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Introduction to the Special Section Unsettling Korean Migration: Multiple Trajectories and Experiences

Sunhee Koo and Jihye Kim

The first wave of Korean emigration began in mid-nineteenth century, when Koreans crossed over into China in search of unused land to cultivate and then to work in the industries that China, Japan, and Russia were developing in Northeast China (Manchuria) and the Russian Far East (Primorsky Krai). Some of these Koreans left their native land voluntarily; others were pushed by political and economic forces threatening their lives at home. We can only speculate as to how many of them had a clear idea of where they would end up or what was waiting for them there. The political climate in Northeast Asia in the first half of the twentieth century, marked by a series of wars, colonization, and the partitioning of the Korean Peninsula into two separate countries, induced many Koreans into internal or international exile. While some earlier emigrants returned to Korea by the middle of the twentieth century despite ominous political and economic uncertainty there, Koreans continued to leave the peninsula in the second half of the century—this time mostly South Koreans who seized a range of voluntary migration opportunities and left for different parts of the world for various reasons. Today, sizable Korean communities are found in countries of East Asia, North and South Americas, Europe, Oceania, and Southeast Asia.

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Since the early 1990s, when international traffic at border crossings accelerated, a significant number of Korean migrants have returned to Korea (mostly South Korea), having spent much of their life—or, in the case of descendants of migrants, even their whole life—outside Korea. Their return may have been lured by a sense of nostalgia or by practical opportunity offered by the (ancestral) homeland, which by then had accrued a degree of industrial advancement and material prosperity. But many were surprised by the social challenges they encountered, namely alienation and discrimination, which were largely rooted in the hierarchical treatment of ethnic Korean returnees according to perceptions about their economic class, their cultural identities, and the particular countries from which they returned and with which they maintained links as expatriates.

Social challenges are also observed in Korean migrant communities overseas. These communities have become increasingly plural in terms of not only the places to which they migrated but also the waves of migration to the same destination in different time periods. Subsequently, longstanding Korean communities encountered more recent migrants whose routes of migration and settlement are different from the past. In places like China and Japan, dynamics and tensions between different groups of Koreans—each group identifying with its respective wave of migration—are readily observed and may even be manifested through separate transnational organizations, differing cultural practices, and newly established Koreatowns separate from older ones.

If Zygmunt Bauman's concept of three different phases of modern-era migration is applied to the Korean case, the first wave of Korean migration may be seen as similar to the migration from a "modernized" center to "empty land" (2011:429). To a degree, Korean migration was driven by economic opportunities presented by Korea's neighboring countries. However, unlike European imperialist migrations promoting the "white man's civilizing mission," Korean migration was impelled by colonial and imperial forces that affected the peninsula at the turn of the twentieth century. The second wave of modern-era migration coincided with the liberation of many states from their colonizers and the subsequent aspirations of the liberated people to relocate to the states of their former colonizers. Although Korea was never a colony of Western countries, the Korean migration wave to Europe and North America throughout the second half of the twentieth century may be similarly or at least partly motivated by the colonial aspiration of desiring the West—now equated with modernity and industrial advancement—and its promise of social and

cultural mobility for which many South Koreans as well as the government were striving at the time. Many Korean migrants, especially in the 1960s and 1970s, aspired to a better life as guest workers and middle-class immigrants. Bauman's third wave of modern-era migration seems to be the most current and expansive form—what he calls the "age of diasporas." Since the 1990s the global ethnoscape has become markedly more complex, requiring the reconceptualization of terms such as diaspora and immigration (Clifford, 1994; Appadurai, 1996; Bauman, 2011). In the "age of diasporas," almost every place in the world has been shaped by inbound and outbound movements of people (Bauman, 2011:429), and the two ends of the Korean Peninsula have not been an exception, even if the motivations, routes, and scales of these movements have greatly varied.

All six articles in this Special Section engage with the outcomes of one or more of the modern-era migration waves that Koreans have ridden in the past century and into this century. Just as their points of departure and routes have differed, their experiences have been myriad. In their new settings, some assimilated into their host societies, others maintained strong ties with their home country, and some did both, to varying degrees. Scholars in migration studies have previously introduced a range of different terms to describe and distinguish their subjects, for example, diaspora, immigrant, expatriate, refugee, guest worker, exile community, overseas community, ethnic community, and return migrant (see Tölölyan, 1991; Tsuda, 2009). In describing Korean migrants, these terms have been used broadly and specifically, and at times in an overlapping manner. Clifford, however, distinguishes between diaspora and immigrant:

> [D]iasporic populations do not come from elsewhere in the same way that "immigrants" do. In assimilationist national ideologies such as those of the United States, immigrants may experience loss and nostalgia, but only en route to a whole new home in a new place. Such narratives are designed to integrate immigrants, not people in diasporas . . . that maintain important allegiances and practical connections to a homeland or a dispersed community located elsewhere. (1994:307)

While acknowledging the epistemological and conceptual distinctions needed when using different terms to describe great many migrations, each with routes of movement specific to particular conditions, diaspora here is defined in a broad sense of migrant communities, since many of today's migrants, whether they were originally exiles or immigrants, have become transmigrants, firmly rooted in their new country but "maintaining multiple linkages to their homeland" (Schiller, Basch, and Blanc, 1995:48).

Like many transnational communities today, Korean migration in the "age of diasporas" presents a geocultural plurality in constructing local communities and in collective/individual identities, while reducing the sense of separation between those at home and abroad "through the continuous circulation of people, money, goods, and information" (Rouse, 1991:14).

This Special Section, titled *Unsettling Korean Migration*, is composed of six articles by Korean studies scholars whose areas of research are grounded in women's studies, area studies, ethnomusicology, anthropology, and film and media studies. All six articles feature the *migrancy* of different groups of Koreans who left the peninsula at various times and subsequently were immersed in and responsive to diverse social, cultural, and psychological contingencies they faced in the context of migration while forming relationships with home and host countries (Reyes, 1999:206).[1] While intending to point out the emergent plurality of Korean identities manifested in and embodied by each migrant individual or group, as the identities are constructed and negotiated in the context of diaspora, this Special Section also approaches migration as an endless act, a journey *in-process* no matter how long ago the migration took place. Once leaving their native countries, all migrants, by interacting with others, are put in situations of having to cast and recast themselves as to who they are and what they want to be. In this sense, *Unsettling Korean Migration* picks up on two important characteristics of migration: *fluidity* and *flexibility*, both of which also characterize identity formation, which cannot be separated from the journey of migration as it constantly prompts people to think about their being and belonging.

Like identity formation, which is always a "process of continuous renegotiation . . . [and is] a lifelong task, never complete; at no moment of life is the identity 'final'" (Bauman, 2011:431), migration is not premised on the "finality" of movement but rather signifies the opening up of new possibilities for migrants while encountering and residing in a new place temporarily or for a more extensive period. These possibilities often lead to new phases of migration (Reyes, 1999). Therefore, the articles contained in this Special Section demonstrate the lives of Korean migrants defined by malleability and creativity in the process of movement, crossing borders, and settling. If identity construction involves a great deal of tension and anxiety that is not easily remediable (Bauman, 2011:432), so do migration and settlement as experienced by the people who cross sociocultural and geopolitical borders.

The first two articles, by Yonson Ahn and Jihye Kim, feature Korean migrations beginning in the 1960s, a critical period when the United States

enacted the Immigration and Nationality Act, in 1965, and welcomed immigrants from all over the world, including Asians, who had been banned since the Immigration Act of 1924 (Yoon, 1991:307; Kim and Min 1992; Lee, 2000:28–32). As a result, a significant number of skilled people and professionals from the educated middle class left Korea (more specifically, South Korea) for the United States. Others, riding this wave of migration in postwar/postcolonial Korea, left to settle in South America or Europe. Currently, approximately twenty thousand ethnic Koreans live in Argentina, about eighty percent of whom are engaged in the garment industry, while about eleven thousand nurses and nurse assistants left South Korea in the 1960s and 1970s to become guest workers in Germany (then West Germany).

Ahn's article explores the negotiation and capitalization of emotion that Korean health care providers undertook in conforming to a racialized view of femininity expected of them, as young Asian women, by their German patients and society. Most had moved to Germany on their own, as single women or having left their immediate family behind. These nurses developed a compassion-based caring intimacy with their European patients and translated it into a way of coping with separation from their own families in Korea. To achieve financial, social, and professional stability as international labor migrants—a rare opportunity for Korean women at the time—these women placed themselves in the role of empathetic "Asian Nightingales" while suppressing their own feelings of longing and loss. Jihye Kim, on the other hand, focuses on voluntary Korean emigration to Argentina, a large portion of which occurred in the 1960s and 1970s. These Koreans depended on ethnic networks and resources as they settled down in Argentina, usually in garment sewing and knitting jobs. Gradually, their businesses evolved into commercial retail and wholesale enterprises. For them, as migrants, co-ethnic networks and resources have been the most reliable source of capital needed in achieving social mobility. Yet, inter-ethnic and inter-Korean competition were always uneasy obstacles, and class gaps developing among Koreans posed another challenge to a community that relied heavily on ethnic resources in the process of settlement in Argentina.

The next two articles, written by ethnomusicologists Soojin Kim and Sunhee Koo, explore diasporic cultural identity and the issues of authenticity, innovation, and creativity that arise from the process of transplanting emblematic Korean performing arts into the diasporic context—the arts functioning as a cultural symbol, a topic of heritage education, and a basis for artistic pursuit. While many artists who devote

themselves to traditional arts find themselves navigating between tradition and innovation, those who are migrants may contemplate things differently. While Soojin Kim examines the political nature of identity as manifested in performance cultures shaped by different groups of Korean American musicians, in the New York tri-state area, devoted to practicing, performing, and disseminating Korean drumming, Sunhee Koo investigates how cultural authenticity and creativity matters in the case of Zainichi Korean artists in Japan, who enact the connection between home and diaspora by practicing national arts designated as Important Intangible Cultural Properties (IICP) of South Korea. Koo teases out the nuances of South Korea's Cultural Property Protection Law (CPPL), modelled on a similar Japanese law, and what the CPPL has come to mean to Koreans in Japan grappling with postcolonial anxiety and Zainichi Korean identity.

Both Hee-seung Irene Lee's article and Markus Bell's article turn the reader's attention to the experiences of Korean Chinese and North Koreans, who grapple with increasing agency in shaping who they are as they (re)migrate to South Korea and, in the case of North Koreans, also Japan. Hee-seung Irene Lee's article looks at the films produced by director Zhang Lu, himself a Korean Chinese whose family had migrated to China at the turn of the twentieth century. As a third-generation Korean Chinese, Zhang straddles social and geopolitical borders within China and between China and South Korea. Before he began travelling to China and South Korea, Zhang was already crossing social borders, remaking himself from a novelist and an academic based in China's Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture to a film director, eventually gaining acclaim in both wider China and South Korea. Lee investigates the depiction in his films of border crossing journeys and the psychological contemplations that emerge from these journeys. Using slow cinema, the director shines a light on the limitations and nuances inherent in the crossing of geosocial borders: his portrayal of tension and anxiety felt by those border crossers is a sharp contrast to the style of upbeat dynamism prevalent in many South Korean blockbuster films. Markus Bell focuses on North Korean migrants who, as they settle in South Korea and Japan, enact ritual practices to commemorate their deceased family members buried in North Korea. While the author provides detailed observations of the commemorative family ritual as performed by North Koreans in North Korea, South Korea, and Japan, an important outcome of his research from migration studies' perspective is his revelation of how the ritual provides a sense of spiritual connection between the North Koreans living in the diaspora and

their deceased relatives buried back home. The ritual practice becomes the means for the North Koreans to mitigate their sense of guilt and anxiety of leaving their (ancestral) homeland and settling elsewhere to seek a better life.

All articles in this Special Section present multiple trajectories of Korean migration, while demonstrating how migrants in each group have established and reestablished themselves by embedding and connecting in their (ancestral) homeland and in the diaspora. By presenting a range of interdisciplinary works focusing on Korean migration and identity, this Special Section seeks to highlight how migration fosters a variety of identities and agencies among those who live in—and between—multiple territories and residency statuses. It aims to spark discussion on the social and experiential plurality of Koreans at home and in the diaspora, the plurality that mutually reinforces the ethnic complexity of Koreans, which is a topic deserving further investigation in Korean studies.

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Note

1. Adelaida Reyes distinguishes migrancy from migration, stating that *migrancy* refers to a "state that grows out of and develops both as consequence of and as part of that movement. It captures the social dynamics set off by moving from one place to another. It provides a point of departure for exploring the notion that home—as country or culture of origin, as a place in which one is native—is less a tangible location than an idea, one that animates a whole way of life and gives new meaning to the saying 'you can't go home again.' In these respects migrancy directs the observer's attention not just to where migrants have gone and where migrants have been but, perhaps more importantly, to the emotional, psychological, and creative behaviors that are the products of those moves" (1999:206).

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