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Migration Transition in South Korea: Features and Factors

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Abstract

South Korea has transformed itself into a dominantly migrant-receiving country over the last three decades. Korea makes an important case in studying migration transition due to the high speed of migration growth and diversifying patterns of migration. This paper identifies the patterns of migration growth in Korea and analyzes various contributing factors from both migrant sending and receiving countries' perspectives. It was found that labor migrants, un-skilled in particular, are the largest contributor to the growth and family migrants, notably female marriage migrants, have been increasingly important. On top of that, ethnic Korean migrants are significant in both the labor and family migration routes. The factor analysis shows that labor market conditions, in terms of higher income and wider job opportunity, in the destination are the strongest driver, but the actual migration flows are not fully explained by economic disparities. Rather, migration flows to Korea, either economic migration or non-economic migration, are influenced by a complex interplay of push, pull, and network factors on the state, family and individual level. However, in all cases the state's policy considerations and settings have played, and will continue to play, a pivotal role in determining the scale and patterns of migration transition in Korea.

■ **Keywords** : migration transition, push-pull factors, labor migration, marriage migration, co-ethnic migration

Introduction

One feature characterizing the contemporary global migration is “the proliferation of migration transition” (Castles & Miller, 2009, p. 12). Migration transition happens when a migrant-sending country becomes a receiving country. However, the dichotomy of emigrant and immigrant

countries may be no longer be sustainable because many countries are in reality simultaneously migrant sending and receiving countries in the fast globalizing world (Held, McGrew, Goldblatt & Perraton, 1999). Nevertheless, either form of migration can be identified as dominant in a country and countries in migration transition are likely to become predominantly migration destinations over time. South Korea (Korea, hereafter) is one such example. Korea makes a particularly important case in studying migration transition due to the high speed of migration growth and its diversifying patterns. Korea has transformed itself into a dominantly migrant-receiving country over the last three decades.

In fact, economically successful countries in East and South-East Asia such as Japan, Korea, Singapore, and Taiwan are all experiencing migration transition in a varying stage (Piper, 2004; Athukorala, 2006; Castles & Miller, 2009). Korea holds the third largest migration stock in East Asia, but it showed the fastest growth rate in this region (UN-DESA, 2015). Researchers have attempted to find some common denominators of those countries experiencing migration transition. Successful industrialization and a consequent labor demand notably in heavy industries have been most frequently attributed to the migration growth in those countries (Fields, 1994; Debrah, 2002). Uneven development within Asia triggered intra-regional migratory movement from poorer to richer countries (Debrah, 2002; Hujo & Piper, 2007). However, political liberalization and continuous integration into the global market are also important factors to understand the migration transition in this region (Findlay et al., 1998; Castles and Miller, 2009; Hollifield et al., 2014). Furthermore, some historical events, notably the fall of the Soviet Union and the Gulf War in 1990 either added another international migration supply or changed the direction of migration to Asia's new migration poles (Seol, 2000).

Despite the burgeoning literature on the migration growth in Korea and its socio-economic implications over the last couple of decades, the research on Korea's migration transition itself is surprisingly rare, particularly in English, and often outdated. Furthermore, the existing studies

seem to fail to deliver a comprehensive picture either by narrowly focusing on certain migrant groups (unskilled labor migrants or marriage migrants, for examples) or by representing only the receiving country's perspective. Although the migration growth in Korea was initiated and dominated by economic migrants, non-economic migrants are becoming increasingly significant. To address these lacunae, this paper aims to construct comprehensive features of migration transition in Korea and analyze various contributing factors from the perspectives of both ends of migration, bringing both economic and non-economic migration into consideration.

The paper consists of two main parts: the first section takes stock of the migration growth in Korea in terms of its scale and patterns, drawing on up-to-date statistical and documentary data available. The second section analyses in three sub-sections demand, supply, and network factors contributing to the growth of different types of migration in Korea, followed by a concluding discussion.

Features of Migration Growth in Korea

Korea's migration transition is a very recent phenomenon. Post-war Korea showed high rates of emigration notably of farmers, nurses, and construction workers to states such as Japan, the USA, and Germany (Held et al., 1999; Castles & Miller, 2009). On the contrary, Korea had remained virtually shut to international migrants until the 1970s, with the exception of a small number of professionals including foreign government officials and military personnel, rendering it virtually a zero-migrant country. Once economic development was on track from the late 1970s, Korea began to attract migrants while unskilled labor emigration began to fade. Starting with investors, traders, and engineers, there was a trickle of technical trainees and students from nearby Asian countries into the country from the 1980s. However, Korea had to wait another decade to see a more constant inflow of migrants. From the 1990s when the Korean government introduced non-skilled labor migration schemes,

the number of migrants finally began to rapidly grow.

The scale of migration may look small by the global standard but the speed of growth has been dramatic. As shown in Figure 1, there were merely about 50,000 migrants in 1990 but the number grew ten times over the next decade. The growth remained robust even during the economic crisis in 1997 to 1999. As of 2015, the number of migrants was 1.9 million accounting for 3.7 per cent of the total population of Korea.¹⁾ The government has estimated that the migrant population will reach 3.2 million, representing 6.1 per cent of the total population, by 2030 (IPC, 2012, p. 20).

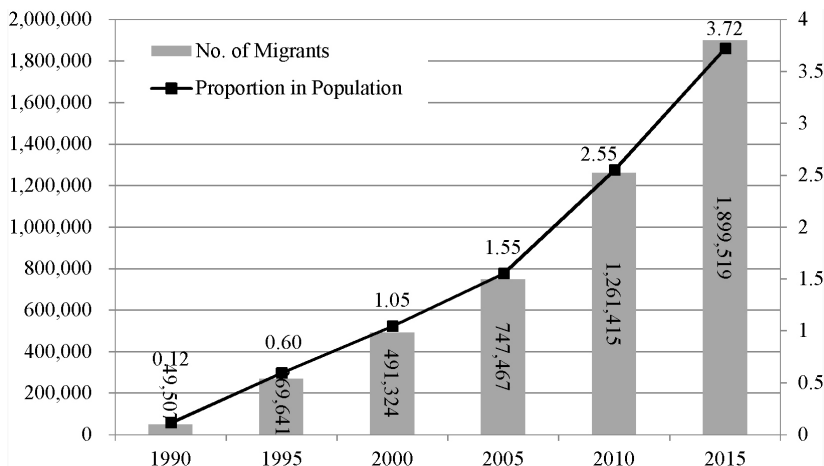


Figure 1. Growth of Migrant Stock in Korea (persons, %)

Source: Korea, Republic of. KIS, *Migration Yearbook* (various years).

The migration growth in Korea has been patterned by route. Migrants for short-term visit and (industrial) training led the growth in the early stage of growth. This is closely related to the increase in undocumented migrants until 2002 because short-term visitors and industrial trainees often overstayed for work. Since 2002, labor migration and family migration have emerged as more dominant forms of migration. Combined, those two routes account for 74.8 per cent of all migrants as of 2015

(refer to Table 1). Labor migration refers to a migration route for employment, while family migration comprises wider types of migrants whose primary purpose of entry is not working but staying as dependants, spouses, or relatives. As Table 1 shows, family migration constitutes the single largest migration route into Korea: at 40 per cent of the migrant stock, it is just slightly ahead of labor migration (34.8 per cent). It should be pointed out that certain groups of migrants, notably those having F-4 visa classified here as family migrants, can be simultaneously economic migrants for employment or business since they are given both residence and labor rights. Therefore, there is a chance that the proportion of labor migration is underestimated here by the author's classification.

Table 1
Migration Growth by Route in Korea (stock, person)

	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010	2015	(%)
Total	49,507	269,641	491,324	747,467	1,261,415	1,899,519	(100.0)
Labor	2,833	8,540	18,563	252,562	557,114	625,129	(34.8)
Family	39,524	53,530	73,903	150,327	326,677	719,219	(40.0)
Short-term Visit	3,274	145,941	242,710	168,338	196,371	353,819	(19.7)
Education & Training	2,106	56,950	146,305	90,838	112,759	101,641	(5.7)
Business	1,765	4,630	8,931	10,742	13,564	14,652	(0.8)
Other	5	50	912	74,660	54,930	85,059	(4.7)

Note. Visa classification for each route: Family (F-1 to F-6), Labor (C-4, E-1 to E-9 and H-1 to H-2), Short-term Visit (B-1, B-2, C-2, C-3, D-5 and D-6), Education and Training (D-2 to D-4), Business (D-7 to D-9) and Other (G-1 and others).

Source: Korea, Republic of. KIS, *Migration Yearbook* (various years).

The labor migration growth in Korea has been driven by a sharp increase in unskilled migrant workers. They currently occupy 92 per cent of the total labor migration stock, while skilled migrant workers have remained constant in number (Korea, Republic of. KIS, 2016). The

growth rate of labor migration has stabilized since 2008 when the new labor migration system, the Employment Permit System with the Working Visit Program, began to fully operate. However, the growth of family migration has been equally dramatic. This is mainly due to a strong growth of marriage migration since 2000 which occupied the largest proportion in the family migration stock until 2011. Although the growth rate of marriage migration began to decline since then, the stock itself is on steady growth.

It cannot be emphasized too much the importance of co-ethnic migrants in understanding Korea's migration growth. Co-ethnic migrants refer to the migrants who have a Korean ethnic background. Most of them are the descendants of the Korean diaspora in China or CIS countries.²⁾ However, about a quarter of co-ethnic migrants are also from "advanced" countries such as the US, Canada, and Australia, which reflects the long history of Korean out-migration to those countries. The second and third generations of the early Korean emigrants are often immigrating back to Korea for various reasons such as business, work, and study. It is crucial to note that co-ethnic migration contributes not only to family migration but also to labor migration. As of 2015, almost 40 per cent of co-ethnic migrants were employed as unskilled workers (H-2 visa) and some of those with the F-4 visa, as mentioned above, are likely to be engaged in the labor market (Korea, Republic of. KIS, 2016). The number of co-ethnic migrants has been continuously increasing. The number slightly waned in 2012 as the first cycle of the five-year long co-ethnic labor migration program ended but it bounced back right away.

Factors Contributing to the Growth

The migration routes to Korea are diverse, so are the contributing factors to the migration growth. The current paper analyses those factors drawing on Martin's (2009) framework as presented in Table 2. He divided migrants into two types, economic and non-economic, and listed

contributing factors in three categories—"Demand-Pull," "Supply-Push," and "Network"—arguing that migration is caused by the combination of these factors. The framework is in line with the so-called "push-pull" scenario which has been typically utilized in explaining labor migration growth (Martin, 2009; Abella, 2014). The push-pull theory has been criticized as "individualistic and ahistorical" due to its preoccupation with the individual's rational choice and a resultant neglect of collective decision making at the level of households and institutions (Castles & Miller, 2009, p. 22).

While I agree that this neo-classical account of migration potentially oversimplifies the reality (Debrah, 2002), I do find Martin's framework useful for analyzing the Korean case for the following reasons. To begin with, the framework takes both economic and non-economic migrants into consideration. This is crucial because family migration is also significant in Korea's migration growth although the economically motivated individual unit of migration has been most prevalent. In addition, the framework does take note of the roles of public policies and networks which are influencing migration flows beyond the individual level. Lastly, this framework considers both ends of the migration flow, which allows us to better capture the dynamics propelling migration, although the current paper tends to be more concerned with the demand side.

Nonetheless, I had to substantially modify the framework to make it more applicable to the Korean case. The original framework includes family reunification and refugees/asylum seekers but they are excluded here because the migration route for family reunion is largely discouraged and the number of refugees/asylum seekers is nominal despite the recent increase (Korea, Republic of. KIS, 2016). Instead, I have added both social and cultural factors in order to explain the flows of particular forms of migration such as marriage migration and ethnicity-based migration. Martin (2009) acknowledges that the factors listed here are not exhaustive and are subject to change in importance over the course of migration development. In addition, it is important to recognize that neither the division of economic and non-economic migration nor that of de-

mand-pull and supply-push are clear cut. The nature/purpose of migration may change as the stay prolongs. In addition, some factors, notably demographic transition, can be applied to both categories of factors. Therefore, the framework and the factors presented here should be understood as only a snapshot of a far more complex process of migration.

Table 2

Analytical Frame to Examine the Factors Contributing to Migration Growth in Korea

Type	Demand-pull factors	Supply-push factors	Network factors
Economic migrants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Labor shortage due to structural changes in economy and demographic transition • Introduction of labor migration programs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disparity in economic conditions (low income and high unemployment) • Emigration as government's development strategy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Migrant communities and information sharing • Geographical and cultural proximity
Non-economic migrants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Bachelor surplus' and changes in norms around marriage, family and gender roles • Support from the government and the civil society 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emigration as family's livelihood strategy • Desire for better life chances (education or new life experiences) 	

Note. Adapted from Martin (2009, p. 4)

Demand-Pull Factors

Labor shortage due to structural changes in economy and demographic transition. The economic migration growth in Korea is primarily attributed to labor shortage triggered by Korea's rapid economic expansion since the 1970s. The Korean labor market had maintained almost full employment until the mid-1980s; however, from then onwards certain industries began to suffer from a severe labor shortage (Seol, 2000). Ever expanding industries required an abundant supply of workers. This labor demand was at first met by internal migrants, both men and women migrating from rural areas to industrialized areas to work in factories.

However, the internal labor reservoir was soon drained. Factories in industrialized areas came to have difficulty recruiting workers while remaining farming and fishing industries had been drastically shrunken as young workers left but no replacement work force was found. Despite the heavy investment on developing human resources by the government, the economic growth was so rapid that inter-sectoral transfer of labor alone would never fully address the labor shortage (Abella, 2014). These situations served as a background against the initial increase in unskilled labor migrants, including the undocumented, before the operation of official foreign labor importing systems from the early 2000s.

Labor shortage turned out to be more structural and prevalent especially in small and medium sized enterprises (hereafter SMEs) as the Korean economy and the labor market continued to be restructured. Native-born workers were fast moving to jobs in the service sector for better work conditions and higher income. This labor market restructuring and the consequent deficit in production workers has been often referred to as the “3D syndrome” (the attitude of avoiding dirty, dangerous, and demanding jobs) in Korea (A.E. Kim, 2009, p. 71). Already understaffed SMEs in manufacturing, farming, and fishing industries could not but require more intense and longer work to survive, which made it even more difficult for them to recruit enough native-born labor. To compound the matter, the government’s large conglomerates-centered development strategy widened the gap between major companies and SMEs with regard to income level and work conditions. It had become evident by the mid-1990s that the domestic workforce alone would never meet the demand, especially in the low skilled areas.

This explanation echoes the dual labor market theory (Debrah, 2002) and historical evidence gives credit to it. During the East Asian economic crisis from 1997 to 2000, Korea recorded minus economic growth and the unemployment rate doubled. Even major companies stopped new recruiting but went through painful restructuring and massive lay-offs ensued. To mitigate social unrest caused by soaring unemployment, the government tried to take jobs occupied by migrant workers and give them

back to unemployed native-born workers by subsidizing the companies replacing migrant workers with Korean workers. However, this “replacement project” did not work as expected. The fact that SMEs failed to hire native-born workers even in the midst of the unprecedented unemployment may suggest that there exist certain job niches which are meant to be filled only with migrant workers. Evidence confirms that the lack of native-born applicants and high turnover rate are the primary reasons why restaurant, manufacturing, and agriculture/dairy industries turn to migrant workers, while construction companies hire migrant workers mainly to save labor cost (G.-Y. Lee et al., 2011, p. 44). These patterns are consistent with previous survey results (Y.-B. Park, 2000; Yoo & Lee, 2002).

However, we should note that labor shortages can be addressed in different ways other than hiring migrants. One of the options is to utilize the part of the female labor force inactive due to career interruptions (typically those in between their 30s and 50s). The Korean government has attempted to encourage women’s labor market participation since the enactment of the “Equal Employment Act” in 1987 and its amendment in 1989. However, these legislative measures including affirmative actions had a limited success in boosting women’s employment. This was primarily because while labor shortage was most severe in small to medium scaled manufacturing industries, the introduced measures were only compulsory for large firms and the public sector. Besides, the gender-biased culture (regarding recruiting, employment, jobs, positions, and promotions) at male-dominant workplaces undermined the effectiveness of those policies (Patterson, Bae & Lim, 2013; Patterson & Walcutt, 2014). Consequently, activating the female labor force has not been effective enough to address the labor shortage especially in so-called heavy industries. Another option can be offshoring factories to more labor abundant but less costly countries such as China. However, relocation is not a viable option for all businesses because many SMEs lack enough resources to operate overseas production facilities. It was found that many SMEs considered hiring more migrant workers, along with automation,

to be a more effective long-term solution to labor shortage particularly if they had already employed migrant workers (Yoo & Lee, 2002).

We can reasonably expect that labor shortage will continue to be a leading factor in the future migration growth in Korea. A recent large-scale survey of employers (n=567) of migrant workers reveals that even though work conditions improve, the possibility of filling the vacancies with native-born young or female workers is limited, and the chances are even lower in agriculture/dairy industries and in smaller companies (Chung et al., 2013). Coupled with the transformation in the economic/labor market structure, the labor deficit has been further exacerbated by the change in the population structure in Korea. It is expected that the number of economically productive people (aged between 15 and 64) will sharply drop to 29 million by 2040, approximately 80 per cent of the level of 2010 (Statistics Korea, 2014a). As witnessed in the West, change in demography, especially rapid ageing, and the labor market would not reduce the demand for migrant labor but rather create new types of demand, such as for care workers for homes and institutions (Cangiano & Shutes, 2010).

Introduction of labor migration programs. It is crucial to note that labor shortage itself does not automatically lead to migration growth since, as pointed out above, there is more than one option to deal with labor shortage. Actual migration inflow can only be realized by the willingness of a state to support migration (Hollifield, 2004). Although it was employers that initiated the process by making requests for the admission of migration workers, recruiting migrant labor was a strategic policy decision made by the Korean government (Abella, 2014). In order to mitigate the severe shortage in unskilled workers, the Korean government has developed two labor migration programs, the Employment Permit System and the Working Visit Program. Here is not a place for a detailed examination of the development and content of these migration policies but an important point to note is that the growth in economic migrants in Korea has been accelerated by the introduction of a type of “guest

worker program,” as happened in some countries in the West a generation ago (see Castles & Miller, 2009, Chapter 5).

However, the Korean government wanted to avoid repeating the problems experienced in the West with guest worker programs. For instance, in Germany in the 1970s many “temporary” guest workers did not return but stayed for the long term and brought in their families, betraying policy makers’ intentions (Castles, 2004). The Korean government would provide migrant workers as the market requires; however, the government made it clear that the admittance of an (unskilled) migrant labor force under the above programs should be only temporary and it would not lead to subsequent settlement and family migration. So, the government has placed all possible measures to tightly manage the flow and the stock of migrants, including yearly sectoral quotas and a prohibition on migrant workers from changing workplaces. Thus, it is unlikely that the number of economic migrants is rising unexpectedly solely based on the market demand. Instead, political considerations and policy decisions will continue to play a critical role in determining the future growth. However, interestingly, the initial principle of temporary labor migration has been gradually loosened by the government. The Korean government has repeatedly lengthened the maximum period of employment (from one year initially to four years and six months later on), and has added various exceptional rules allowing opportunities for long-term work and stay. Consequently, the labor migration stock has been persistently on the rise.

It remains to be seen whether the Korean unskilled labor migration programs in the long run, as were the cases in Europe (Castles, 2004), will become another example in which historical lessons on guest worker programs were once again over-ridden by the government’s naive confidence in its ability to control migration flows as it wishes through modern administrative systems. The main reason why labor migration keeps growing in Korea is that the Korean economy has become ever more structurally dependent on a migrant labor force. Therefore, it is important to note that the migration growth has been a part of the economic restructuring process in Korea. The Korean government approaches admit-

ting more migrants as one of the solutions to remedy population ageing and a consequent slowdown of economic development (Korea, Republic of. IPC, 2012). Thus, it is highly probable that the Korean government would continue to maintain extensive labor migration programs to accommodate varying demands for migrant workers not only from traditionally labor absorbing industries, but also from the service sector.

“Bachelor surplus” and changes in norms around marriage, family and gender roles. Now let us turn to the factors contributing to non-economic migration growth. As identified earlier, an increase in marriage migration marks the most important feature of the (family) migration growth in Korea. The number of marriage migrants in Korea has been on a sharp rise from the mid-1990s to 2013, accounting for seven per cent of the total migrant stock, although the growth rate has been slowing down since then due to tightened regulations on commercially arranged international marriages and marriage migration (Korea, Republic of. KIS, 2016). The growth of marriage migrants in Korea has resulted from increasing international marriage. Before the new millennium, international marriage was rare in Korea and official infrastructures to support international marriages or mixed families were yet to be developed. However, international marriages have grown fast since 2000. International marriages occupied only 3.5 per cent of all marriages in 2000, but by 2005 they reached a peak of 13.5 per cent (Statistics Korea, 2014b).

It is interesting to see that international marriages with Korean nationals are gendered: over 70 per cent of all international marriage cases since 2002 are between Korean males and foreign females, while the remaining 30 per cent are between foreign males and Korean females (Ibid.). It should be noted that not all international marriages lead to marriage migration into Korea and some foreign nationals who get married to Korean nationals in Korea may have different visa status such as labor migration or permanent residence rather than marriage migration visa. However, among those migrants entering Korea specifically with a marriage migration visa (F-6 or equivalents before 2012), the feminized

nature of this route is evident: over 85 of them are female foreigners marrying Korean males.

This highly feminized flow of marriage migration is a direct consequence of the so called “bachelor surplus” in Korea. A skewed sex ratio caused by successive family planning policies from the 1950s to the 1980s is often mentioned as a primary factor for the severe mismatch in the marriage market from the late 1990s when the post-Korean War generations reached marrying age (Seol, 2006). Combined with a strong preference for sons, the family planning often led to sex selection (in other words, sex selective abortion) in the midst of a strong discouragement against having multiple children. Sex off-balance continued to deteriorate, reaching its highest ratio of 117:100 in 1990. After three decades of tight family planning and selective birth, some males at their marriage age found themselves having not enough potential native-born brides.

Marriages in a society are not determined solely by the ratio between sexes, but they are also approached and negotiated in wider social and cultural contexts, which are bound to change over time. To begin with, the enhanced social and economic status of Korean women also contributed to the mismatch (S. Park, 2011). Where females have wider choice than males, there is no reason for them to marry *down* the social and economic ladder. Consequently, the marriage market in disadvantaged areas was especially squeezed, leaving some bridegrooms virtually no options but to turn to foreign wives (H. Lee, 2012). In addition, attitude toward international marriage in Korea has positively changed. Marrying a foreigner has become increasingly socially acceptable: 56 per cent of those surveyed were agreeable in 2008 but it rose to 62.9 per cent in 2014 and such change in attitude has been more evident among people in rural areas than in urban areas (Statistics Korea, 2008; 2014c). However, as in the case of labor migration, demand for foreign wives itself cannot automatically explain the actual increase in marriage migrants, but it can only be realized into actual marriages and subsequent migrations through the relevant government policies as well as societal supports.

Support from the government and civil society. Marriage in essence can be seen as a very private matter, but combined with migration it becomes a highly complicated legal process which requires a series of policy arrangements in both the sending and receiving country. Especially, family (marriage) migration policies and membership (citizenship, for example) regulations in a receiving country are critically important in order that marriage migration can actually happen. So far, active support from the government has been vital in the growth of marriage migrants. The details of those marriage migrant-related policies and their policy rationales should be investigated elsewhere; one point, however, can be highlighted here that continuous positive framing of marriage migrants by the government itself has sent off encouraging signals for both inviting men and prospective wives. Female marriage migrants have been regarded as deserving migrants by the government in that they not only relieve the social tension caused by “bachelor surplus” but also help form a family, a crucial unit in which the members are biologically and socially being reproduced (G. Kim & Kilkey, 2016). Unlike other types of migrants, marriage migrants are encouraged to settle permanently and they can enjoy fuller rights through a wide range of supportive programs, called “multicultural family policies” (Korea, Republic of. IPC, 2012; Korea, Republic of. MOGEF, 2012). It is a rather surprising move for Korea where an anti-settlement policy orientation prevails (Seol & Skrentny, 2009).

In addition, civil society organizations and activists in Korea have influenced to a substantial degree the process of both labor and family migration in Korea. They may not be the direct drivers of the migration growth but they have contributed to it by helping reform migration policies and assisting existing migrants with their settlement and integration. Thanks to their pressure, unskilled labor migrants, for example, could enjoy enhanced labor/human rights even amongst harsh crack-downs during the early stage of migration transition. However, marriage migrants most benefit from the support of the civil society, which has contributed to enhancing public acceptance of marriage migrants and establishing vari-

ous supportive policies for them (Yoon, 2008; Jeon, 2012). Many related NGOs, often forming a liaison with local governments, provide various types of settlement and integration support programs. Information regarding such support may well spread and encourage further migration. In both labor and family migration, positive signals from the civil society partly constitute what Castles (2004, p. 209) calls an “opportunity structure,” through which migrants can negotiate to increase their chance of entry and later survival, often regardless of government’s policy intentions.

Supply-Push Factors

Disparity in economic conditions. While labor shortage exerts the strongest pulling power from the demand side, it has been argued that Korea’s higher income and employment chances among Asian countries are the strongest push factor from the sending countries’ perspective (Seol, 2000; Lim, 2002). Uneven industrialization in the region has widened the disparity in economic performance, which has formed a condition for “a regional division of labor” through migration (Yamanaka & Piper, 2005, p. 1). In this regard, it can be hypothesized that the greater the differentials of GDP and unemployment rate are between Korea and source countries, the more economic migrants would come to Korea.

Appendix Table A1 shows the largest 18 labor migrant sending countries and their per capita GDPs and unemployment rates. When statistically tested, however, no significant correlation is established between the macroeconomic indicators (represented by GDPs and unemployment rates) and the size of labor migration regardless of their skill levels (refer to Appendix Table A2). The result confirms that the differential in income and employment itself cannot lead to the actual migration. The primary reason is that the scale of the unskilled labor migration, which is the largest proportion of the labor migration in Korea, is not an entirely free movement but is predetermined by intra-governmental agreements and related policies. To illustrate, even though someone may want to come to Korea for a job, they may not be admitted unless there is a labor

migration agreement with their government or they prove ethnic/ancestral ties in other cases.

However, it is not to deny the critical importance of economic disparity in the migration flow. Rather, it is to emphasize that various motivations are factored in migration decisions and they are often based on very personal experience and expectation beyond the aggregate disparities in economic performances. A survey commissioned by the Korean government asked 795 unskilled migrant workers of their reasons to choose Korea for a destination (G.-Y. Lee et al., 2011). The result reveals that higher income is indeed a leading driver for migration: 41.4 per cent of migrant workers were reported to earn two to three times higher salary than they used to in the country of origin; 23.7 per cent of them earned even four to five times higher (Ibid., p. 67). Interestingly, the second most important factor is not job availability but chances to learn new skills in Korea. The reason is related to how the migration system of Korea works. Easiness to find a job can be an irrelevant question to some migrant workers because a work contract is arranged for them even before they depart, but to those having secured a chance for labor migration newly earned skills in Korea may guarantee them a better position in the labor market back in the country of origin. This expectation for *potential* income difference is also a strong incentive to both current and prospective labor migrants.

Emigration as a development strategy for governments. As noted earlier, unskilled labor migration to Korea is arranged by a bilateral agreement between the Korean government and the sending country. Therefore, sending countries' policy considerations are equally decisive in exporting migrants. The potential of economic development by labor emigration has been the center of debate (Lucas, 2005). In this migration-development nexus, migrants become "agents of development" through financial and social remittances which benefit receiving households and the government by reducing unemployment and increasing income, consumption, and social protection (Hujo & Piper, 2007, p. 4). It can also make a

strong case for East and South-East Asia. Athukorala notes that “the governments of labor sending countries in the region generally believe that the national gains from emigration outweigh the potential costs. In particular, they consider labor migration as a safety valve for unemployment and underemployment and as an important source of foreign exchange” (2006, p. 19).

Reflecting this perception, the facilitation and promotion of labor export has become an important aspect of the labor market policies in some sending countries (Ibid.). Once their economies become structurally dependent on emigration, governments encourage emigration through official policies, as in the Philippines under Marcos, and it has long-term effects on their economy and society (Abella, 1993; Castles, 2000). One such effect is the creation of so-called “a culture of emigration,” in which working/living abroad can be accepted as “a normal rite of passage for young people” as seen in the Philippines and other countries (Castles, 2004, p. 210). The genuine contribution of emigration to development is often doubted (Geiger & Pecoud, 2013; Sanderson, 2013); however, these countries keep making a continuous outflow of migration throughout the world not only for work but also for marriage and living. As of 2015, migrants from the Philippines constitute the fifth largest group in Korea's labor migration stock and the third in its marriage migration stock, except the migrants from China (Korea, Republic of. KIS, 2016).

Emigration as family livelihood strategy. As shown above, migration cannot be adequately explained just by income differences on an aggregate level between the destination and the origin country. This is in part because migration is often a collective decision made in the context of a much wider range of factors (Castles & Miller, 2009). Unlike the neoliberal understanding of human behavior, social groups, notably families, rather than utility-maximizing individuals, may make a decision to send one or more members to another region or country which they find most optimal to manage economic risks and maximize survival chances

(Taylor, 1999; Castles, 2004).

This “new economics approach” can explain family migration as well as labor migration flows to Korea. Research on Vietnamese marriage migrants reveals that marriage migration decisions are family-level strategies to secure family livelihoods (Le et al., 2014). Typically, marriage migrants are given a large sum of money (as a “gift”) from the inviting husbands at the point of the marriage, which may be large enough to rescue the sending families from economic trouble right away. Continuous remittances from their daughters after migration can also be a significant financial source. Studying Vietnamese women marriage decisions, for example, Le et al. (2014, p. 96) found that “beliefs in the prospect of a better economic situation, the possibility of supporting the family left behind, and of securing a better future for their possible children are all associated with such marriages.” Marriage migrants from Vietnam currently account for 26 per cent of all marriage migrants in Korea, making them the second largest ethnic group in this migration category (Korea, Republic of. KIS, 2016).

Desires for better life chances. Although many marriage migrants may never become free from the pressure to support their original families left behind, marriage migration like other non-economic migration can also be prompted by more subjective and diverse motives. Others may see marrying overseas as an opportunity to start a new life in a better environment (Le et al., 2014). Migrants may decide to leave to escape not just poverty but also traditional gender roles, domestic violence, lack of life chances such as education, or they leave simply because they yearn for new experiences (Piper & Roces, 2003).

Desires for better (or new) life chances can be as strong as the economic motivations. However, those motives cannot be entirely isolated from economic ones. For student migrants, for instance, newly earned academic qualifications as well as industrial skills significantly increase economic potentials. As noted above, even marriage migrants can be equally eager to find employment in the destination. So some exploit

the marriage migration channel ultimately to access the labor market with long-term residence rights as fraudulent marriage migration cases show (Freeman, 2011).

Network Factors

Migration communities and information sharing. In general, while demand-pull and supply push-factors are decisive at the beginnings of a migration flow, the network factors become more influential as the flow matures (Martin, 2009). This is because migration takes place drawing on various forms of networks and they tend to become “self-sustaining once started” (Castles, 1998, p. 180). Existing connections between the origin and the destination country can have a strong influence over potential migrants’ choice of routes and destination for both economic and non-economic migration cases. Here the information sharing is critical in migration decision-making. Information about income, job condition, overall market situation, and migrant-related policies and procedures may encourage or discourage the decision to migrate. Once moved, migrants can receive various types of support over the process from arrival to settlement from the established migrant communities (Castles, 2004).

Networks are important also in that they can trigger “chain migration” by which an initial migration is followed by others often from the same family or community. Ethnic communities and networks can encourage further migration inflow because the existence of settled migrants can reassure the survivability of new comers. Unlike in traditional immigration countries, ethnic communities in Korea have not been so prominent with few exceptions (E.M. Kim & Kang, 2007), mainly because the total migration stock is still relatively small and the government has taken anti-settlement policies in general (Seol & Skrentny, 2009). Nevertheless, some migrants managed to settle in Korea and started to influence the chain migration inflows. A government-commissioned survey on the process of labor migration to Korea confirms that “recommendations from friends who used to work in Korea” is a most

influential factor (11.7 per cent) in the migration decision making other than higher income (50.6 per cent) (Chung et al., 2013). It was also found that in the case of co-ethnic migration to Korea, advice and assistance from relatives and friends were far more influential than other sources of help (Chung et al., 2010). Many (female) marriage migrants find their partners through agencies, but “introduction by families, relatives or friends” is becoming an increasingly frequent channel (J. Kim et al., 2014; Le et al., 2014).

Geographical and cultural proximity. Geographical and cultural closeness itself may not explain migration growth, but proximity does influence migration mobility and it especially pertains to the context of intra-regional migration growth in which Korea is situated. First, geographical proximity to Korea is an extra appeal since migrants’ travel distance/cost is directly related to their economic motivation (Hujó & Piper, 2007). In an effort to reduce overstay and consequent illegalization, the Korean government has granted a chance of rehiring to those migrants who showed a good work record and departed voluntarily at the end of the first stint. Some migrants may well consider multiple travels in and out of Korea, and travel distance/cost matters more in this case.

Similar appearance, cultures (custom) and language, as well as geographical closeness, can give migration candidates additional incentives. Indeed, many Korean employers show absolute preferences for ethnic Koreans who can speak Korean over any other Asian migrant because they are thought to fit in better and thus cause less tension with natives in and out of the workplace (Gwak, 2012; Chung et al., 2013). Even when having become undocumented, some ethnic Koreans manage to find employment more easily compared to other migrant workers from different ethnic backgrounds (Chung et al., 2013). China’s dominant contribution via all types of migration routes to Korea’s migration transition supports the proximity argument. As of 2015, migrants from Asian countries occupied 87 per cent of total migrant stock in Korea, and 60 per cent of those Asian migrants originated from China (Korea, Republic

of. KIS, 2016). China is the single largest migration source country for both labor migration and marriage migration. China is apparently not the poorest country in the region but geographically and culturally one of the closest countries to Korea.

It is important to note here that 64 per cent of those Chinese migrants have Korean origin (Korea, Republic of. KIS, 2016). Most of Chinese Koreans are from a Korean Autonomous Prefecture in south-eastern China, called Yanbian, which is currently bordered by North Korea. North Korea, of course, used to be the same nation with South Korea before politically being divided in 1948. The formation of a Korean settlement in Yanbian can be traced back to the 19th century. Many were driven by economic hardship on the Korean Peninsula. After the Japanese colonized Korea in 1910, a significant number of migrants migrated also for political reasons. Ethnic Koreans once reached around 60 per cent of the population in the Prefecture. Although their share had fallen to 32 per cent by 2000, their economic connection with Korea remains strong. It is estimated that the ethnic Koreans, also known as *joseonjok*, contribute one third of the local GDP each year through remittances, called “Korean money” (“Yanbian in Turmoil,” 2014). The significance of *joseonjok* in the Korean migration growth clearly shows the importance of geographical, historical, and cultural linkages previously established between the destination and origin countries (Seol, 2000).

Conclusion

This paper has been concerned with identifying and analyzing the patterns of migration transition in Korea and the contributing factors. Despite the growing volume, the research in the migration transition of Korea often lacks comprehensiveness or is outdated. The paper aims to contribute by incorporating non-economic migration and sending countries’ perspectives into the analytical frame, drawing on various data available.

Starting from the ignoble existence of Filipina maids in better-off

families in Seoul and a handful of industrial trainees brought into Korea, migrants have dramatically increased in number, transforming a hitherto ethnically homogenous country into a key migrant-receiving country in Asia. It was found that labor migrants, the un-skilled in particular, are the largest contributor to the growth, but family migrants, notably marriage migrants, have been increasingly important as well. Also, ethnic Korean migrants are significant in labor migration and family migration alike. The factor analysis shows that labor market conditions in terms of higher income and wider job opportunity in the destination are the strongest driver; however, no statistically meaningful correlation can be found between the aggregate economic indicators and the number of migrants. Instead, it shows that migration decisions, either economic migration or non-economic migration, are influenced by a complex interplay of factors on the state, family, and individual level. The cases of migrants from the Philippines and Vietnam confirm that emigration can be sought out both as a state strategy for economic development and as a family or individual strategy for livelihood and life chances.

Korea's ongoing transition to a migrant-destination country seems hardly reversible, considering that the economy is now structurally dependent on the foreign labor force and that migration origins and patterns are expected to become more diversified. The accelerating ageing trend, for example, may force the introduction of a migrant care/domestic worker visa (or program) for non-ethnics, which has been prohibited so far. In addition, the possibility of permission of family reunion of unskilled migrant workers may cause a second wave of migration growth in Korea. Nonetheless, as emphasized throughout the paper, it is important to recognize that the migration to Korea is highly controlled (at least is meant to be) mobility. Although Korea has been receiving more migrants than before, migration type, size, and flow are predefined and tightly regulated by the government(s) with specific rationales and procedures. As Cohen and Kennedy (2000, p. 206) pointed out, "migration shopping" can be found anywhere to a varying degree, but the Korean government's strategic and pragmatic approach to migrants has been more conspicuous (IPC,

2012) and it will continue to be pivotal in determining the future scale and patterns of migration transition in Korea.

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- 1) Note that the Korean government's migrant statistics includes migrants staying over three months to a year which the UN defines as "short-term immigrants" (see UN, <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/sconcerns/migration/migmmethods.htm>).
 - 2) CIS countries refer to Commonwealth of Independent States which consists of ten former Soviet Republics, namely Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan (World Atlas, <http://www.worldatlas.com/aatlas/infopage/cis.htm>).

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Appendix

Table. A1

Major Labor Migrant Sending Countries to Korea and Their Economic Indicators

Sending country	Total labor Migrants	Unskilled labor migrants	GDP(PPP) per Capita, USD	Unemployment rate
China	251,214	234,666	9,844	4.6
Vietnam	53,538	48,966	4,012	1.9
Indonesia	32,617	29,352	5,214	6.0
Uzbekistan	27,075	26,924	3,762	10.8
Cambodia	25,542	25,525	2,576	0.3
Philippines	25,116	20,567	4,682	7.3
Thailand	22,719	22,291	9,875	0.8
Sri-Lanka	21,448	21,390	6,531	4.2
Nepal	18,846	18,462	1,508	2.7
United States	13,158	0	53,101	7.5
Myanmar	11,461	10,885	1,740	3.5
Bangladesh	9,469	9,287	2,080	4.3
Mongolia	8,854	8,578	5,885	4.9
Pakistan	4,188	4,014	3,149	5.2
Canada	3,784	0	43,472	7.1
Japan	1,706	0	36,899	4.1
Russia	1,112	544	17,884	5.8
Australia	603	0	43,073	5.6

Note. Number of migrants is as of 2014; GDP and Unemployment Rate as of 2013. With the same time point, the per capita GDP(PPP) and the unemployment rate for Korea are 33,189 USD and 3.2 respectively. Compiled by the author from Korea, Republic of, KIS (2014), IMF World Economic Outlook Database (April 2014), ILO Global Employment Trends (2014).

Table. A2

Correlation between the Scale of Labor Migration into Korea and Economic Performances of the Sending Countries

		GDP(PPP) per Capita	Unemployment rate
Total labor migrants	Pearson Correlation	-.177	-.072
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.482	.776
	N	18	18
Unskilled labor migrants	Pearson Correlation	-.218	-.094
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.385	.711
	N	18	18

Note. Author's calculations (SPSS ver.19 used) based on data presented in Appendix Table A1.

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