In the era of globalization, as goods, capital, information, and technology move transnationally, so do people. In the past, only a small number of people were able to experience living abroad, but now millions of people are living and working abroad. Historically, foreigners who lived in Korea for a long time were generally diplomats, expatriates from foreign companies, US forces, and overseas Chinese. Recently, the number of foreign residents has increased sharply. Moreover, many foreign residents tend to settle down and spend the rest of their lives in Korea, changing Korean society to a multicultural society.

The map shows both the number and origin of foreigners that visited Korea in 2017. About five million visitors from China, and another 3.5 million from Japan, visited Korea in 2017. Chinese and American visitors were about 9.8 million each. The number of visitors from the other countries was less than 0.5 million. More visitors are currently coming to Korea from geographically close countries, and the number of visitors decreases as distance increases. An exception to this pattern is the United States, with close countries, and the number of visitors decreases as distance increases.

On the 2017 map depicting the departure of Koreans and the entry of foreigners, we can see increased personal exchanges across the national boundary. As of June 2017, the Korean government had signed visa-free exceptions agreements with 186 countries around the world to facilitate personal exchange. Sixty-nine countries have signed agreements to exempt general passport holders from visas. Also, the Korean government has presented these personal exchanges through visa waiver programs with many countries. Koreans are free to travel to 59 countries without a visa, while foreigners from 46 countries may enter Korea without a visa, even though they may be special regulations in some countries.

The map also shows the foreigners who take extended stays, where they are from, and why they have come to Korea. We can find the purpose of their stays through their visas, which are classified into eight types: A type (Diplomacy, Official Missions, Conventions/Agreements), B type (Visa Exemption, Tourist/ Transit), C type (Temporary Journalism, Short-Term General, Short-Term Employment), D type (Cultural Arts, Study Abroad, Industrial Training, General Training, Journalism, Religious Affairs, Supervisory Intra-Company Transfer, Corporate Investment, Trade Management, 3-6 Session), E type (Partnership, Foreign Language Institute, Research, Technology Transfer, Professional Employment, Arts and Performances, Special Occupation, Nonprofessional Employment, Nadal Crew), F type (Family, Visit, Residental, Dependent Family, Overseas Korean, Permanent Resident, Sponsor of A Korean National), G type (Miscellaneous), and 1 type (Working Holiday, Working Visa). The largest number of foreigners entering the country on a long-term stay visa come from China, with about 157,000 people, followed by Thailand with 72,000, Vietnam with 45,000, the United States with 20,000, Russia with 18,000, and China with 18,000.

As of 2017, the number of foreign residents had reached 1.86 million, accounting for 3.0% of the total population. In 1990, only 45,000 people, or approximately 0.11% of the total population, were of foreign origins. Along with quantitative growth, the socioeconomic characteristics of foreign migrants also changed. First, the country of origin diversified, and its composition changed. In 1990 alone, Thais accounted for almost half of the total foreigners, followed by Americans and Japanese. Three countries accounted for about 90% of foreign residents. However, now, more than half of the foreign residents are Chinese, followed by Vietnamese, Thai, American, and Filipinos. The surge in Chinese, mainly composed of Korean-Chinese (Cheongsowon), is a result of a Chinese government policy that encourages the match of the workforce and economic reform. The Korean government’s policy of prioritizing the recruitment of overseas Koreans in order to mitigate the labor shortage also impacted this. Korea and China have worked together since 1992 to build and improve diplomatic relations.

There have also been significant changes in terms of migration policies. In the past, the majority of foreign migrants, except for Overseas Chinese, were diplomats, university representatives of foreign firms and their families, but since the 1990s, unskilled labor migrant workers, marriage migrants, and international students have been the main types of migrants. In particular, due to an imbalance in the male-to-female ratio that impacts marriage prospects for men and the demand for service personal such as domestic childcare assistants and caregivers, many women have migrated, although fewer have than men. The large influx of overseas Koreans, mainly Korean-Chinese, and North Korean defectors in a special characteristic of Korean society, unique from other developed countries.

| Human Exchange |
| Departure and Entry |
| Foreigner Entry | Long - Term Staying Foreigner and No-visa Agreement Nations |

The graph shows the trends of Koreans who go abroad and foreigners who visit Korea. Until 1968, both numbers were less than 5,000. The number of foreign citizens reached 100,000 in 1975, 1 million in 1980, 3 million in 2005, and 10 million in 2010. In 2010, approximately 14.6 million people visited Korea. For a long time, foreign arrivals exceeded Korean departures. Until 1980, the number of foreign arrivals was double the number of Korean departures. This trend was reversed in 1990 when the Korean government authorized more overseas travel. Since then, Korean departures have gradually increased, except during the economic recession in the late 1990s and the late 2000s. In 2018, the number of Koreans who travelled abroad was approximately 28 million, which is twice the number of foreign residents.

The pie chart shows the main countries the tourists visit, with Korea as the most popular destination, followed by the United States, Japan, China, and Russia. In contrast, the pie chart shows the main countries they visit, with Korea as the most popular destination, followed by China, the United States, Japan, and Russia.
The geographical distribution of foreign residents in Korea is uneven. Looking at the national distribution by their country of origin, Korean-Chinese are concentrated in south-eastern part of Seoul and industrial districts in Gyeonggi-do. Gyeonggi-do, Gyeongbuk-do and Gyeongsangbuk-do. On the other hand, non-Korean-Chinese, including a relatively high proportion of international students, and professional workers. The purpose of staying, correlated with the country of origin, tends to determine where they live in Korea.

Among the foreign residents, males account for approximately 90% of all foreign residents and females account for approximately 10% (However, in Seoul, where low-order service industries are heavily developed, the proportion of women among foreign residents is higher). In rural areas, where the proportion of marriage immigrants is high, the proportion of women is also higher than in other areas.

As of 2017, there were about 1.48 million immigrant workers in Korea, accounting for 26.7% of all foreign residents. In the past, most foreign workers were professionals, including professors, foreign language educators, researchers, and technical guides. In the 1990s, however, there was a large influx of unskilled laborers in the manufacturing and construction industries, which nevertheless resulted from a workforce shortage due to rising wages and decreasing Korean workers. Currently, the foreign employment permit system, introduced in 2004, is a system that allows domestic companies to legally hire laborers from countries that have signed a workforce introduction contract, guaranteeing equal treatment with domestic workers. On the other hand, the visiting employee system was introduced in 2007 to give priority to overseas Korean workers. Most of the workers who come in through the program are Korean-Chinese.

Professional foreign workers, mainly from developed countries, live in large cities and often concentrate in a neighborhood by country of origin. In Seoul, the French live in Seorae village in Seongdong-gu, and the Japanese live in Ichon-dong in Yongsan-gu. On the other hand, foreign workers in unskilled labor jobs live in residential areas near industrial complexes. For example, the Wando-dong in Ansan-si, Myung-dong in Namyangju-si, Sungdong-dong in Iljik-dong, and Dalseo-gu in Daegu-si. Korean-Chinese generally work in the service industry, such as catering, tourism, wholesale and retailing, and often reside in low-cost residential areas in large cities. In the case of Seoul, Gwangjing-dong, Gangnam-gu, Dongnae-dong in Guro-gu, and Daejeon-dong in Yuseong-gu are popular choices.
Marriage Immigrants

Distribution of Marriage Immigrants (2017)

A notable change with the influx of foreign workers is the increase in marriage immigrants. Marriage immigrants are not new, but since the mid-1990s, Asian immigrant women have been arriving in larger numbers than before. The map shows foreign residents who have married and have been married to Koreans, without regard to their status of residence, by gender and country of origin. As of 2017, the total number of marriage immigrants was about 160,000, and more than half lived in the Seoul metropolitan area (25.4% of Gyeonggi-do, 14.0% of Seoul, and 6.1% of Incheon). More than half of them are under six years of age (51.7%). However, significant numbers of them are school-aged (16 – 18 years old). As a result, efforts are being made throughout school classrooms. As of 2017, the number of multicultural families is about 184,515. A ratio of children of these multicultural families is about 184,515 males per 100 females. The area of residence is concentrated in the Seoul metropolitan area (25.4% of Gyeonggi-do, 14.0% of Seoul, and 6.1% of Incheon). More than half of them are under six years of age (51.7%). However, significant numbers of them are school-age: 36.8% are elementary school age (7 – 12 years old), 7.1% are middle school age (13 – 18 years old), and 4.4% are high schoolage (16 – 18 years old). As a result, efforts are being made throughout Korean society to promote a multicultural consciousness that understands and respects cultures other than the culture of one’s group.

Multicultural Family Support Centers

Korea’s transition to a multicultural society can also be seen in school classrooms. As of 2017, the number of multicultural family support centers nationwide to operate various programs such as Korean language instruction, interpretation and translation services, and cultural events for stable settlement, well-being, and social integration of multicultural families.

Children of Multicultural Families

Distribution of Children of Multicultural Families

Marriage immigrants not only change their family composition to build multicultural families, but also settle and naturalize in Korea, so they are of great social importance in terms of transitioning Korea into a multicultural society. The government has established 218 Multicultural Family Support Centers nationwide to operate various programs such as Korean language instruction, interpretation and translation services, and cultural events for stable settlement, well-being, and social integration of multicultural families.

Nationality Trends for Children of Multicultural Families

Regional Distribution of Children of Multicultural Families

Note: This map is based on the statistics on the children of marriage migrants, naturalized Korean citizens, and others who were born in Korea or came to Korea before the age of eight.