

Half in, Half Out: Being Mixed in Korea

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To be mixed in Korea... where do I begin? To be mixed in Korea is to be less than whole, it is to be less deserving of the title “Korean” on my birth certificate, passport, ID card. To be mixed in Korea is to hesitate when people ask the common, yet to me, most threatening question: “Where are you from?” To be mixed in Korea is to be everything except that—Korean.

When I first set foot in Incheon International Airport, I was shocked to be welcomed by a staggering wave of anxiety rather than a warm embrace from the motherland. Seoul did not belong to me and I did not belong to Seoul. My journey there, however, was hopeful and overbrimming with expectations. With a newly asserted pride in being mixed, I flew to Korea thinking I would finally find myself. I expected an epiphany as soon as I stepped on Korean territory. Yet this revelatory moment did not come, and I was clouded by fear instead. As I made my way through passport control, I suddenly grew scared of being labeled an impostor with the pretext of carrying a passport that was not my own. Though my face undoubtedly matched the picture on my passport, I feared that my lack of Koreanness would be much too obvious... and it was. When an immigration officer asked me something in Korean and I failed to respond, she aggressively scanned my passport, desperate to understand why a Korean passport holder could only speak kindergarten-level Korean. After looking back and forth between my passport and my face, she asked: “Are you sure you’re Korean?” Unlike the previous question, this one I certainly understood, and it has stayed with me ever since.

Though I may be Korean on paper, I have never been able to confidently embrace this identity. It feels as though I am taking up space that is not rightfully mine. In a never-ending effort to belong, I am forced to challenge strictly established notions, which proves particularly complex in Korea—a country with a strong sense of collective identity. At the core of Korean culture is the word ‘woori’(우리), which directly translates to ‘we.’ However, ‘woori’ is not a simple pronoun, but rather “[a collective ‘I.’](#)” When referring to “My house, my mother, my country,” Koreans use ‘we.’ ‘Woori,’ then, is embedded in the Korean cultural identity.

Nevertheless, as a mixed Korean, my experience in the country has rather been that of being labeled as ‘nam’ (남)–Korean for ‘other.’

If not part of the ‘woori,’ then how do mixed Koreans fit into the narrative? Historically, mixed-race Koreans have not been named, and if anything, they have been unjustly and unfavorably portrayed in South Korean [history textbooks](#). In Korean, the term most commonly used to refer to mixed-race individuals is [혼혈](#) (*honhyeol*), its literal translation being “person of mixed blood.” Neutral as it may sound today, its connotations have often been alienating. In a country where the national identity is strongly tied to the purity of a single bloodline, to be mixed is to be tainted by undesirable blood. For the [first generation of mixed Koreans](#), the term *honhyeol* was a constant reminder of their difference, one that cost them the right to claim their Koreanness. Mostly children of Korean women and American soldiers stationed in South Korea due to the Korean War, the first generation faced ardent discrimination. According to Korean Studies researcher [Mary Lee](#), they were considered “shameful, regrettable by-products of U.S.-Korea state relations.” In the past, besides *honhyeol*, it was also commonplace to refer to mixed Koreans with derogatory terms such as [“튀기”](#) or “아이노코” (both Japanese words), the former translating to “a young born between two animals of different species.”

In the same manner that post-war society rejected the emerging mixed Korean identity, I, too, rejected my mixedness. Yet, as a child, I was not always aware of the fact that I had two distinct cultural identities. Born in Mexico City to a Korean father and a Mexican mother, my childhood was split between two worlds, especially with my parents being divorced. On my father’s side, my grandparents were my primary access to my Korean heritage. They would cook Korean food, watch Korean TV, and shop for groceries at H Mart. My childhood is filled with memories of Korean sounds and flavors. Yet even then, I never really had a strong awareness of being Korean—or being Mexican for that matter. I do not remember abiding by strict cultural labels. Instead, I grew aware of my differences through others’ eyes.

The environment that I grew up in was not racially diverse, which drove me to a complete rejection of my Korean side. This came in many forms, ranging from a genuine failure to recognize that my physical traits were predominantly Asian to the erasure of my Korean name.

Similar to how the first generation of mixed Koreans rejected the term *honhyeol*, I strove to erase the name that contributed to my otherness. In her book [Crying in H Mart](#), half-Korean author Michelle Zauner shares this same sentiment; she thought the omission of her Korean name “chic and modern,” when in reality, she “had just become embarrassed about being Korean.” Erasing the bits and pieces of my identity that did not necessarily help me in my struggle to fit in was an everyday action to me, almost a sixth sense. I thought the omission of my Korean identity on paper would magically lead to the omission of that undesirable half of me as a whole. Yet no matter what I did, I could not escape the half that I was so ardently striving to erase.

Being mixed was never the problem. Unfortunately, I did not realize this until much later, as is the case for many mixed Koreans who grow up without a sense of shared identity. Particularly in Korea, where multiculturalism and [“mixed-race visibility”](#) have only recently become matters of popular discourse, the mixed experience can be quite isolating and hopeless. There is, however, a project created by and for mixed Koreans: [The Halfie Project](#). “Part art, part research,” this project “discusses, debates and sheds light on all questions concerning identity as a mixed-race Korean.” It seeks to be a community hub where halfies are encouraged to share their stories and delve into their Korean heritage. Becky White, the founder of this project, agreed to share *her* story with me.

I was able to find out that very much like myself, Becky grew up unaware of her mixedness—that is until other people made it their mission to point it out. Born in Nebraska to a U.S. military father and a Korean mother, Becky moved back and forth between Korea and the U.S., eventually settling in Seoul for university. She told me that despite bouncing back and forth, she did not have a strong awareness of being mixed. Her family was her primary community, and her identity was not seen as deviant. “You don’t really view yourself from a third-person perspective. This is just who you are,” she said. “You see your parents first as parents, and after that is how the rest of the world views them and how the rest of the world views you.” It was not until she had her first blatantly racist encounter that she finally recognized that people perceived her differently. Becky also shared that this inner conflict became all the more prevalent when she moved to Korea. That is when she distinctly remembers thinking,

“Why can’t I just be one or the other? Why do I always have to explain myself? I wish people would stop staring.”

Not foreigners but not entirely Korean either, mixed-race Koreans are often stuck in the [in-betweenness](#). That is to say, never a part of mainstream Korean society. Long known to be [“racially and culturally homogenous,”](#) Korean conceptions of identity fail to consider diasporic and multicultural experiences, making it increasingly difficult for us mixed Koreans to present ourselves as what we are—Korean. [Cedric Stout](#), co-host and videographer for the Halfie Project, said, “We’ll never be totally Korean. It doesn’t matter if I’m half Korean or if my mom’s Korean. You’re still different, still 외국인 (foreigner), still an outside person.”

Up until 1997, [South Korean citizenship](#) was acquired via *jus sanguinis* of paternal lineage. In that same year, a new law was introduced, and children born after 1988 could inherit Korean citizenship from either parent, [regardless of gender](#). Yet it was not until 2010 that [dual citizenship](#) was legally recognized. As valuable as this achievement may be, it essentially amounts to nothing. It still is not enough. Ironically, legal citizenship makes me Korean everywhere except Korea. [Cultural citizenship](#) overshadows everything else. This includes, amongst many of the requirements, “knowledge of Korean culture, fluency in the Korean language, and, critically, a monoracial “Korean” physical appearance.” For the most part, these seem reasonable (perhaps minus the last point). Yet for diasporic and mixed Koreans, these requirements may translate to a deeply instilled sense of otherness.

Otherness is what initially drove me to reject my Korean side, and even today, it still shows up in my daily life like an old friend who won’t leave my side. The difference is that it no longer overdetermines me. It was around middle school that I started to embrace my Korean heritage. I wanted to learn more about where I belonged, and I wanted to make my history mine. I suddenly had so many questions, and I thought only one thing would solve them: Korea.

A fresh high school graduate, I waved goodbye to my mom as she left me at the entrance of the university dorm that I would call home for the next six weeks. At Korea University, I would learn that all the answers I was looking for were not in Seoul. At subway stations, I would

be overwhelmed with joy at the sight of people that looked like me. If only my skin tone were a tad bit lighter, I would camouflage with the crowd. At stores, I felt pride for being addressed in Korean. If only I had the confidence to reply. At the airport, I felt reassured while holding my Korean passport. If only I could feel it was rightfully mine. My life in Korea was filled with “If onlys.” I felt an overbearing pressure to belong as if failure to do so would invalidate the very reason I was here in the first place. Everything felt so familiar yet so foreign. Though I recognized so many memories of my childhood with my dad and grandparents come to life, I could not help but be utterly disappointed by how so *not* Korean I was.

For mixed Koreans, the desire to prove our [Koreanness](#) is widespread. [Becky](#) shared that she, too, thought that moving to Korea would symbolize instant belonging. However, upon her arrival, she was met with a “keen sense of disappointment and a sense of loss.” She thought she would easily blend in, but people kept staring, and staring, and staring. “It’s very hard because you ping-pong back and forth with being part of the ‘woori’ and being the other,” she said. Wondering what she could do to be “more Korean,” she changed her appearance and focused on improving her language skills in an effort to prove herself.

Mixedness in Korea is particularly complex. I asked Becky if she thought there was a reason for this, and she mainly pointed to the nature of Korean society and culture. It is through an understanding of history and trauma that we can come to understand why mixed Koreans feel so othered by mainstream Korean society. The post-war ideology and exclusion of mixed Koreans is not inherently hateful. Part of it stems from historical struggles to preserve a national sentiment amidst [foreign invasions](#), such as Japan’s colonial rule. When addressing our issues as mixed Koreans, we are, in a way, burdened with having to be continuously “gracious and educative.” “It’s not really fair, is it? But I do think it’s the only way forward,” Becky told me.

My main mistake when striving to embrace my mixedness was to regard both of my national identities as strict molds—even more so with my Korean side. I thought of “[being Korean](#) as if there were only one kind of identity.” In my mind, there was no in-between: I could either be truly Korean or not Korean at all. In an effort to belong, I thought it indispensable to mimic everything encompassing Koreanness, but I soon discovered that I was setting myself up for

failure. I had never actually tried to embrace my mixedness; I was just looking for belongingness where there had previously been rejection. Yet the mixed Korean experience should not be a game of pretend. Why was I trying so hard to be fully Korean when I was just... not? The bulk of genuine acceptance lies in the realization that being mixed is a culture in itself. Owning this fact and making it uniquely mine is what has allowed me to accept, even if only in small increments, that being half in and half out does not inhibit my wholeness.

I have yet to entirely discover what it means to be mixed in Korea, but I have definitely uncovered some truths. To be mixed in Korea is not to be less than whole, nor is it to be less deserving of the title “Korean” on my birth certificate, passport, ID card. To be mixed in Korea is to present myself as such without having to eliminate my mixedness in exchange for being whole. I am not to mold myself into the ‘woori.’ Instead, the ‘woori’ is to gradually expand, allowing for more than a single definition of Koreanness. For now, however, I am happy to say that I am a halfie.

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