korean government.

Due to the temporality of Koreans' stay in Israel, the president, vice-president, and auditor are chosen from general members who have already lived in Israel for at least one year and intend to stay in the country for one more year. Regular members, on the other hand, must have resided in Israel for more than three months. Sponsored by membership fees and external donations, the Association clearly enforces the dividing line between members and nonmembers. At the same time, it deals with temporality issues by allowing Associate membership for those who do not fit the three months criterion or would like to be a part of the community, despite their physical absence in Israel. As not all Koreans in Israel have become Association members, for reasons that include political and religious disagreement, the numbers are inexact. Nevertheless, between 1992 and 2004, one notes a constant increase in membership from 74 to 219, with a small decline in 2002–2003 due to the unstable security situation.

In addition to temporality challenges, based on the ethnography and interviews with the community members I could identify four tensions within the community that challenge its inwardness. First, despite seemingly close borders of “nation-within-nation” with elections, rights and obligations, the Association also manages external

relations with the Korean Embassy in Israel, another national representative, and with “the people of Israel,” both Jews and Arabs. For instance, in addition to inward activities such as the above-mentioned General Meeting, which closely coincides with Christmas and New Years’ celebrations, Sport Day, and Independence Day (August 15), Koreans in Israel have also organized an outward-focused event, Korea Day, since 1998, which I will describe in detail in the next section. The Association has been engaged in charity work such as donations to the Palestinian community, the annual Charity Bazaar (since 1999) for the poor of Jerusalem, and in 1998 they even organized “A Worldwide Day of Fasting for the Hungry and Suffering People of North Korea” in the city center of Jerusalem, sponsored by three local Korean restaurants.

Second, despite the Christian identity of its members, the Association declared itself in secular-national rather than religious terms, which might allow for easier communication with the Israeli authorities. For example, in 2003, in collaboration with the Embassy, the Association arranged an emergency meeting and the evacuation of families to a kibbutz, as a safer area, due to the wave of terrorist attacks in Jerusalem. Like the nation-within-nation, the Association has responded to the external threat by keeping its members safe. Besides meetings, the Association runs an Internet site<sup>8</sup> and publishes annual budget reports. In addition, it has created a calendar specifying both Israeli and Korean holidays and other important dates, a list of Korean restaurants in Israel, tourist agencies, useful Internet sites, and a list of members that includes their contact information. In 2004, the Association’s former head published a book on its activities from 1990 to 2004 that included both official and unofficial correspondence (including emails and handwritten letters) with both internal and external audiences such as the embassy, scholars from Israeli universities, and media items.

The third ambiguity stems from the official/national-like character of the Association and its promotion of the community as an imagined family. For instance, many meetings are family-oriented, with activities for children such as picnic events. In observing the General Meeting

<sup>8</sup> *Chae isürael haninhoe* [The Korean Association in Israel], <http://israelhanin.org/>.

in December 2005, I was surprised by the combination of formality and familiarity. On one hand, the Association rented a luxurious room in a 5-star hotel in East Jerusalem—located, through no accident, near the biggest Korean church. All members wore official outfits (black suits), and the meeting included speeches, greetings from the English-language board, and children’s classical music performances. At the same time, the atmosphere was relaxing, and about 10 children between the ages of 4 and 10 played quietly together for almost two and a half hours.

Other tensions in action were seen as well. Despite the members-only event, five outsiders in addition to myself participated in the activities: two students from the Hebrew University, two movie directors, and a violin teacher. Separated by language and physical appearance, we also stood out by our less-formal outfits (jeans and warm jackets; one man wore an earring) and were greeted by the members in Hebrew, English, or sign language. Both I and the movie director were invited to the stage to explain in English our motivation for joining the meeting. While I introduced myself as a half-Korean who writes on academic subjects and would like to learn more about the community, the movie director was looking for “Asian” (in his words) actors and invited anyone to join. Both of us received some polite applause, and the director left shortly after his speech in the middle of the music concert.

The final source of tension stemmed from my then-Orientalist expectation and understanding of Korean culture as a traditional one. Accustomed to women in *hanbok*, as well as traditional musical instruments and food in outreach events like Korea Day, I was surprised to see Koreans in formal Western dress in a 5-star hotel enjoying classical music and haute cuisine. While some scholars tend to describe Korean Christians as more “Western” and “modern” (e.g., Min 1992, 1376), today I see it as one of the self-representations of the community that respond to its own, rather than others’, expectations. As I will explain in the next section, unlike inward events, it seems that during Korea Day the community responds to external expectations and/or to the traditional/cultural self-representation of the Korean nation.

## Korean Churches in Jerusalem

Besides national and ethnic belonging in the Association, most Koreans also belong to one of the seven Korean congregations—with weekly prayers on Saturdays, since Sunday is a working day in Israel. At most, Koreans look for the church via Internet searches or through acquaintances, usually choosing the biggest one, the Korean Church of Israel (hereafter, the Church), which in 2005 included roughly 100 members, of which about 30 were children. Besides religious roles, such as the main pastor and chorus, the church also has a national component—an internal and external affairs office that is community oriented. This office is in charge of education for children and seminars for students and their spouses. The Church also provides a marketplace for the exchange of Korean books and foods that are almost impossible to purchase in Israel.

Unlike the Association's website, the Church's website is regularly updated and contains socially relevant information such as forums, picture galleries, updated news, notifications, and useful links, thereby serving as a digital community not only for Koreans in Israel but also for Koreans abroad who would like to donate or join in the future.<sup>9</sup> Besides the website, the Church publishes a weekly newspaper that provides information such as the name of the pastor, chorus members' names, verses, and Christian parables, the group of women who cook the meal, monthly events, names of community members who can help with financial or health matters, the number of regular members and visitors, study groups, and news such as birth announcements.

The Church also places a strong emphasis on children's education as both Korean and Christian, since most of the children will go back to Korea after a 5–7 year stay in Israel. Besides Saturday school and kindergarten with free Korean-language lessons on religious subjects, the Church organizes a 3–4 day Summer Bible Camp and, in general, provides a socialization center that offers an ethnicreligious service to attract family members. The above-mentioned overlap between religious and communal motivations of Korean

<sup>9</sup> *Isūrael hanin gyohoe* [Korean church of Israel], <http://www.israelchurch.org/>.

churches has led some Koreans to convert to Christianity or to enhance their religiosity, much like other Korean diasporic churches (e.g., Min 1992).

Due to the relatively large number of pastors who give numerous sermons and moderate internal disagreements, some pastors have decided to open more churches. In these congregations, the number of members is much smaller, ranging from 10 to 30. Besides weekly meetings, some Korean Christian families prefer to share private apartments and fulfill their religious duties in those apartments. Rather than building its own church, the Korean community usually rents Arab Christian churches. In one case, the members rented an office in the center of Jerusalem to serve as a church/community center. In addition to their religious function, churches and communal apartments serve a social role of the inward diasporic nationalism of the imagined ethnicreligious family.

While all churches play a social role in addition to the religious one, there are several differences in their approaches to these roles and their boundaries. First, unlike the Church, where, following the religious service, members have time to socialize by eating together and celebrating birthdays and holidays, in smaller congregations, members usually go to the pastor's apartment to eat together. As most parents with children prefer the Church, smaller churches have younger members with fewer or no children, where the religious community provides shelter for an "imagined family." The musical background also makes smaller congregations more intimate. While in the biggest Church a professional chorus and musicians play energetically to praise God, love, and peace, accompanied by clapping and raised hands, standing, singing, crying, and praying aloud to the audience, smaller congregations prefer quiet music that creates an intimate atmosphere of prayer.

Second, unlike smaller congregations that keep their borders closed, the Church encourages outsiders, such as Christian non-Koreans or Korean businessmen and tourists, to join in by providing simultaneous translations from Korean to English. On one occasion when the translator was abroad, several community members sat near me to translate the

service. They make available Bibles and other religious books in Korean, English, Arabic, and Hebrew to accommodate foreigners. Such openness might explain the larger turnout and temporality that make the Church members perform formal and informal rituals for newcomers and farewell rituals for those who leave. For example, all newcomers can write their names down upon arrival, and at the end the pastor reads the names and everyone welcomes them with clapping. Before leaving, members are encouraged to come to the stage and say a few words of farewell, in addition to joining a smaller, informal party in one of the communal apartments.

As for outside events, which are almost absent in smaller congregations, the Church, like the Association, engages in charity work, including donations to the Palestinian orphanage in East Jerusalem, gospel service for Arabic-Christian churches, and the annual Charity Bazaar (held since 1999) for the poor of Jerusalem. Here we can see the internal tensions toward the Israeli-Arab conflict. In general, the Church service deals solely with religious and communal issues, but in one of my visits the pastor referred to the Israeli-Lebanon Second War (2006), saying that if both peoples were Christian, the war would end. He asked to pray for peace. This remark reveals the complex relationship of the Church to Jews, Judaism, Israel, and Zionism beyond just “Lovers of Zion” among Christians, including Korean Christians who—besides the missionary goal—feel more connection to Arab Christians and generally oppose conflict with and hostility toward Arabs. For instance, besides donating to the Palestinian orphanage and collaborating with Arabic Churches in East Jerusalem, Koreans also rent Palestinian bus services for the Church and school. On a few occasions, some members had even participated in peace marches and strikes near the security barriers to emphasize the similarity between Israeli-Palestinian and North and South Korean conflicts. Kim-Yoon’s (2015) study also found that most Koreans struggle with the prejudice and animosity of Jewish Israelis against Arabs.

While most Koreans come to Israel because of the religious connection to the Holy Land, many have expressed

sympathy, compassion, and even solidarity with the local Arabic population among Christian, Muslim, and secular Arabs. Unlike the general negative perceptions and prejudices against Arabs and Muslims in Korea, supported, among other factors, by Korean Christianity (e.g., Jamass 2014; Jeon 2011), the Korean Community in Israel has had an opportunity to develop more personalized and positive views that derive from almost daily interactions by living in Jerusalem's neighborhoods, such as French Hill and Pisgat Zeev, that border with Arabic ones, such as Isawiya and Shuafat; by visiting Korean churches and schools in the East Jerusalem; and by meeting Arabic students at the Israeli universities. Moreover, the economic cooperation that derives from churches and school renting in East Jerusalem, tourism in the Holy Land monopolized by Christian Arabs, and renting services, such as bus driving, that work on Saturdays and usually are cheaper than Jewish ones, might facilitate better relations and understanding between Koreans and Israeli and Palestinian Arabs. Last but not least, the continuous interaction with "a minority within a minority"—Arab Christians—who usually obtain higher educational and economic status compared to Muslim Arabs in Israel (David 2014, 184), might explain the positive views of Koreans toward the general Arabic population compared to that in Korea.

These and other complexities related to religious, national, and international issues—such as the Israeli–Arab conflict—are at the heart of inward community building efforts that include the intertwined and strategically used national and religious motivations.

## Korean Schools

The religious-national dilemma becomes salient especially in education choices and opportunities among community members. Due to financial restrictions and the short length of their stay, the majority of children study in nonreligious Jewish Hebrew public schools. By contrast, relocation workers

<sup>10</sup> They are able to afford the high tuition at such schools thanks to financial assistance from their workplace.

from the Embassy and large Korean conglomerates, who come for 2–3 years, tend to send their children to English-speaking international schools with an American curriculum.<sup>10</sup> Only a few students' families in Jerusalem send their children to private Christian schools, such as the American International School in Jerusalem or the Arabic–English Jerusalem School in East Jerusalem.

Besides the possible loss of the Korean language and culture, the central problem in public Israeli schools relates to the secular, non-Christian, and in some cases anti-Christian orientation of schools. As one of the participants in Kim-Yoon's (2015) study explains this religious-national dilemma, the parents must "instill" the identity in students to counterbalance the Israeli education:

I wanted to instill [their identity] in them intentionally. You are Korean! So, I do instill in my children our Christian faith and then our Korean nationality, although they were born in Israel. Culturally, I want to instill a Korean identity in them, and religiously, I want to instill in them a Christian identity as believers in Christ our Savior. (Kim-Yoon 2015, 24)

Further, to make the return to the homeland easier, the Korean Education Ministry supports an official Friday Korean language school, one kindergarten group, and a three-day summer school both to educate the children and provide for social interaction among them. However, the school often experiences budget problems, and in some cases teachers—who are temporary Korean students—work for low salaries or no payment at all, and without social benefits. In addition to competition from the Church's religious education, these problems make the school "weaker," in the words of its former manager, a graduate student himself:

[Unlike in Israel] in Egypt they have a professional school. The manager comes from Korea under the supervision of the Korean Ministry of Education, since in Egypt people don't feel they can bring their kids to local schools. There, children learn in a proper Korean school during the

whole day.

Despite being an extension of Korean education law for all Korean citizens of national rather than religious character, before moving to a new location in Anglican St. George School, the school rented space for more than 20 years in the Anglican International School in East Jerusalem. When the Anglican Church requested that the school leave, the Korean Ambassador even searched for a new location in Jerusalem. But religious obstacles arose, as the Israeli authorities demand a security guard at the entrance of every educational institution, and keeping Shabbat—the period from Friday evening to Saturday evening in which, according to Jewish religious law, one must rest, and educational institutions must close. Since children in the Korean school begin their studies later than those in the Israeli school, and finish too close to Friday evening, the problem of non-Jewish schools persists.

In sum, all three inward institutions—the Association, the Church, and the School—demonstrate multiple combinations between religious-national motivations both in response to each other and to the hosting society. Moreover, in the case of the Church, with its openness to non-Koreans such as Arab Christians and temporal Korean visitors, the religious goals transcend the nation-within-nation closeness.

### *Outward: “Koreans are the Israeli of the East”*

While inward community building has both national—including ethnic—and religious borders, outward activities have concentrated mostly on national promotion. There are several reasons why the community has chosen to open its borders. First, the openness can be explained by religious reasons—that is, some of its members are “Lovers of Zion” and, in general, have a religious affinity to Jewish people who manifest their devotion by volunteering at the cultural events or making donations.<sup>11</sup> Some Korean Christians even believe that Koreans belong to the lost Jewish Dan tribe due to the name of Dan’gun, the mythical founder of the Korean nation (C. Choi 2009, 3–5), much like Latin American foreign workers in Israel, who argue that they are descendants of Sephardic

<sup>11</sup> Michael Freund, “South Korean Pastor: ‘Israel was Chosen for the Glory of God,’” *Jerusalem Post*, September 7, 2018, <https://www.jpost.com/magazine/israel-was-chosen-for-the-glory-of-god-566573>.

Jews (Kemp and Raijman 2003, 308).

Besides religious affinity, both Israelis and Koreans underline the national similarity between their two countries, even stating that “Koreans are the Israeli of the East.” That is, they are two nations that suffer from conflict, are surrounded by strong and dangerous countries, and possess no natural resources but their people; two modern and democratic nations possessing strong military power and a rich culture (Podoler 2014; Lyan, unpublished manuscript).

Finally, the underlying religious and national similarities are not random. South Korea is famous for its “soft power” attempts to promote the positive, rightful image of Korea beyond its borders due to colonial legacy, among other reasons. One of them, the confusion of Korea with other Asian nations and nationals, motivates Koreans abroad to distinguish themselves in an effort aimed at stigma management. In the current case study, the confusion between Korean students and foreign workers in Israel from Asian countries contributes to the wish to make Korean culture known to Israeli society. For example, Ezra Kim, a Korean Christian student who aspires to become a pastor, said in his interview to *The Jerusalem Post* that if someone greets him in Chinese on the street, he usually responds: “Come here, I’m not Chinese, I’m not going to let you go until you guess the right country.”<sup>12</sup>

In 2006, the former Korean Ambassador to Israel, H. E. Shin Kak Soo, gave a lecture on the similarities between Israelis and Koreans. In addition, he explained to the Israeli audience among Asian Studies students about the differences between Korean and Chinese or Japanese cultures as seen in the language, cuisine, and traditional clothing. He also explained about the trauma inflicted on Korea in the Japanese colonial period, during which Korean culture and history were rewritten in an unflattering way—namely, as similar to that of Japan and China. While the ambassador represented a macronational narrative of a so-called “defensive nationalism” born of the misrepresentation of Korea during and after the Japanese colonialization (1910–1945), the Korean community echoes it on a micronational level in order to avoid the negative image bestowed on them through meeting

<sup>12</sup> Jacob Atkins, “Lovers of Zion: The Growing Phenomenon of Koreans in Israel,” *Jerusalem Post*, November 26, 2016, <https://www.jpost.com/magazine/lovers-of-zion-koreans-in-israel-470975>.

points that include the Korean Cultural Center in Jerusalem, Korean restaurants, and public events such as Korea Day.

## Korean Cultural Center in Jerusalem

Founded in 2006 by a veteran member of the Korean Christian community in Jerusalem who stayed in Israel for more than 20 years, the Center's goal is to promote cultural exchange between the two countries. Rather than being state-sponsored, as are other Korean cultural centers around the world, the Center is supported by donations from the community, Korean Christian tourists, and governmental organizations. When I asked the manager back in 2006 why he decided to open the Center, his response reflected both the above-mentioned religious motivation and the lack of national differentiation and confusion: "The Korean people (especially Korean Christians) know a lot about Israel, but Israelis don't know about Korea. On the streets, everyone asks if I'm Japanese or Chinese, but never if I'm Korean." More than 300 people visited the exhibition during the opening, where they could see the traditional paper folding art prepared by one of the community members (which he called by the Japanese name, *origami*), among others. Within his initial plans were to promote the Center in the Israeli media, build a website, and organize movie screenings, language lessons, Korean cooking classes, traditional games, and more.

Located in the heart of Jerusalem, the Center is designed as a minimuseum with books in Korean, language materials, DVDs, and traditional artifacts such as pictures, ceramics, dolls, a national flag, and a large Korean map on the wall. In addition to the formal representation of the Korean nation, also seen during the Association's General Meeting, the atmosphere is rather informal, inviting, and family-oriented. For example, after hearing that my father is Korean, the manager immediately told me to feel at home and to ask for any help I might need. Half a year later, I was already working in the place, thinking collaboratively about how to promote Korea in Israel.

Despite the efforts of the manager and his family, until 2007 the Center was, for the most part, empty—or, paradoxically, had become a meeting place for the members of the Korean community themselves who came to use the Center as some kind of social club. During a period of financial difficulty for the school, some of its classes met in the Center, intersecting inner and outer community spaces.

The lack of interest in Korea in general and in the Center's activities in particular can be explained by several reasons. At large, until the 1988 Seoul Olympics, Korea was a *tabula rasa* (blank slate) not only in Israel but also around the world (Lyan and Levkowitz 2015). The lack of knowledge about Korea stemmed from limited trade and the absence of cultural exchange between the two countries. The beginning of the peace process in the Middle East in the 1990s and the decreasing fear of Korean companies, brought on by the Arab boycott of any company that traded with Israel, led to the growth of political and economic relations between the two countries (Levkowitz 2012). This disparity was gradually disappearing, but Korea's cultural influence in Israel was still imperceptible. The shift toward cultural acknowledgment of Korea came in the late 2000s with the introduction of the Korean Wave or Hallyu—the growing popularity of Korean popular culture abroad—in Israel. In 2006, a Korean TV drama *My Lovely Sam Soon* (2005), was first aired on the Israeli cable soap opera channel Viva. It gained such popularity that it paved the way for the next Korean TV dramas broadcast on the same channel (Zur 2018). Moreover, the interest in TV dramas was followed by an increased interest in things Korean—movies, fashion and food, and K-pop (Otmazgin and Lyan 2014).

Since the rise in popularity of Korean culture in Israel in the late 2000s, the Center has become one of the major meeting points for Korean students and Israeli Hallyu fans interested in Korean language lessons. The great distance and lack of diplomatic relations between the two countries until the 1990s explain the most salient characteristic of Hallyu fans in Israel, the majority of whom have never been to Korea and were first introduced to the country mostly through Korean TV dramas and K-pop, while the Center made it possible to

“visit” Korea. Hallyu has become a gateway to a broader interest in the Korean language, history, and society, and in many countries it is the main reason for students enrolling in Korean classes. The educational interest in Korea has even led some fans to be engaged in what I call “fan-nationalism” which, similar to diasporic nationalism, (re)imagines Korea beyond its borders (Lyan 2019).

## Korean Restaurant

The Korea House, the restaurant in the Jerusalem center that was run by a Korean Christian family from 1999 to 2006, has become another meeting point for Israelis with Koreans and Korean culture. According to the story of its founding, a Korean student had been accompanied by her mother who opened the restaurant. While providing authentic Korean food at comfortable prices, the place also reminded customers of a museum with traditional artifacts, article designs on the walls and windows, and Korean background music. Most of its customers were Koreans, tourists, or community members, with only occasional Israelis, as the latter are mostly unfamiliar with Korean food. In some cases, the restaurant was chosen as a meeting place for members of the Korean Association.

The workers, some of whom are volunteers among Korean Christians, have been friendly and open to questions about themselves and Korea, making the atmosphere informal and family-like. While some were students, others were looking for a place to live in Jerusalem for religious reasons. The restaurant had become another minicommunity, with a separate “church” room for prayers, accompanied by piano music. I remember one of the restaurant workers laughing that “When Chinese come to a new place, they open a restaurant; when Koreans arrive at a new place, they establish a church.” As in other places with intertwined religious-ethnic boundaries, in the Korea House both outward-inward national and inward religious aspects of the community coexist.

# Korea Day

Two large annual events were celebrated by the Korean community for the purpose of bringing Korea and Israel closer together. These are Korea Day, which was established in 1998 and usually celebrated at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and the “Renewal Together” event organized by the Korean church. I had an opportunity to visit the sixth Korea Day in 2004 and the second Renewal Together event in 2005, both of which, despite national and religious motivations, had some commonalities such as traditional outfits, food, arts, music and songs, with a family-like atmosphere and both Korean and Israeli participants. Unsurprisingly, the Church’s event placed more emphasis on religion by way of a chorus providing religious songs in both Hebrew and Korean, and it seems that the decision to create nearly identical cultural events with more or less the same audience grew out of a wish to represent the religious identity of the community while featuring in the forefront an attractive traditional culture.

The first Korea Day was organized by the Korean community in 1998 in Jerusalem with the declared mission to bring the two nations closer and to promote mutual recognition. These celebratory days, which act as one-day living museums, have become a display of diasporic nationalism. The Hebrew University was chosen as a focal point because the majority of Korean students studied there, and its Asian Studies Department had been, since the early 1990s, the only place in Israel teaching the Korean language. The department supported the Korea Day celebration by providing space and logistical assistance. Jerusalem was also initially chosen as a religious center so as to locate Korea inside it in a symbolic way. But in 2004, in order to attract a wider audience, the Korean community decided to move the location to Tel Aviv University, which is considered more “global” and open to diverse cultures, as compared to “closed” and religious Jerusalem.

The cultural program consisted of a film screening of the Korean blockbuster *Joint Security Area* (2000), food tastings, and a cultural festival held in both English and Korean that

included taekwondo and traditional musical performances. Food was distributed by Korean volunteers dressed in *hanbok*, while the concert was organized by amateur students from the community. The choice of the program fitted the Han style of popular national culture, while the content of the movie was the tragic and melodramatic circumstances surrounding the conflict between North and South Korea, themselves in tune with the popular national Han discourse on everlasting Korean hardships and sufferings.

What was striking about this event, as well as other events before the late 2000s organized by the Korean community, was that the majority of attendees were Korean families celebrating their own culture. Most of them travelled together from Jerusalem to Tel Aviv on buses that were organized for the occasion. In other words, Korea Days strengthened the Korean community from the inside by expressing inward diasporic nationalism rather than promoting Korean culture to outside audiences. The few Israelis who showed up looked as if they had either randomly stumbled upon the festivities or were acquaintances of the Korean students. Sitting in the almost-empty cinema screening hall, I remember looking around and seeing mostly Korean faces. In other words, Korea Days have become an occasion for homecoming as well as an opportunity for ethnic Koreans to celebrate and promote their national culture, both inwardly and outwardly.

In 2005, professional Christian musicians, singers, dancers, and taekwondo masters from Korea replaced Korean students, giving a three-day performance in Jerusalem. Some of the Korean students felt marginalized, which may be the reason why no one organized Korea Day in 2006 and 2007. In addition, one of Korea Day's principal organizers left Israel, and the head of the Korean Association changed, disrupting the seven-year tradition. To fill the void, in 2008 the Korean Cultural Center brought in professional artists sponsored by the Gwangjin Culture and Arts Center and Korea's governmental cultural office. They called it "First Korean Cultural Day" to differentiate themselves from the Korea Days organized by the Korean community and held it not only in Israeli urban centers such as Tel-Aviv, Tiberius, and Jerusalem, but also the Christian center in the Palestinian

Authority, Bethlehem. Since 2009, the Center has begun to bring Korean artists to the international festival in Jerusalem, “Hutzot Hayotzer,” in which each country is represented by its own booth, with nation-related goods for sale. Established by the Jerusalem municipality in 1975, the festival hosted about 100,000 people in ten days in 2018. During the visit, the audience, like tourists, randomly visits country-booths to sample different cultures and places.

The Korea Day changed its ownership from the Korean community with an inward orientation to the Korean Cultural Center that institutionalized the event within the “Hutzot Hayotzer” festival, expressing outward diasporic nationalism in order to promote Korean culture to a broader Israeli audience. With the growing appeal of Korean popular culture, since 2013, fan-students at The Hebrew University, whom we also call “*hallyu* students” (Otmazgin and Lyan 2018), have become the driving force behind the organization of annual Korea Days, replacing or collaborating with Korean students (Lyan 2019) for cultural rather than national or religious reasons.

## Concluding Discussion

This article has brought forward a unique case study of what Arjun Appadurai (1996) would call “transnational irony” behind the “homecomings” to both national and religious homelands among Korean Christians in Jerusalem enacted by imagined nostalgia for a never-lost past. Such an academic pilgrimage compresses time and space by displaced and deterritorialized imagined communities and homes. While nationalism has become a master narrative in diaspora studies, this article has attempted to illuminate the multiple contested combinations of both inward and outward national and religious actions that can reinforce, overlap, or contradict one another. Thus, in inward community-building activities, one can see a coproduction and cocompetition between religious and nation-within-nation home-building. In outward actions, while the religious motives seem subdued,

backgrounded, and even silenced, the nation is reproduced on public stages and minimuseums to embrace the hosting society by evoking another imagined nostalgia—Han-style Korea’s “authentic” traditional past.

By moving beyond the common geographical logic about ethnic Koreans in place X, the article has sought to offer a non-essentialist, nuanced understanding of transnational diaspora troubled by both religious and national homelands in various routes to imagined and actual homes. Rather than providing an either/or approach to ethnicization or Christianization of a diasporic community, these routes are further complicated by the work of a social imagination fueled by deterritorialization. Finally, by examining both inward and outward diasporic agency, the article has explored the paradoxical concept of diasporic nationalism, whose religious origins are often forgotten as they both enhance and transcend the idea of nation.

Nostalgia for imagined authenticity in both religious and national missionary motivations has emerged as a major force in blurring the boundaries not only between the two homelands but also between inward and outward agency. The academic pilgrimage has become a challengeable journey that tests community members’ Korean-ness and Christian-ness by maintaining relations with both homelands, supposedly resulting in an “authentic” experience of homecoming. Acting as Koreans and/or Christians under the burden of proving both identities and duties properly has fueled an identity work to achieve self-recognition as well as significant others’ recognition and ownership of both identities and “authentic” homes. By avoiding the essentialist trap of nationalism-as-patriotism, or measuring and judging others as more or less authentic in nation or religion, the article summons the reader to listen to the endless dialogue between religious and national homecomings. Through the liminal and temporal position of both hosts and guests in the Holy Land, the Korean Christian community is captured and compressed in time and space to prove its unprovable authenticity.

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