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## On This Topic



# Korean Migration in the Global South: *Contextualizing Migration Trajectories and Complexities*

Yonson AHN and Jihye KIM

The concept of the Global North and Global South is used to group countries along a North–South divide in a global context, according to socioeconomic and political features. The Global South is generally understood to encompass those countries that are less economically developed and is employed to identify regions with developing countries within Latin America, Asia, Africa, and Oceania. It is often associated with terms such as “Third World,” “peripheral,” “underdeveloped,” “marginal,” or “unconventional,” as most of these countries are low-income and often politically or culturally marginalized, relative to the other side of the divide, that is, the countries of the Global North, often defined as the developed countries.

Migration studies have traditionally tended to emphasize migration from the Global South to the Global North, largely in North America and Europe, especially labor migration to a higher income country, and

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associated issues, such as the drivers of migration, integration, and the dynamics of transnationalism, have largely been examined from this angle (Nawyn 2016). Empirical studies as well as theoretical debates in migration scholarship have been heavily focused on issues of integration, migration policy and management in migrant receiving counties in the Global North. In recent decades, with some economies in the Global South growing quickly and many countries in the region experiencing increasingly high net immigration, interest in migration through and to these countries has been increasing (Czaika and de Haas 2015; Rugunanan and Xulu-Gama 2022). Even so, most theoretical and methodological development and empirical analysis has been based on studies focusing on South–North migration. Given this South–North theoretical emphasis, the question arises as to its applicability to other migration patterns, such as South–South or North–South (Nawyn 2016). As Stephanie Nawyn (2016) convincingly observes, it is necessary to analyze how migration patterns and the migration experiences of both migrants and the host population vary within the Global South in order to advance theories of migration that more fully encompass human movement across borders.

The case of South Korean (hereafter Korean) migration in the Global South has been no exception to these general trends in international migration studies. Because of the significant number of Korean im/migrants and their remarkable contribution to the societies and economies of host countries, Korean migration has attracted ample scholarly attention. However, relevant studies have focused mainly on countries in the Northern Hemisphere, especially the United States, China, Japan, and the former Soviet Union, which represent a longer history and a larger scale of movement, and theoretical debates in Korean migration studies have been developed primarily through empirical studies conducted in post-industrial countries, in particular in North America. Only a few studies (Kim and Koo 2017; Kim 2020, 2021) have addressed Korean migration in the Global South, and Korean im/migration in those regions has been understudied in the body of Korean diaspora literature to date. This regional bias has resulted in a major research gap in the field of Korean migration studies. This special issue aims to bridge that gap by featuring studies carried out in the Global South.

**Table 1.** Numbers of South Koreans in the Global North and Global South (1995–2021)

	1995	2005	2011	2015	2017	2019	2021
Global North	5,049 (96.6%)	6,272 (94.5%)	6,598 (91.9%)	6,558 (91.3%)	6,755 (90.9%)	6,786 (90.6%)	6,735 (91.9%)
Global South	180 (3.4%)	366 (5.5%)	578 (8.1%)	628 (8.7%)	676 (9.1%)	707 (9.4%)	589 (8.0%)
Total	5,229 (100%)	6,638 (100%)	7,176 (100%)	7,186 (100%)	7,431 (100%)	7,493 (100%)	7,324 (100%)

Sources: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Korea (2022), Tongilwon (1997)  
Note: Unit is 1000 persons.

As shown in Table 1, based on the data from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Korea, the number of Korean migrants both in the Global North and South has increased. Korean migration in the Global South has a relatively short history and is on a small scale compared to the Global North. Since 2011, the portion of Koreans in the Global South among total Koreans living abroad ranges from 8 to 9.4 percent and had been on the rise before the COVID-19 pandemic broke out. They reside primarily in South Asia and the Pacific islands, followed by Latin and South America, with the fewest in Africa.

The first wave of Korean emigration began in the mid-19th century, when Koreans crossed over into China in search of unused land to cultivate, before spreading into Northeast China (Manchuria), Japan, Russia, and the United States in the first half of the 20th century in response to a series of wars, colonialism, and the eventual partitioning of the Korean Peninsula. The 1960s was a critical period in the history of South Korean migration. Between 1965 and 1975, new flows of migrants left voluntarily for the US, South America, and Europe, a movement that continued on a large scale into the 1990s. This second wave of Korean migration reflected aspirations for the West, associated with modernity and industrial advancement and the promise of social and cultural mobility, for which many Koreans (as well as the Korean government) were striving at the time (Koo and Kim 2021; Ahn 2020, 2021). Many Korean migrants, especially in the 1960s and 1970s,

aspired to thrive economically as *guest workers* and middle-class immigrants (Koo and Kim 2021). In particular, middle-class Koreans who were unable to migrate to the US moved to Argentina or Brazil, which were seen as the developed countries of South America, with good economic conditions and living standards compared to the underdevelopment of their home country at the time. From the early 1990s, dubbed the “age of mobility” (Papademetriou 2007) and the “age of diasporas” (Bauman 2011, 429), international migration accelerated, and there was a marked increase in human movement and mobility internationally. Notably, after the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, the number of Korean emigrants again began to increase, as shown in Table 1, particularly to English-speaking countries for occupational and educational purposes. Many Koreans now go abroad to study, take up business positions, or seek employment independently, rather than to join family members. In this last stage, the destinations for Korean migrants have diversified to include new countries in Africa and Southeast Asia. Two articles in this special issue engage with the outcomes of the second wave of Korean migration to South America; three more focus on the experiences of Korean migrants in Southeast Asia and Africa in the third wave of Korean migration.

Despite the relatively short history and small scale of Korean migration in the Global South, there are many meaningful reasons for carrying out research in this area. First, driven by a pioneer spirit, the quest for better economic opportunities has been the main motivation for Korean immigrants in both the Global North and the Global South. However, the socio-economic circumstances in which Korean immigrants operate in the Global South are more complex. For instance, in Global South countries, the level of informality tends to be much higher, providing more niches and opportunities with low barriers to entry, good potential growth, and requiring less initial capital, although these same conditions could limit their further development and might affect their business negatively. Secondly, in the Global South there have been cases that emphasize a quest for better and higher-quality lifestyles rather than the pursuit solely of economic opportunities and progress, such as leisure or retirement migration, rarely observed in the Global North. In addition, economic and political instability

and the relatively high crime rate negatively impact Koreans' motivation to settle in these countries long term. Consequently, whereas Korean immigrants in the Global North pursue mainstream-oriented integration, those in the South find alternative routes and options and diversify their trajectories with high mobility. Those alternative routes include short-term temporary settlement, on-migration, and eventual re-migration back to the home country; alternatively, they find pathways for settling long term that eschew mainstream-oriented integration. Furthermore, the favorable economic status of Korean immigrants in these developing countries shapes different types of ethnic relations with the local people, as well as affecting the process of identity transformation. For instance, the particular social hierarchies in im/migrant-receiving countries of the Global North are central components in theories of im/migrant exclusion as these hierarchies very often revolve around ethnicity and race and influence im/migrants' sense of inclusion and ability to integrate (Nawyn 2016). New tools need to be developed to promote understanding of the complexity of these relationships in the Global South, rather than simply assuming that racial hierarchies in the Global South will reproduce those in the Global North. Finally, from the perspective of international migration studies, while there have been some studies focusing on people migrating between countries within the Global South (Castillo 2014; Han 2013; Kofman and Raghuram 2012; Lan 2015; Mathews and Yang 2012; Stock 2019; Vammen 2019; Winters and Izaguirre 2019; Zhou et al. 2016), examinations of cases of migration from the Global North to the Global South are rare. Thus, it is imperative to examine how subtle differences and variations in typical Global South contexts affect the shaping and re-shaping of their settlement and integration experiences, identity transformation, long-term plans, and trajectories, in comparison with those in the Global North.

Most studies on migration in the Global South have focused on South–South migration, which has tended to be driven by a desire for better economic, social, or political conditions. The first two cases of Korean communities in Argentina and Brazil in the 1960s and 1970s may be treated as South–South migration, from an extremely underdeveloped home country to a relatively better-off country. In the intervening fifty years the

economic situation of South Korea as compared to Argentina and Brazil has completely reversed, affecting migration and integration patterns. The last three case studies of Korean migration to Malaysia, Vietnam, and South Africa are typical instances of migration from the Global North to the Global South, which has been neither observed nor studied thoroughly in international migration studies. While demonstrating characteristic migration and settlement patterns of South–South and North–South movements and illuminating the interconnections between the South and North, it is important that a future migration research agenda be developed that both locates migration within the Global North/South divide and examines critically whether such a concept is the best way to describe the complex interrelationship between countries currently defined as being on either side of the divide.

Migrations through and to Global South countries share many of the features of migration through and to Global North countries, with a global interdependence and interconnectedness of economic and political systems that produces similar migration drivers and magnets across different migration steams (Nawyn 2016). The need and aspiration to seek out better economic opportunities, the ability to travel, and the distribution of information about where to go and how to get there have become similar across different parts of the globe (Nawyn 2016). Explicit comparisons between Global North and South migrations appear difficult to make due to ostensible dissimilarities between the two, and scholars have tended to avoid them, assuming that the two are starkly contrasting. Yet with careful analysis such comparisons can be fruitful, with existing North-based research potentially shedding light on Southern phenomena, even if some significant differences make Global North theories of migration are inappropriate for application to the Global South (Nawyn 2016). Rather than contrasting and separating the migration phenomena into the two geopolitical spaces—the Global North and South—we would like to offer insight into the differences, congruences, and entanglements between Global North and South migrations through empirical studies of Korean migration.

The articles in this special issue explore case studies of Korean migration that illuminate similarities and differences between North and

South while making up for deficiencies in the existing theories developed in the Global North and proposing new guidelines for research on the Global South. Providing Korean migration experiences through and into the Global South to migration literature allows us to enhance existing theories that scholars in migration studies have developed to explain motivation, destination, settlement, integration, and onward migration processes. Moreover, unlike the Global South–North migration where a wide variety of data is available, for their empirical analyses the authors in this special issue have produced unique data from narratives of migrants in the Global South based on their lived experiences. While examining specific examples in cases from South America, Southeast Asia, and South Africa, the case studies in this special issue identify particular issues and problems beyond those existing conceptual frameworks and analyze them from more global and comparative perspectives.

The first two articles, by Jihye Kim and Dennis Choi, address Korean businesses in the garment industry in Argentina and Brazil. Korean migration to both countries began in the early 1960s, and the settlement and integration patterns of Korean communities in both countries have been quite similar. Since the late 1960s, Korean communities in both countries have been intensively involved in the garment industry. At first engaging in machine sewing and knitting or door-to-door sales, they quickly gained an economic foothold in the industry, eventually expanding their businesses. These days, many Korean immigrants in both countries run wholesale garment businesses operating both the production and distribution processes.

Jihye Kim's article addresses Korean garment businesses in Argentina with a particular focus on informality, which is common across numerous aspects of economic and social life in developing countries, affecting both locals and immigrants. Extended market informality created an opportunity structure for the entry, consolidation, and concentration of ethnic Korean businesses in the sector. The Korean community in Argentina is at an important crossroads. While Koreans dominate the lucrative semiformal wholesale garment market and have the capital and the know-how to move up into the more formal, first-line brands, many are hesitant to make the



transition, even though the community is well-aware that this hinders their long-term integration into Argentine society. Since the semiformal operations of Korean garment businesses have been shaped within an environment of loose government control and rampant corruption in the sector, they reflect a contextual response to the complex social, economic, and political circumstances of a developing country in the Global South, more than an ethnically based style of management or decision-making. By paying particular attention to how semiformal management not only denies them the opportunities for advancement available to larger and formal companies, but also hinders their long-term integration into Argentine society, the author casts light on the distinctive conditions and integration patterns of the Global South and North.

Unlike second-generation Koreans in the Global North, who have tended to reject the small-business preferences of their parents and to pursue professional careers and achieve mainstream-oriented mobility, Korean Brazilians over succeeding generations have continued to choose work within the garment industry. In the specific context that reflects the Global South, Dennis Choi explores how the use of ethnic resources has changed over time. In the early stage of settlement and business development, first-generation Korean immigrants depended heavily on co-ethnic networks and resources to obtain information on business or employment because of the language barrier and lack of familiarity with the host society. The informal Korean rotating saving and credit system of *gye*, post-dated checks, and other types of credit were frequently used among co-ethnics to start or expand their businesses. Over time, this dependence on ethnic resources and networks has diminished as they also had negative effects, and the scale of Korean businesses has increased significantly. While illustrating how second-generation Korean Brazilians utilize ethnic resources and networks in a different way, establishing the Brazilian Garment Industry Association and circulating information at a broader community level rather than at a narrower and denser individual level, Choi's study reflects the specific circumstances and integration experiences of second-generation Koreans in a Global South country.

The next two articles present cases of Korean migration in Southeast

Asia. The first focuses on a Korean ethnic enclave in Hanoi, with its high concentration of Korean residential and commercial areas that service Korean sojourners, mainly expatriates sent by Korean companies who maintain strong cultural identities and consumption patterns in relation to the home country. The second shows the ways in which Korean immigrants adapt to the host culture and interact with the local population in Malaysia, with regard to slow temporality, a distinctive cultural difference with the home country. Although Vietnam and Malaysia are in the same region and the Korean migration into both started in similar periods, the two case studies provide clear examples of how interaction with locals and the degrees and patterns of integration vary significantly depending on the motivations and backgrounds of immigrants.

Kong Chong Ho, Hae Young Yun, and Jeehun Kim illustrate consumption patterns in retail shops in one of Hanoi's Korean ethnic enclaves, My Dinh, dominated by temporary sojourners rather than permanent settlers. Significant direct Korean foreign investment in Vietnam created a particular type of global production chain between the two countries, resulting in a high flow of skilled and managerial Korean workers into Vietnam. As these workers temporarily relocated to Vietnam in anticipation of an eventual return to Korea, their daily life and consumption patterns in Hanoi focused on their home country at the social and cultural levels. With their enhanced expatriate salaries and affluent and privileged position in a Global South country, these Korean expatriates and their families are highly concentrated in a newly developed suburban area of Hanoi. This ethnic enclave serves more for Korean sojourners than settlers, as Korean sojourners need to engage more in cultural performance and consumption away from home as a strategy to manage comfort, security, and belonging in their everyday lives in their new city. In addition, the presence of this ethnic enclave has created new opportunities for the growing Vietnamese middle class to sample new lifestyles and engage in cosmopolitan consumption. This type of Korean ethnic enclave, associated with Korean cultural expansion, re-shapes migration patterns in the host city, strengthens bilateral interaction between the two countries, and leads to a new urban experience in a Global South city.

Migrants encounter cultural differences in the newly moved host society. Gaik Cheng Khoo's article illustrates cultural difference in temporal habits Korean migrants face in Malaysia, characterized by a slower pace of life and a lack of punctuality. She demonstrates how these temporal habits affect Koreans' decision to migrate in search of happiness as well as their integration into and processes of adaptation to the host society. The discourses of Koreans in Malaysia with regard to temporalities are not just tied to their visa status, which limits their time there and shapes how they see their future plans, but also have to do with their perceptual experiences with slowness that are an evident characteristic of a developing country. Notions of time management reflect cultural differences, notably between the Global North and South, and Khoo's article addresses the importance of these differences between Korean migrants and local people in Malaysia. By pointing out the Korean culture of hyper-celerity and expected efficiency and immediacy, the study illustrates the ambivalent and diverse opinions and experiences regarding slow time that Korean immigrants have shaped, including challenges they face and strategies they deploy while negotiating the slower temporality of everyday life in a developing country.

Of the regions in the Global South, Korean migration to Africa has been particularly under-represented in the literature on Korean migration because of its relatively recent history and smaller scale. By exploring multiple trajectories of Korean migrants to, from, and within South Africa, Yonson Ahn demonstrates how ongoing, multidirectional, and onward geographic journeys of Korean migrants have been shaped and re-shaped by their embodied movement, lived experiences, and identities/subjectivities. In particular, Ahn's study illustrates specific Global South contexts where motivations for migrating involve not only economic but also familial, emotional, sociocultural, and political factors of both the countries of origin and settlement. Besides, uncertainty, unforeseeable changes, and challenges in the Global South have influenced how migrants navigate migratory paths, negotiate new destinies and lifestyles, and deal with obstacles they face in the course of migration, reflecting the procedural and transitional nature of migration trajectories that continue to be directed, redirected, and maneuvered. Thus, Ahn's study sheds light on migrants' active and constant

re/negotiation processes and their agency in making and remaking their plans and decisions in response to the circumstantial challenges and possibilities they encounter during their migratory lives, in particular in the context of the Global South.

Rather than reproducing the traditional Global North and South hierarchy based on materiality and power in migration scholarship, this special issue seeks to shed light on the entangled and intertwined nature of multiple and complex migration trajectories between Global North and South. Empirical studies in this issue demonstrate the critical need to study complex and intermingled trajectories of Korean migration in the Global South rather than assume migration patterns in the Global North fit those in the Global South. The similarities provide a platform for capturing interconnectedness, whereas the differences and particularities enhance the existing theories and concepts more comprehensively. While presenting findings informed by the situated socio-cultural context of interlocality, such studies facilitate a better understanding of how differently or similarly migration patterns and migrants' experiences are connected to one another from comparative perspectives. By contextualizing migration trajectories and complexities in empirical studies of Korean migration in South America, Southeast Asia, and South Africa, we hope to enhance theorization of North–South migration and to bridge the gap between Global North and Global South migration.

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