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## Immigrant Entrepreneurship and the Rising Popularity of Korean Cuisine: Korean Restaurant Businesses in Frankfurt\*

Jihye Kim 

*In recent decades there has been a dramatic increase in Korean restaurants in Frankfurt, Germany. Based on ethnographic research conducted in Frankfurt in 2022, this research explores multiple situational factors across socio-structural layers influencing Korean restaurant owners in their decision to open their businesses. The study found that the economic, cultural, and social contexts in Germany, such as visa and settlement schemes, market conditions, and the cosmopolitan lifestyle in Frankfurt have been vital factors for Korean immigrants in Germany while ethnic networks and resources have been inconsequential. Korean restaurant owners in Frankfurt also contribute greatly to the shaping of trends in terms of interest in Korean food and culture in the host society through their own agency and in their interactions with local people. In the context of a rapid rise in popularity of Korean culture and food internationally, this study points to an uneasy fit between the case of Korean restaurant owners in Frankfurt and the prevailing conceptual frameworks of immigrant entrepreneurship in Europe, leading to the need to approach their case from new angles.*

**Key words:** Korean immigration, Germany, Immigrant entrepreneurship, Hallyu, Korean food, Korean restaurant business, Frankfurt.

### Introduction

Since the early 2000s there has been an exponential increase in Korean restaurants in the major European cities. In Frankfurt the phenomenon has been relatively recent, only taking off in the mid-2010s. Prior to that Korean food

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(*Hansik*) was mostly unknown to Frankfurters, and it was difficult to find a Korean restaurant outside the Korean neighborhood, with only two or three in the entire city. Since the mid-2010s the number of Korean restaurants has increased noticeably.

While the first wave of Korean immigrants in Germany consisted of nurses and miners as guestworkers, for more recent Korean immigrants in the new century, small businesses have been the main pathway into German society, despite the immigrants' generally high educational background, with most holding university degrees from South Korea. For those recent immigrants in particular, the Korean restaurant business has been a main source of income generation. Based on ethnographic research conducted in Frankfurt between July and December 2022, this study explores the multiple situational factors across socio-structural layers that have been critical in Korean immigrants' decision-making in opening Korean restaurants in Frankfurt. It seeks to explain why the number of these businesses in Frankfurt has soared since the mid-2010s and eventually helps understand how and to what degree Korean immigrants in Germany achieve integration into the host society.

For decades business ownership has been a preferred point of entry for many immigrant groups in the numerous immigrant-receiving countries.<sup>1</sup> In fact, almost everywhere, immigrant groups show high rates of self-employment, much higher than do native-born populations<sup>2</sup> – a phenomenon that scholars from many disciplines have endeavored to explain. Employing theoretical and conceptual frameworks of immigrant entrepreneurship, this research aims to explore and take into account as many influencing factors as possible in regard to the rise of Korean restaurant businesses in Frankfurt.

Immigrant enterprises do not function in a vacuum; they are a response to the availability of specific market opportunities and niches, which is especially important for small enterprises.<sup>3</sup> Since the shape of these economic spaces is contingent on prevailing factors, the larger structures in the host society have to be taken into consideration in order to comprehend trends in immigrant entrepreneurship.<sup>4</sup> Among various theoretical concepts, the concept of mixed embeddedness is the main one adopted for this research, as it emphasizes the crucial interplay and dynamics between immigrants and the broader contexts in which they navigate, not only focusing on the significance

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<sup>1</sup>Roger Waldinger, Howard Aldrich, and Robin Ward, *Ethnic Entrepreneurs: Immigrant Business in Industrial Societies* (Newbury Park, CA: SAGE, 1990).

<sup>2</sup>Trevor Jones, Stella Mascarenhas-Keyes, and Monder Ram, "The Ethnic Entrepreneurial Transition: Recent Trends in British Indian Self-Employment," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 38, no. 2 (2012).

<sup>3</sup>Robert Kloosterman and Jan Rath, "Immigrant Entrepreneurs in Advanced Economies: Mixed Embeddedness Further Explored," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 27, no. 2 (2001).

<sup>4</sup>Jan Rath, *Unraveling the Rag Trade: Immigrant Entrepreneurship in Seven World Cities* (Oxford: Berg, 2002).

of immigrants' concrete embeddedness in social networks and opportunity structures but also closely linking to the larger social, economic, and political contexts in the host country.<sup>5</sup>

Large-scale Korean migration to Germany started in 1960s with miners and nurses who went there as guest workers, a phenomenon that is well known, with most studies on Korean migration in Germany having focused on their case. The settlement and integration of more recent waves of Korean immigrants has been mostly off the scholarly radar despite important changes and shifts in recent decades in terms of Korean migration flows and cultural interactions in Germany. A significant increase in the number of Korean immigrants in Germany – including skilled migrants, working-holiday visa holders, international students, and employees sent by Korean companies – means that Germany now hosts the largest Korean community in Europe.<sup>6</sup> Most of those recent immigrants from Korea tend to run small businesses, and Korean restaurant businesses are a common choice for them.

I initially established two main hypotheses for this research: the expansion of Korean restaurant businesses in Frankfurt is related to (i) the recent rise in popularity of Korean culture (commonly referred to as *Hallyu* (the Korean Wave) or K-culture), and (ii) the intensive use of networks and resources by recent Korean immigrants in Frankfurt. These hypotheses took into account two phenomena that are specific to this case: a rise in the international cultural influence of the country of origin and a growing number of recent Korean immigrants in Germany. As yet, no conceptual framework dealing with immigrant entrepreneurship has considered these two factors in combination. And in the case of Korean-immigrant-run businesses in Germany, this is the first study to be carried out. Focusing on the case of Korean restaurant businesses in Frankfurt, this study thus examines immigrant entrepreneurship from a new angle and perspective that goes beyond existing concepts and models in immigrant entrepreneurship.

Despite the recent rapid expansion of Korean food and restaurants outside Korea, topics relating to this phenomenon have attracted little academic attention. Min and Lee<sup>7</sup> carried out a study on customer satisfaction with Korean restaurants in Queensland, Australia, claiming that these restaurants act as ambassadors for tourism marketing. Exploring customers' experiences with and perspectives about Korean restaurants in Adelaide, Ingerson and Kim<sup>8</sup> argue that a majority

<sup>5</sup>Kloosterman and Rath, "Immigrant Entrepreneurs."

<sup>6</sup>Jihye Kim and Yonson Ahn, "Gradual, Diverse, Complex—and Unnoticed: Korean Migration in Europe," *European Journal of Korean Studies* 22, no. 2 (2023).

<sup>7</sup>Kye-Hong Min and Timothy Jeonglyeol Lee, "Customer Satisfaction with Korean Restaurants in Australia and Their Role as Ambassadors for Tourism Marketing," *Journal of Travel and Tourism Marketing* 31, no. 4 (2014).

<sup>8</sup>Sumi Ingerson and Aise KyoungJin Kim, "Exploring the Value of an Ethnic Restaurant Experience: A Consumer Perspective toward Korean Restaurants," *Tourism Recreation Research* 41, no. 2 (2016).

of customers place high value on the health dimensions of Korean food and its gastronomic features, such as taste and variety, rather than on cultural attributes, such as Korean music, royal cuisines, or religious foods. Analyzing the locations and characteristics of Korean restaurants in Buenos Aires, Argentina, Delmonte<sup>9</sup> demonstrates that Korean restaurants there function as sites of identity construction for Korean immigrants while presenting different narratives and ways of articulating with the host society, helping to shape heterogeneous cultural configurations of the Korean community in the host society. In a similar vein, Min<sup>10</sup> suggests that the significant numbers of Korean grocery stores/supermarkets, restaurants, and other eating/drinking establishments in New York act as an important mechanism for Korean Americans for preserving their ethnic identity and promoting Korean cuisine to New Yorkers. Khoo,<sup>11</sup> critiquing the Korean government's campaign for the global promotion of Korean cuisine, points to the role Korean immigrants in Malaysia play in promoting *Hansik* (Korean food) and interacting with local people and culture in their host societies. These studies notwithstanding, considering the growing number of Korean restaurants overseas, there has been relatively little work done in this area. Focusing on topics related to Korean food and restaurant businesses in Frankfurt, this study addresses significant gaps in the fields of both Korean migration in Germany and immigrant entrepreneurship in Europe.

## Korean Migration in Germany and Korean Restaurant Businesses in Frankfurt

From the perspective of Korean migration studies, Korean migration to Germany started in the 1960s when the Federal Republic of Germany (Western Germany; hereafter Germany) invited nurses and miners from South Korea to come as *Gastarbeiter*<sup>12</sup> to mitigate the labor shortage resulting from the German economic boom. The Korean government, in turn, expected a rise in overseas remittances from migrants to support their families in Korea and a decrease in unemployment.<sup>13</sup> Following an agreement between the two countries, approximately 10,000 Korean nurses and nursing assistants and 8,000 Korean miners moved to Germany between 1963 and 1977 as migrant workers.<sup>14</sup> In the second

<sup>9</sup>Romina Delmonte, "Restaurantes coreanos en la Ciudad de Buenos Aires. Comida, cultura e identidad en la diáspora," *Sociedade e Cultura* 18, no. 1 (2015).

<sup>10</sup>Pyong Gap Min, "Korean Food," in *Transnational Cultural Flow from Home: Korean Community in Greater New York* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2023).

<sup>11</sup>Khoo, *Hansik Globalization Campaign*.

<sup>12</sup>Detlef Garz, "Going Away. Going Home! Coming Home? The Migration of Korean Nurses and Miners to Germany and Their Return in Retirement to Korea's German Village—Together with their German Husbands," *Journal of Multicultural Society* 6, no. 1 (2015).

<sup>13</sup>Garz, "Going Away."

<sup>14</sup>Garz, "Going Away."

half of the 20th century, while most Koreans who moved to developed countries in North America, Europe, and Oceania did so in family migration patterns, those who went to Germany tended to be single migrant workers in early adulthood on temporary contracts, with more than a third staying into late adulthood.<sup>15</sup> Because of their historical and social uniqueness, topics related to Korean nurses and miners in Germany have been comprehensively studied by Korean scholars.<sup>16</sup>

As of the most recent census data on overseas Koreans published by South Korea's Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2021, Germany (with 47,428 Korean residents) hosts the largest number of Koreans living in Europe, followed by the UK (with 36,690 residents). This German dominance is a recent phenomenon.<sup>17</sup> Until 2017, the Korean community in Germany was the second largest in Europe, after that in the UK, which, as an English-speaking country, was the preferred destination for many Korean students and immigrants. The gap between the UK and Germany was greatest around 2011, when there were 46,829 Korean immigrants in the UK and 31,518 in Germany, followed by 12,684 in France.<sup>18</sup> This gap began to decrease in 2011, with the UK and German rankings eventually reversing in 2017, and it has stayed that way since.<sup>19</sup> The change in Korean migrants' preferred destination to Germany seems to be the result of economic and social factors, with Germany offering more opportunities, especially for young people, despite the increased language barrier compared to English, which may be more familiar to them.<sup>20</sup>

In recent years, there has been a significant increase in the number of Korean students, skilled migrants, and working-holiday visa holders in Germany as well as Koreans moving to Germany for their children's education.<sup>21</sup> The fact that there is a large and well-established Korean community in Germany also

<sup>15</sup>Garz, "Going Away."

<sup>16</sup>Yonson Ahn, "Here and There: Return Visit Experiences of Korean Healthcare Workers in Germany," in *Diasporic Returns to the Ethnic Homeland: The Korean Diaspora in Comparative Perspective*, eds. Takeyuki Tsuda and Changzoo Song (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019); Yonson Ahn, "Nursing Care in Contact Zones: Korean Healthcare 'Guest Workers' in Germany," in *Transnational Mobility and Identity in and out of Korea*, ed. Yonson Ahn (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2020); Mi-Ran Kim, "Influential Factors on Turnover Intention of Nurses: The Affect of Nurse's Organizational Commitment and Career Commitment to Turnover Intention," *Journal of Korean Academy of Nursing Administration* 13, no. 3 (2007); Won Kim, "Memories of Migrant Labor: Stories of Two Korean Nurses Dispatched to West Germany," *Review of Korean Studies* 12, no. 4 (2009); Helen Kim, "Making Homes Here and Away: Korean German Nurses and Practices of Diasporic Belonging," *Journal of Cultural Geography* 36, no. 3 (2019).

<sup>17</sup>Kim and Ahn, "Gradual, Diverse, Complex."

<sup>18</sup>Sung Eun Shim, "Immigration as Personal and Cultural Interchange: South Koreans in Germany, the United Kingdom, and France," in *The Routledge Handbook of Europe-Korea Relations*, eds. Nicola Casarini, Antonio Fiori, Nam-Kook Kim, Jae-Seung Lee, and Ramon Pacheco Pardo (London: Routledge, 2021).

<sup>19</sup>Kim and Ahn, "Gradual, Diverse, Complex."

<sup>20</sup>Kim and Ahn, "Gradual, Diverse, Complex."

<sup>21</sup>Kim and Ahn, "Gradual, Diverse, Complex."

motivates more to come and helps improve the experience of newcomers moving to and settling there. With the European headquarters of large Korean companies mostly located in the Frankfurt Rhine-Main area, there is also a high number of employees sent on postings to Frankfurt by Korean corporations. Consequently, Frankfurt hosts the largest Korean community in Germany, with over 5,000 Korean residents, and the number of small- and medium-sized Korean companies in Frankfurt has been growing. Recent immigrants from Korea tend to run small businesses, and Korean restaurant businesses are a common choice for them.

One of the interesting features of Korean restaurants in Frankfurt is that depending on the location, there is a clear distinction between those that target a Korean clientele and those that cater to local non-Koreans. Since most Korean companies and immigrants are concentrated in Eschborn on the outskirts of Frankfurt, the most “authentic” Korean restaurants, those frequented by Koreans, are located there. Currently there are around 20 Korean restaurants in Frankfurt proper targeting local non-Korean customers. Koreans do not usually go to these restaurants. Although the number of non-Korean customers in Korean restaurants in Eschborn is slowly increasing, this study focuses only on those Korean restaurants in Frankfurt proper targeting non-Korean customers due to its aim of assessing the impact of *Hallyu* as a primary factor in the growth of Korean restaurants among non-Koreans.

## Theoretical Frameworks on Immigrant Entrepreneurship

Because of the significant number of ethnic minority businesses in developed countries (primarily in North America, Europe, and Oceania) and their contribution to those countries’ economies, in recent years the topic of immigrant entrepreneurship has attracted ample scholarly attention. Germany hosts the largest foreign population among European countries,<sup>22</sup> and numerous scholars have noted the strong presence and spread of small businesses there run by immigrants, especially in large cities such as Frankfurt and Berlin.<sup>23</sup> However, up until now Korean-immigrant-run businesses in Germany have eluded this scholarly attention.

<sup>22</sup>Alexander M. Danzer and Hulya Ulku, “Integration, Social Networks and Economic Success of Immigrants: A Case Study of the Turkish Community in Berlin,” *Kyklos* 64, no. 3 (2011).

<sup>23</sup>Antoine Pécoud, “Entrepreneurship and Identity: Cosmopolitanism and Cultural Competencies among German-Turkish Businesspeople in Berlin,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 30, no. 1 (2004); Danzer and Ulku, “Integration”; Luca Storti, “Being an Entrepreneur: Emergence and Structuring of Two Immigrant Entrepreneur Groups,” *Entrepreneurship and Regional Development* 26, no. 7–8 (2014); Regina C. Andoh, Claudia N. Berrones-Flemmig, and Utz Dornberger, “Ghanaian Immigrant Entrepreneurs in Germany: Motivations and Contributions for Development,” *Problemy Zarządzania* 1/2019, no. 81 (2019); Maria Elo, “Immigrant Effect and Collective Entrepreneurship—the Creation and Development of a Turkish Entrepreneurial Group,” *Historical Social Research/Historische Sozialforschung* 44, no. 4 (170) (2019).



Scholars from various disciplines have endeavored to explain this persistent preference for immigrant self-employment, developing theoretical models such as labor market disadvantages, middleman minorities, ethnic enclaves, and class and ethnic resources. Some scholars<sup>24</sup> attribute the high rate of self-employment of immigrants to the labor market disadvantages they face in their host countries. These disadvantages include racial discrimination, language barriers, unfamiliarity with the host culture and laws/regulations, and limited job opportunities. Middleman minority is the term used for a minority group that plays an intermediary role, whereby their businesses serve to link dominant and dominated groups.<sup>25</sup> In particular, many researchers<sup>26</sup> have indicated that Korean entrepreneurs in the United States play the role of minority middlemen because they are caught in vulnerable positions between White providers and low-income Black customers. An ethnic enclave is a geographic area with a high concentration of ethnically close communities, which improves new immigrants' access to opportunities and information through networking.<sup>27</sup> In this regard, ethnic resources are created and used among members of the same ethnic group and thus seen as providing a crucial advantage for immigrants in developing their businesses. Some scholars also claim the importance of class resources, such as individual capacity and class background, in the formation and operation of ethnic enterprises.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>24</sup>Waldinger, Aldrich, and Ward, *Ethnic Entrepreneurs*; Ivan Light and Edna Bonacich, *Immigrant Entrepreneurs: Koreans in Los Angeles, 1965–1982* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); Ivan Light and Carolyn Rosenstein, *Race, Ethnicity, and Entrepreneurship in Urban America* (New York: Aldine Transaction, 1995); Giles A. Barrett, Trevor P. Jones, and David McEvoy, "Ethnic Minority Business: Theoretical Discourse in Britain and North America," *Urban Studies* 33, no. 4–5 (1996); Ivan Light and Steven J. Gold, *Ethnic Economies* (San Diego: Academic Press, 1996).

<sup>25</sup>Edna Bonacich, "A Theory of Middleman Minorities," *American Sociological Review* 38, no. 5 (1973); Jonathan H. Turner and Edna Bonacich, "Toward a Composite Theory of Middleman Minorities" *Ethnicity* 7 (1980); Walter P. Zenger, *Minorities in the Middle: A Cross-Cultural Analysis* (New York: SUNY Press, 1991).

<sup>26</sup>Light and Bonacich, *Immigrant Entrepreneurs*; Pyong Gap Min, *Caught in the Middle: Korean Communities in New York and Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); In-Jin Yoon, *On My Own: Korean Businesses and Race Relations in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997); Pyong Gap Min and Andrew Kolodny, "The Middleman Minority Characteristics of Korean Immigrants in the United States," in *Koreans in the Hood: Conflict with African Americans*, ed. Kwang Chung Kim (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).

<sup>27</sup>Alejandro Portes, "The Social Origins of the Cuban Enclave Economy of Miami," *Sociological Perspectives* 30, no. 4 (1987); Min Zhou, *Chinatown: The Socioeconomic Potential of an Urban Enclave* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995); Min Zhou, *Contemporary Chinese America: Immigration, Ethnicity, and Community Transformation* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009); Alejandro Portes and Steven Shafer, "Revisiting the Enclave Hypothesis: Miami Twenty-Five Years Later," in *The Sociology of Entrepreneurship*, eds. Martin Ruef and Michael Lounsbury (Bingley, UK: Emerald, 2007).

<sup>28</sup>Ivan Light, "Immigrant and Ethnic Enterprise in North America," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 7, no. 2 (1984); Light and Bonacich, *Immigrant Entrepreneurs*; In-Jin Yoon, "The Changing Significance of Ethnic and Class Resources in Immigrant Business: The Case of Korean Immigrant Business in Chicago," *International Migration Review* 25, no. 2 (1991); Yoon, *On My Own*; Light and Rosenstein, *Race, Ethnicity*; Light and Gold, *Ethnic Economies*.



These are the main theoretical frameworks on immigrant business that have significantly influenced the ways in which problems and issues involving immigrant entrepreneurship are framed and have been extensively applied to other case studies in Western countries. More recent frameworks, such as those of structural opportunity and mixed embeddedness, recognize the crucial significance of immigrant social capital and ethnic resources in the entry into and operation of immigrant enterprises, but also locates them within the wider social, economic, and political contexts of the host country as explanatory factors. While the structural opportunity approach focuses on market positions and dimensions,<sup>29</sup> the more recent construct of mixed embeddedness advocates for a more comprehensive approach that also takes into account laws, regulations, institutions, and governmental practices, recognizing their vital influence on how markets operate.<sup>30</sup>

In studying the diverse factors underlying the Korean restaurant business in Germany, I take into careful consideration not only the singular importance of ethnic resources but also the more complex and subtle contributing factors. In this sense, among the diverse approaches to immigrant entrepreneurship, the concept of mixed embeddedness is particularly important in this research. Under mixed embeddedness, opportunities for ethnic entrepreneurial activities sit at the intersection of factors and changes pertinent to economic, institutional, and sociocultural transformations in the host country, with particular emphasis on the crucial interplay and dynamics between immigrants and the larger contexts in which they are embedded. Although ethnic resources and other micro factors are critical, the environment in which entrepreneurs operate can also have a significant influence; indeed, it may equally contribute to the determination of the shape and dynamics of business practices and of their effective success. However, considering the limitations of mixed embeddedness as the sole basis of a theoretical framework, I apply it more broadly in order to explore as many as possible of the factors and issues that have interacted to affect the emergence and evolution of the Korean restaurant sector in Frankfurt. I further examine how these factors have been directly and indirectly connected with other key social dimensions of mixed embeddedness and other conceptual frameworks, in order to better understand the ways in which Koreans in Germany have embedded themselves in their host economy and society.

<sup>29</sup>Roger Waldinger, *Through the Eye of the Needle: Immigrants and Enterprise in New York's Garment Trades* (New York: New York University Press, 1986); Roger Waldinger, "Structural Opportunity or Ethnic Advantage? Immigrant Business Development in New York," *International Migration Review* 23, no. 1 (1989); Waldinger, Aldrich, and Ward 1990, *Ethnic Entrepreneurs*.

<sup>30</sup>Robert Kloosterman, Joanne Van Der Leun, and Jan Rath, "Mixed Embeddedness: (In)formal Economic Activities and Immigrant Businesses in the Netherlands," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 23, no. 2 (1999); Kloosterman and Rath, "Immigrant Entrepreneurs"; Rath, *Unraveling the Rag Trade*; Robert C. Kloosterman, "Matching Opportunities with Resources: A Framework for Analyzing (Migrant) Entrepreneurship from a Mixed Embeddedness Perspective," *Entrepreneurship and Regional Development* 22, no. 1 (2010).

As discussed in this section, with the high presence and spread of small businesses run by diverse immigrant groups, the topic of immigrant entrepreneurship has been intensively investigated by numerous scholars, greatly contributing to the development of theoretical frameworks and concepts on the topic. Despite the high volume of previous studies, research on the topic of Korean restaurant businesses in Frankfurt remains challenging, since the Korean community in Germany has distinctive features that existing theories and methodologies do not address. By paying particular attention to these features, namely, the recent, rapid rise in popularity of Korean culture and food in Western countries concurrent with the increasing number of Korean immigrants in Germany, this study actively incorporates these new sociocultural trends and shifts into its data analysis methodology rather than merely applying existing theories.

## **Methodology**

For this research I carried out extensive ethnographic field research in Germany based on interviews – the central element of this research project – in order to gather immigrants' experiences, trajectories, and opinions concerning Korean restaurant businesses in the Frankfurt area. Field research allowed me to obtain and incorporate findings that go beyond what I can gather through secondary data – specifically, by listening to the voices of Korean immigrants speaking about their own everyday experiences. Applying ethnographic methods, I paid close attention to the specific issues and factors that the interviewees themselves considered crucial in their decision to enter into the Korean restaurant business in Frankfurt. I primarily relied on biographical interviews, encouraging the participants to freely tell their stories from their lives prior to migration to their very recent experiences of restaurant management and operation and asking additional questions to elicit further information on their decision to become self-employed Korean restaurant owners.

During the field research, which took place between July and December 2022, using Google I identified approximately 20 Korean restaurants in and around the city center of Frankfurt. I visited 14 of these and established contact with their owners. After having meals at their restaurant as a means of establishing rapport, I asked the owner for an interview. In some cases the manager gave me the owner's phone number. I interviewed eight restaurant owners; several of them also granted me follow-up interviews and conversations, especially those from restaurants I often visited and with whom I had established a good rapport. Not all felt comfortable revealing their identity (either their name or that of their restaurant), so for this article I assigned them numbers to avoid using identifiable information (e.g., Interview 1). I also had informal conversations with managers, employees, and customers in several restaurants, with the owners' permission.

Among the eight owners, one was a second-generation Korean born in Germany whose parents had moved there as a miner and a nurse. He obtained a university degree in Germany and briefly worked in Germany for a Korean company. The other seven owners had immigrated from Korea, one in the early 2000s and the rest less than 10 years prior. All had obtained university degrees in Korea. Their level of German varied depending on their educational background, personal inclination, and circumstances in Germany, but all could speak at a more or less intermediate level and did not have problems interacting with customers.

In the analysis phase, I organized and classified the data into detailed themes and topics pertaining to the owners' motivation and entry decision in order to carry out a thematic analysis. I first preidentified themes based on the previous theoretical frames and concepts as well as my own hypotheses. Then I went over the field data thoroughly, linking them to the preidentified themes. Considering the limitations of the existing conceptual frameworks, in the data analysis I also identified and explored new factors and dimensions not covered by the preidentified themes.

In addition to the interviews, I also incorporated additional research methods and sources for data collection, such as archival research at the community newspaper, Instagram posts and webpages of the restaurants, and online resources related to business- and immigration-related government regulations. This additional data was helpful in understanding each topic more comprehensively and providing better support for my arguments.

## **Diverse Reasons and Motivations to Start a Korean Restaurant Business in Frankfurt**

The ways in which immigrants have been embedded and have shaped their economic performance in the host country are quite diverse and complex. Although the decision to start up a business in a new country depends on highly personal and individual considerations, it is not made purely individually or independently of wider contexts. These entrepreneurial, motivational, and decision-making processes tend to involve complex sets of factors and interactions in both the home and host countries. They also seem to be connected to social systems and factors within particular historical circumstances. In this section I have classified and examined the most influential factors in the setting up of Korean restaurant businesses in Frankfurt.

### *Visas and settlement schemes in Germany*

For decades, business ownership has been a preferred point of entry for many immigrant groups in the numerous immigrant-receiving countries of North

America and Europe.<sup>31</sup> Scholars from many disciplines have endeavored to explain why this is so.<sup>32</sup> Their studies explained immigrant self-employment as a way of developing their income and setting up their lives after migrating to the new country. However, many immigrants also use self-employment as a means of migrating to and securing their immigration status in the host country, as many countries offer visas for self-employment or for new businesses, an angle calling for more investigation. It is well known that many middle-class Korean immigrants have taken advantage of this type of opportunity to migrate to a new country, with many examples, such as that of Korean immigrants running sushi businesses in New Zealand.<sup>33</sup> Germany is among those countries offering a visa for self-employed business aimed at those who wish to set up a commercial business as a self-employed entrepreneur.<sup>34</sup> This visa is initially limited to a maximum of 3 years, but if the business is successful, the immigrant and their family can apply for a settlement permit, allowing them to remain in Germany indefinitely.<sup>35</sup>

Half of the interviewees had either permanent residency or citizenship in Germany when they started their businesses; the others were on a work visa or visa for self-employment. For those who did not have a permit to stay in Germany, a restaurant business served not only for income generation but also as a migration pathway into Germany. The following account from a first-generation Korean immigrant is a typical case of using a Korean restaurant business to secure a settlement permit in Germany:

My sister and I set up this restaurant together. The main reason that my sister migrated to Germany was her children's education. She doesn't want her children to suffer a lot because of the Korean education system. My sister spent many years getting ready to migrate to Germany. She studied at a cooking school to get a cooking license in Korean cuisine. I came with her, but at first I was on a student visa to study German. After I learned basic German I applied for a work visa as an employee of her restaurant while she was on a business visa. (Interview 6)

The owners of this restaurant had researched in advance how they could migrate to Germany. Prior to their departure they had already decided to set up the restaurant and made all the necessary arrangements to meet the visa conditions. The older sister who had a family got a visa for self-employment through her

<sup>31</sup>Waldinger, Aldrich, and Ward, *Ethnic Entrepreneurs*.

<sup>32</sup>Light and Bonacich, *Immigrant Entrepreneurs*; Light and Gold, *Ethnic Economies*; Light and Rosenstein, *Race, Ethnicity*; Waldinger, Aldrich, and Ward, *Ethnic Entrepreneurs*; Barrett, Jones, and McEvoy, "Ethnic Minority Business."

<sup>33</sup>Changzoo Song, "Ethnic Entrepreneurship of Korean New Zealanders: Restaurant Business as Self-Employment Practice," *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies* 15, no. 2 (2013).

<sup>34</sup><https://www.make-it-in-germany.com/en/working-in-germany/setting-up-business/visa/self-employed>

<sup>35</sup><https://www.bamf.de/EN/Themen/MigrationAufenthalt/ZuwandererDrittstaaten/Migrathek/Niederlassen/niederlassen-node.html>

restaurant business while the younger, single sister obtained a work visa through the same business. For the older sister, the visa for self-employment was the easy and convenient option to be able to permanently migrate to Germany with her family. They now have a successful Korean fried chicken restaurant, and the family is well settled in Frankfurt. Two other restaurant owners from Korea had similar stories. Here is another example:

I majored in viola performance and my husband majored in vocal music. We came to Germany to study in a postgraduate program and eventually work here as professional musicians. When we finished our studies and started looking for jobs, the pandemic started. With the total lockdown there were no jobs available that had to do with music concerts and performance. During the pandemic the previous owner of this restaurant opened it as a delivery-only Korean chicken restaurant targeting a German clientele, and it was a huge success. I knew her personally, and she needed to hire a marketing person, so I started working for her. After several months, she wanted to sell the restaurant because of personal issues, so I bought it, and since early this year I have been running it with my husband. (Interview 1)

This interviewee started working for a Korean restaurant as an employee and eventually took over the business, already set up by a Korean immigrant long settled in Germany. Even though she became the owner and ran the business, she did not change her visa status from employee to employer, as doing so would have needed her to produce many more documents and proof of skills. Even if on a visa for self-employment she and her husband would need to wait only 3 years to be able to apply for a settlement permit, compared to 5 years on a visa for employees<sup>36</sup>; for them, it was much easier to stay on visas for employees and wait longer than to secure the many documents needed to fulfill the criteria and requirements, including producing a convincing business plan. Instead, they made an arrangement with the previous owner to help them remain on employee visas as though they were still working for her.

As these interviews demonstrate, since setting up and running a Korean restaurant business facilitates obtaining a settlement visa, governmental policies and regulations vis-à-vis visa and settlement schemes and controls have influenced the ways Korean immigrants go about settling in Germany, with the routes they take and the types of visas they arrange through their restaurants varying according to the specific circumstances of each. As the concept of mixed embeddedness<sup>37</sup> suggests, individual entrepreneurship at the micro level links not just to the opportunity structure in which markets operate at the meso level but also to the wider political and institutional framework at the macro level. Laws, regulations, institutions, and governmental practices as well as the markets in which immigrant businesses operate considerably affect the motivations,

<sup>36</sup><https://www.bamf.de/EN/Themen/MigrationAufenthalt/ZuwandererDrittstaaten/Migrathek/Niederlassen/niederlassen-node.html>

<sup>37</sup>Kloosterman, Van Der Leun, and Rath, "Mixed Embeddedness"; Kloosterman and Rath, "Immigrant Entrepreneurs"; Rath, *Unraveling the Rag Trade*.

decisions, and management styles for these businesses. This means that to understand the recent trend in Korean restaurants in Frankfurt, a more comprehensive examination of these larger structures and frameworks – government regulations, laws, and institutions including visas and settlement schemes – should be taken into consideration as an important factor.

### *Kinship, friendship, and ethnic networks*

Numerous studies<sup>38</sup> have claimed that faced with a language barrier, discrimination, unfamiliarity with the host society, and limited access to job opportunities, immigrants tend to rely on ethnic ties and solidarity and cooperate in co-ethnic businesses which provide them with business or employment opportunities, especially in the early stage of migration. This has been the case for many Asian immigrants in the United States.<sup>39</sup> In particular, Korean immigrants in the United States and South America have relied heavily on co-ethnic networks and resources for start-up capital or to obtain funds using rotating credit associations.<sup>40</sup> However, as members of the younger generation understand the local language, job market, and social environment in the host society much better than their parents and are better incorporated into local social and cultural contexts, over time ethnic resources tend to lose their centrality in immigrant entrepreneurship. In addition, in contemporary times, with the ready circulation of information via the internet and social media, ethnic networks and resources may function differently – an area ripe for analysis. Considering that most Korean restaurants in Frankfurt have been in operation for less than 10 years, and for less than seven in the case of my interviewees, I pay attention to how their reliance on ethnic networks and resources in setting up their businesses has differed from early-stage Korean immigrants in other countries in past times.

Among the eight interviewees, two had taken over their restaurant from Korean friends or acquaintances and another had received help from a relative. The other five had started their restaurant based on their own experiences in the local context and without any help from family, friends, or co-ethnic networks.

The following interview is an example of a case where help was obtained from a Korean friend working in Frankfurt:

<sup>38</sup>Light, “Immigrant and Ethnic Enterprise”; Light and Bonacich, *Immigrant Entrepreneurs*; Light and Rosenstein, *Race, Ethnicity*; Light and Gold, *Ethnic Economies*; Yoon, “Changing Significance”; Yoon, *On My Own*.

<sup>39</sup>Ivan Light, Im Jung Kwuon, and Deng Zhong, “Korean Rotating Credit Associations in Los Angeles” *Amerasia Journal* 16, no. 2 (1990); Light and Bonacich, *Immigrant Entrepreneurs*.

<sup>40</sup>Yoon, *On My Own*; Jihye Kim, “Ethnicity, Opportunity, and Upward Mobility: Korean Entrepreneurship in the Argentine Garment Industry 1965–2015,” *Asian Ethnicity* 21, no. 3 (2020); Jihye Kim, “From Ethnic to Class: The Evolution of Korean Entrepreneurship in Argentina,” *Korean Studies* 45 (2021).



We came to Germany in 2016. My husband studied cookery and worked as a chef in Korea. A friend of ours worked for this restaurant and mentioned that the business was for sale. My husband travelled to Frankfurt [from Korea] to check it out and decided to take it. At the time he was leaving his previous job, so it was convenient for us. We made the decision purely based on our personal circumstances. (Interview 2)

In this case of direct migration from Korea to Germany to take over a Korean restaurant, business information provided by a Korean friend already in Germany was the key factor, together with the fact that he had previous work experience as a chef. The following account is an example of a case where help was obtained from a relative:

As I mentioned, my sister attended a cooking school to get a cooking license in Korean cuisine when she was getting ready to migrate to Germany. When we first got here we also got a lot of help from our cousin, who had been living here for many years and was very familiar with the local situation. For instance, he suggested to us which neighborhood would be good to open a Korean chicken restaurant. We are well settled now and we don't need his help anymore, but at the beginning it was important. (Interview 6)

The owners of this restaurant affirmed that the help from the cousin was invaluable for setting up their business, which they did as soon as they arrived from Korea, although they soon became independent. As noted by Sanders and Nee,<sup>41</sup> the family unit represents a web of responsibilities that encompasses the social, economic, and cultural commitments formed prior to immigration; consequently, immigrants rely on and further nurture this network throughout the course of settling down and adapting.

Previous studies highlighted the significance of support provided by a friend or family member for individuals who are in the initial phase of migrating and lack familiarity with the local environment. Strong bonds and robust social ties are critical factors in the decision-making process of starting an entrepreneurial endeavor, according to Davidsson and Honig.<sup>42</sup> In the case of my study, while one interviewee emphasized the importance of family support, two others acknowledged the crucial role played by close friends in the initial stages of their business ventures, specifically in understanding the local context. These examples point to the significance of these factors, particularly in cases where individuals have close connections, such as family or friends who own businesses and can provide active encouragement, valuable information, and practical know-how based on their own experiences. However, this support was not consistently available or used by the new entrepreneurs.

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<sup>41</sup>Jimmy M. Sanders and Victor Nee, "Immigrant Self-Employment: The Family as Social Capital and the Value of Human Capital," *American Sociological Review* 61, no. 2 (1996).

<sup>42</sup>Per Davidsson and Benson Honig, "The Role of Social and Human Capital among Nascent Entrepreneurs," *Journal of Business Venturing* 18, no. 3 (2003).

The evidence that I gathered from the interviews demonstrates that, except for those who received information or help from friends or relatives, more than half of the cases set up their businesses on their own, without any recourse to ethnic networks or resources. Rather than relying on ethnic ties, they used their individual resources. For my sample of new Korean restaurant owners in Frankfurt, ethnic networks and resources within the Korean community were not a key factor in their decision making. As well demonstrated in previous studies,<sup>43</sup> the younger generation of immigrants do not need to rely on ethnic networks and resources as they know the local language and context well. In this Frankfurt case, however, with one exception, my interviewees were recent first-generation Korean immigrants, suggesting the need to interpret this special case differently from previous ones. My interview data suggests their language skills were more developed and their adaptation processes faster compared to those of first-generation Korean immigrants in other countries who opted for self-employment in the past. This feature of recent Korean immigrants in Germany also seems to have influenced the ways in which they have shaped their businesses in the new society.

Numerous studies have shown how ethnic networks provided important resources for immigrants wishing to obtain information on business opportunities.<sup>44</sup> Business skills and on-site training are also obtainable through informal ethnic networks.<sup>45</sup> Finally, access to co-ethnic labor for employers is regarded as another advantage of ethnic networks.<sup>46</sup> However, as the mobility trends of young Korean migrants and the ways in which they get information and incorporate into the new society have changed significantly, the resources and networks that in the past were so valuable seem to have lost their previous function. Although the ethnic community still performs essential functions for new immigrants seeking jobs or starting new businesses, today's new Korean immigrant entrepreneurs in Frankfurt rarely mentioned ethnic resources or co-ethnic help as a motivation to enter the business. Compared to early-stage Korean immigrants from previous decades elsewhere, the function of the ethnic community in

<sup>43</sup>Dae Young Kim, "Leaving the Ethnic Economy: The Rapid Integration of Second-Generation Korean Americans in New York," in *Becoming New Yorkers: Ethnographies of the New Second Generation*, eds. Philip Kasinitz, John H. Mollenkopf, and Mary C. Waters (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2004); Jihye Kim and Sunhee Koo, "From Father to Son: 1.5- and Second-Generation Korean Argentines and Ethnic Entrepreneurship in the Argentine Garment Industry," *Review of Korean Studies* 20, no. 2 (2017).

<sup>44</sup>Light, "Immigrant and Ethnic Enterprise"; Illsoo, Kim, *New Urban Immigrants: The Korean Community in New York* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981); Kwang Chung Kim and Won Moo Hurh, "Ethnic Resources Utilization of Korean Immigrant Entrepreneurs in the Chicago Minority Area," *International Migration Review* 19, no. 19 (1985); Min, *Caught in the Middle*.

<sup>45</sup>Kim and Hurh, "Ethnic Resources"; Light and Bonacich, *Immigrant Entrepreneurs*; Waldinger, Aldrich, and Ward, *Ethnic Entrepreneurs*.

<sup>46</sup>Kim and Hurh, "Ethnic Resources"; Waldinger, Aldrich, and Ward, *Ethnic Entrepreneurs*.

Frankfurt seems to now be limited to Korean entrepreneurs wanting to sell their businesses to other Koreans, thus providing eventual business opportunities.

### *Korean food for local people and low barriers to entry*

One of the particular features of Korean restaurants in Frankfurt is the distinction between two different types: one targeting Korean customers in Eschborn, the Korean neighborhood, and the other targeting non-Korean local people in and around the city center. Until recently, Korean food was unknown to people in Frankfurt, and Korean restaurants outside the Korean neighborhood were few and far between. As the popularity of Korean food is still a very recent phenomenon in Frankfurt, the market targeting locals still offers good niches and opportunities for those who want to enter the sector.

Among my eight interviewees, all of whom ran Korean restaurants around the city center, three had previous experience as chefs or restaurant owners in the same sector, including one who had planned for opening a restaurant prior to her departure from Korea. For the others it was their first time working in the food industry, as described by this owner:

We sell only fried chicken, so it was easy for us to run this business, even though we have no previous experience. It was not difficult to cook or to develop a new menu either. The previous owner taught us how to operate this business, for instance, where to purchase good ingredients. We've also learned a lot while running the business. As we know what Korean chicken restaurants in Korea offer it was not difficult to develop our menu. (Interview 1)

As this interviewee indicates, the fact that they are Korean and know Korean food well is an important factor in their competitive advantage in running a Korean restaurant compared to non-Koreans. Even without previous experience they had some interest in food and liked cooking, an element in their decision to engage in the Korean restaurant business. An interesting point I noted through my interviewees is that those with no previous experience in the food industry tend to offer only one type of dish, such as fried chicken or bibimbab, or a limited menu, while those with experience offer a greater diversity of options. Similar comments were repeated in the interviews with the other restaurant owners. One made an interesting observation in terms of her easy entry into the Korean restaurant sector targeting non-Korean locals in Frankfurt:

“There are two types of Korean restaurants in Frankfurt, depending on the target customers. As you know, the Korean restaurants in Eschborn, where Korean immigrants and companies are concentrated, are targeting Koreans. This means you have to know how to cook very well to make authentic Korean foods like the restaurants in Korea, and the competition is much more severe. The dishes that I make are very popular and people like them, but they are only for locals. I adapt many local ingredients and recipes for my dishes. As a person

who never had any previous experience [at running a Korean restaurant] I can only sell my food to locals. I know it's not for Koreans." (Interview 4)

As this interview suggests, among my interviewees as well as many Koreans who live in Frankfurt, there has been a clear distinction between Korean restaurants in and around the city center targeting locals and those in the Korean neighborhood targeting Koreans. In fact, several of my interviewees thought that many of the restaurants targeting non-Korean locals are more "fusion style," offering "Germanized" or "Westernized" Korean foods rather than "authentic" Korean foods, as Korean food is quite new to Frankfurt and locals do not know how to distinguish "authentic" Korean food from "less authentic." At the same time, those restaurants targeting non-Koreans provide a better niche market, since fewer skills are needed in terms of types of menus and culinary expectations compared to those offering "authentic" Korean foods aimed at Koreans, and they can also build a broader customer base. In particular, as the market among non-Koreans is still nascent it has major potential for Korean immigrants wanting to start a business.

The structure of opportunities model<sup>47</sup> pinpointed market positions and dimensions as important factors in immigrant business start-ups in a particular sector. While most previous theories focus on the supply side of immigrant entrepreneurs, such as ethno-cultural practices and preferences, ethnic networks and institutions, and ethnic and class resources, the structure of opportunities model emphasizes the demand side. According to this model, opportunities provided by local markets, neighborhoods, and sectors are the key gateways into business.<sup>48</sup> These new restaurant owners are Koreans and very familiar with Korean cuisine, and their ethnic and cultural background provides them with an advantage. The fact that the market for Korean cuisine targeting non-Korean local customers in Frankfurt is still quite open and easy to enter provides another advantage for new entrepreneurs, especially those without previous experience. As Waldinger<sup>49</sup> argued, it is not only the socio-cultural features of immigrants but also the economic environment in which they operate that are critical in the initiation of self-employment; this was indeed the case for new Korean restaurant businesses targeting local customers. This "integrative model"<sup>50</sup> took account of both group characteristics and the structure of opportunities, combining market conditions and access to ownership, such as business vacancies and competition for these. Numerous researchers have used this integrative approach as a means of advancing the understanding of ethnic entrepreneurial strategies.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>47</sup>Waldinger, *Eye of the Needle*; Waldinger, "Structural Opportunity"; Waldinger, Aldrich, and Ward, *Ethnic Entrepreneurs*.

<sup>48</sup>Waldinger, *Eye of the Needle*; Waldinger, Aldrich, and Ward, *Ethnic Entrepreneurs*.

<sup>49</sup>Waldinger, *Eye of the Needle*; Waldinger, "Structural Opportunity."

<sup>50</sup>Waldinger, *Eye of the Needle*; Waldinger, "Structural Opportunity."

<sup>51</sup>Rath, *Unraveling the Rag Trade*.

## *Hallyu and Hansik*

As part of the spread of *Hallyu* across the globe, Korean cultural products such as Korean cinema, television dramas, music, and food have attracted significant attention and interest, and the consumer base outside Korea for these has increased dramatically. I asked my interviewees how this recent phenomenon has influenced the set-up and running of their businesses.

Of course, taking over this restaurant was a huge decision for us, as we were trained as musicians and wanted a performance career. However, working here as an employee I saw the huge popularity and potential of Korean food and culture. Although we have some Korean customers, most are local people, including both Germans and immigrants. They come here specifically as they want to eat Korean food. It's not just a random choice. Some of them say "annyeonghaseyo" [hello] and like talking about Korean culture. The popularity of Korean culture is growing really quickly. When I came to Germany seven years ago, many people didn't know anything about Korean culture or food, but it's become really popular these days. It's what influenced my decision to change my career and run this restaurant. [...] On our Instagram we post many pictures related to Korea or Korean culture, and we would like to move to a larger space or open another restaurant." (Interview 1)

For this interviewee, the main reason to take over the Korean restaurant was to be able to settle in Germany. However, the recent interest in *Hallyu* played a critical role in her assessment of the potential growth of the business when she took it over in 2021. In particular, as this restaurant sells only Korean-style fried chicken, the owner links its potential for success to the popularity of K-culture, both of which are trendy among young people. The owner of another Korean restaurant whose main clientele is young local people has a similar view on the expansion of K-culture:

It was merely a personal decision. When I ran the Korean restaurant in the city center, our opening hours were very limited, especially for dinner, only from 6 to 8 p.m., so it was hard to make the rent. I wanted to have more customers. One day I travelled to another city and visited a very popular pojangmacha-style restaurant [a place selling snacks and drinks open late into the night] which is open until 4 a.m. I liked the idea of running longer hours, so I opened a similar style of restaurant. We usually close at 12 midnight, and on weekends at 2 a.m. [...] In the last five or six years the number of Korean restaurants has increased significantly, and I think the influence of *Hallyu* has been a factor. Many young people, including Chinese students, live in this neighborhood, and they are my main customers. [Q. What is the proportion of Korean and non-Korean customers?] I would say a third Koreans, a third Chinese or other Asians, and a third Germans. (Interview 5)

The owner of this restaurant was a professional chef in Korea. He first ran a Korean restaurant offering a variety of types of Asian food in the city center. In 2015 he sold that business and opened another in an area not near the city center. When he opened it, he did not consider the popularity of *Hallyu* as an important factor for business growth and success. Instead, the decision was mostly

personal, including his preference for an area with cheaper rent, as the interview above suggests. However, over time running the restaurant he has seen the expansion of K-culture, which in the end has played a role in its eventual success and further development.

The clientele varies between restaurants depending on each's menu and style. For some restaurant owners it is apparent that some of their customers are very interested in Korea or Korean culture and also want to practice speaking Korean, especially for restaurants targeting younger people, as they have more customers who are interested in K-culture. Other owners did not believe their restaurant was affected by the growing interest in K-culture even if they were very aware of the phenomenon.

For this research I often visited Korean restaurants in Frankfurt to have meals. Whenever I did so I tried to strike up conversations with the customers around my table. On one occasion I had the chance to chat with customers at four tables over the dinner hour at a restaurant that is very popular among young locals, with the permission of the owner. While there was one customer who liked K-pop, the others were not aware of or interested in K-pop or K-drama. Instead, they professed to having started going to Korean restaurants because they had been introduced to Korean cuisine by friends or colleagues and they liked it. On other occasions, I met customers who were very interested in K-drama and had wanted to try Korean food they saw featured on screen.

My conversations and interviews with customers clearly show that, contrary to my hypothesis, they are not necessarily fans or consumers of the K-culture entertainment industry and simply enjoy Korean food as an independent cultural item. Certainly, the recent popularity of K-pop, K-film, and K-drama is an element of the growth of the Korean restaurant sector, but in the case of Korean restaurants in Frankfurt, it was not the crucial factor. The cosmopolitan lifestyle in Frankfurt is also favorable to the expansion of Korean food, with many local people wanting to try different foods from other countries, especially Asian countries.

Whether influenced by other elements of K-culture or not, the growing popularity of Korean food is a recent phenomenon. Although K-culture was not a major factor in these Korean restaurant owners' decision to open their business, it is a factor that many restaurant owners are aware of and should not overlook in terms of their restaurant's further growth and success. This kind of new and particular phenomenon has not been explained through existing conceptual frameworks of immigrant entrepreneurship, none of which, including the concept of mixed embeddedness, take into account transnational cultural influence. Together with the contemporary migration and mobility patterns of young Korean people, these new Korean cultural trends and shifts should be incorporated into studies of immigrant entrepreneurship beyond the mere application of existing models.



### *Beyond the “K-food” label*

As discussed in the previous section, not all Korean restaurant owners in Frankfurt think their businesses are connected to the recent popularity of *Hallyu*. For instance, some Korean restaurants target particular customers based on current views about foods that are “healthy.” In her interview, the owner of a restaurant which sells only various types of bibimbab said:

Our restaurant is located in an area where there are many financial firms. We are only open from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m., selling only bibimbab and targeting only those who work at these firms in the area. When we started the restaurant in 2017, Korean culture was not as popular as now. However, many people already knew bibimbab as healthy food. We can see that the popularity of Korean culture has been growing a lot in recent years, but that doesn’t influence my restaurant that much. Although the number of customers who ask about Korea or say Korean words such as “annyeonghaseyo” [hello] or “gomapseumnida” [thank you] has been growing, it is our location and the particularities of the restaurant, such as the opening hours and the type of food, that are the driving factors in our business. However, I can see the potential of Korean food and restaurants in Germany. In particular, as we sell only bibimbab, which is very easy to prepare and sell, I think turning it into a franchise restaurant would be a good option. (Interview 3)

This restaurant thus sells only bibimbab over the lunch period in the financial district, and the popularity of Korean culture was not a factor in the owner’s decision to open the business. Most of her customers are employees in offices located near the restaurant. The owner believes that the option of bibimbab is attractive to customers who are after an easy option for a “healthy” lunch and the fact that bibimbab is Korean is not that important. For this restaurant owner, it suits her to open the restaurant only over the lunch period targeting office workers and avoid having to work longer hours.

I also visited a Korean vegan restaurant near the city center. The restaurant offered a few dishes only, including vegan adaptations of bibimbap, kimchi bowls, and mandu, together with coffee, tea, and cakes. The owner of the restaurant pointed out that the number of vegans in Frankfurt has been growing significantly in recent years. She opened the restaurant considering that the vegan market was ripe for a Korean menu, as many Korean dishes use vegetables as the main ingredients. In considering local demand she hit upon a good niche market which the other Korean restaurants had not targeted, and indeed has found success. At the same time, she believes that her business is serving to introduce the Korean food to non-Korean locals. Although the restaurant’s main clientele is people who live in the neighborhood, the owner is very aware of the current popularity of K-culture and *Hallyu* in Frankfurt and is thinking about how to eventually capitalize on this when in targeting a clientele for her next business.

Previous research<sup>52</sup> shows that for new immigrant entrepreneurs low-barrier markets are important. Rath<sup>53</sup> further claimed that the involvement of specific ethnic groups within a business sector is not just the result of the presence or absence of entry barriers to those markets. The prospects for ethnic businesses are certainly contingent on how new entrepreneurs maneuver, go upmarket, or break into new markets, as the circumstances, conditions, and features of the markets in which entrepreneurs function over time is also important.<sup>54</sup> In this sense, the power of the agency of immigrants should be taken into account as a substantial factor, since they put in the effort to identify and break into good market niches in setting up and developing their businesses that reach beyond the usual ways of running Korean restaurant businesses.

## Conclusion

In comparison with other larger cities in Europe, such as London and Paris, the expansion of Korean restaurants has taken place very recently in Frankfurt. As this study suggests, diverse reasons and factors have affected the decisions and motivations to open and develop Korean restaurant businesses in an intricate way. In my interviews, there were no cases where the restaurant owner mentioned only a single factor or reason behind their decision. Individual restaurant owners over the course of their interview pointed to diverse factors influencing the process of initiating and developing their businesses.

Although starting up a business depends on highly personal and individual considerations, decisions, motivations, and decision-making processes are also the products of complex sets of factors and interactions in both the home and the host countries. In the case of Korean restaurant owners in Frankfurt, factors facilitating their entry into the Korean restaurant sector include governmental visa and settlement schemes, market conditions, low barriers to entry, and local people's perception of Korean foods as healthy. Previous studies that used the concept of mixed embeddedness mainly focused on market conditions and on the wider social, economic, and political contexts such as government policies and regulations, income distribution, structural factors of the financial system, available technology, and welfare system constraints. In this study I applied this concept more broadly, incorporating new dimensions such as cultural and social contexts of both the home and host countries, cultural and social trends among local people, immigrant movements and flows, policies, and regulations related to migration and settlement schemes.

<sup>52</sup>Waldinger, *Eye of the Needle*; Rath, *Unraveling the Rag Trade*.

<sup>53</sup>Rath, *Unraveling the Rag Trade*.

<sup>54</sup>Rath, *Unraveling the Rag Trade*.

This research has taken account of the recent increasing number of Korean immigrants in Germany, especially young Koreans. Unlike Korean immigrants in other countries in the past, who set up businesses relying heavily on ethnic networks and resources,<sup>55</sup> for these recent immigrants in Germany, co-ethnic networks and resources are not critical factors in the establishment of their businesses. Instead, they mobilize and rely more on their individual networks, capacities, and resources – a finding that differs from those of previous studies. They learn the local language more quickly and adapt to local social and cultural contexts more easily, as it is much easier to access information on the local market and other aspects before and during their migration and they tend to have more exposure to the local language and culture. The function of the Korean ethnic community has thus significantly narrowed and in the case of Korean restaurants has become limited to specific cases, such as taking over existing businesses or looking for employees. In only few cases did they mainly rely on kinship and friendship, primarily in the early stages of migration and setting up their businesses.

In terms of the current popularity of Korean culture, although all of the Korean restaurant owners are aware of it, it was not the main factor in their decision to set up their businesses. My conversations and interviews with the restaurant owners and customers clearly show that, contrary to my hypothesis, the customers are not necessarily fans or consumers of other elements of K-culture, such as K-drama, K-film, or K-pop, and they enjoy Korean food independently of these. Frankfurters' cosmopolitan lifestyle and mindset has also acted in favor of a growing enjoyment of Korean food unconnected to Korean media culture. So far, no conceptual framework around immigrant entrepreneurship, including mixed embeddedness, has taken into account a rising international cultural influence of the home country alongside an increasing immigrant population from that country. Thus, it will be important to observe and incorporate the new sociocultural trends and shifts posed by the case of an expanding Korean restaurant sector to hone the existing frameworks.

It is generally assumed that products of Korean media culture, such K-pop, K-drama, and K-film, are produced in Korea and distributed unidirectionally overseas in a straightforward manner. However, Yoon<sup>56</sup> notes that diasporic Korean youth, as linguistic and cultural translators, also contribute to the rise of *Hallyu* by producing paratexts (e.g., fan-created subtitles), participating in digital media-driven translation processes, and constructing overseas *Hallyu* infrastructure (e.g., venture companies specializing in K-drama streaming services). In a similar way, Korean restaurant owners in Frankfurt contribute to producing,

<sup>55</sup>Light, "Immigrant and Ethnic Enterprise"; Light and Bonacich, *Immigrant Entrepreneurs*; Light and Rosenstein, *Race, Ethnicity*; Light and Gold, *Ethnic Economies*; Yoon, "Changing Significance"; Yoon, *On My Own*.

<sup>56</sup>Kyong Yoon, "Diasporic Korean Audiences of Hallyu in Vancouver, Canada," *Korea Journal* 60, no. 1 (2020).

distributing, expanding, and shaping trends around Korean food and culinary culture in the host society, but in even more active ways. It is important to take into consideration that the Korean restaurants and the food they offer are run and produced locally. In fact, although the growth in popularity of Korean food and restaurants goes side by side with the increased adoption of other K-culture phenomena, it is virtually impossible to produce Korean food and expand its consumption without the intervention of local restaurants and Korean immigrants. Because of this particular feature of food, Korean immigrants play an essential role as agents who deliver Korean culture to and interact with local people.

Previous conceptual frameworks on immigrant business have focused mainly on the disadvantages that migrants face in the host society, on the role of ethnic resources and networks, and on the social, economic, and political environments in the host society. These have not emphasized the role of immigrants as agents or the interaction processes between immigrants and local people. The social formation process of transforming themselves and being transformed in the new host context shows the power of social agency enacted “within webs of power linked to the nation-state and civil society.”<sup>57</sup> Thus, social agents are always engaged in and act in response to the multiplicity of social relations in which they are intricately entangled, and agency is culturally and socially created.<sup>58</sup> Thus, it is critical to explore and examine how immigrants navigate and explore their resources as a function of multiple social relations and conditions, as in the case of Korean restaurant owners in Frankfurt. With the incorporation of this particular role of immigrants into my data analysis, this research enriches existing conceptual frameworks and adds to knowledge about Korean migration in Germany and immigrant entrepreneurship in Europe.

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<sup>57</sup>Aihwa Ong, “Cultural Citizenship as Subject-Making: Immigrants Negotiate Racial and Cultural Boundaries in the United States,” *Current Anthropology* 37, no. 5 (1996): 738.

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