Korean Migration: “The first reason for coming to New Zealand is adventure.”

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Abstract

This article foregrounds the hopes, desires and aspirations involved in migratory processes. While the Korean parents in this study stated that their children’s education remained their official reason for migration to New Zealand, the stories about New Zealand offering an array of possible life choices were more significant in their migration decisions. The parents’ voices were clear that they wanted alternative and more adventurous life pathways for themselves and their children than were available in South Korea. They also reported that they were strongly motivated by favourable environmental factors.

The international literature on Korean migration gives precedence to the desire for education for children (Jeon, 2010; Kim & Greene, 2003; Song, 2010). A degree from an English-speaking country enables desirable employment and economic security in South Korea. This singularity of purpose is traceable to the historic association of social mobility with education. Other education-related factors prompting longer-term migration include the competitive education climate and the gatekeeping role of English entrance and workplace tests in South Korean schools and workplaces (Piller & Cho, 2013).

Another key factor in the decision to migrate is the role of environmental values, particularly the perceived access to cleaner and less-crowded living conditions, as highlighted in Kim and Yoon’s (2003) study of Korean migration to New Zealand. This is also mentioned in Te Ara – The Encyclopaedia of New Zealand: “Many [Koreans] sought a quieter lifestyle, and welcomed New Zealand’s open spaces” (Story: Koreans, Immigration). Likewise, Collins and Pak (2008) highlighted the role of environmental

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factors in language students’ decision-making, while also acknowledging that there are multiple influences.

Such findings suggest that migration purposes are changing, or that Koreans migrating to New Zealand are motivated differently. Benson and O’Reilly contend that lifestyle or amenity-seeking migration is an emergent and important field, noting that “Lifestyle migration is ... a growing, disparate phenomenon, with important but little understood implications for both societies and individuals” (2009, p. 608). Data from their ethnographic study suggest that migrants seek “open space”. This refers to a broad perception of space – i.e. a “favourable” environment as one participant said – but primarily spaces where more choices are imaginable.

This paper explores the migration experiences of a group of Korean permanent residents whose children attended a large urban Auckland secondary school. The migrants reported that they sought a space where they could “lead their own lives”. They desired more choice in education and careers for their children. At the point of migration the parents imagined their children finding their own path outside the narrow range of work that is traditionally valued in Korea. For them, it was a desire for “adventure”. One informant noted that although unacknowledged publicly, “mid-life crises” propelled adult migration, yet education remained the main stated official reason as it was palatable to relatives left behind.

**Korean Migration to New Zealand**

The total number of permanent Korean residents in New Zealand is relatively small; however, as a proportion of the population, New Zealand has the largest expatriate Korean community in the world (Park, 2010). Moreover, within the burgeoning of populations of Asian origin in New Zealand over the last two decades (“one of the most dramatic transitions in ethnic composition that Aotearoa New Zealand has ever experienced” (Friesen, 2008, p. 2)), the growth was faster among people from South Korea than any other Asia-born residents in the 1990s (Ho & Bedford, 2008; Lidgard & Yoon, 1998). There was a decline in the number of people who identified as Korean in the last inter-censal period, decreasing from 30,792 in 2006, to 30,171 at the 2013 Census (Statistics New Zealand, 2014). Roughly two-thirds of those who identified as Korean reside in
Auckland, many in the northern suburbs, with significant but smaller groups in south-east Auckland and west Auckland.

It is clear that return migration, or on-migration to countries such as Australia, is a significant phenomenon among Korean New Zealanders, even if it cannot be precisely quantified (Friesen, 2012). Despite this, the overall evidence is that the majority of Asian permanent residence migrants to New Zealand are staying in the country, at least in the medium term. Friesen concludes that “[t]here is a significant group of stayers who have usually been overlooked in research in favour of those who have moved” (Friesen, 2012, p. 16). It is the stayers who are the focus of the study reported here.

The trope of “astronaut migrants” (migrants from Asian countries who spend long periods working in their country of origin, leaving their spouses and children in New Zealand) is not prevalent amongst Korean families with permanent residence (Bedford, Ho, & Lidgard, 2000; Lidgard & Yoon, 1998). It is popularised by political electioneering rhetoric, but evidence for its widespread existence among families from other Asian countries is sketchy.

Most of the Korean participants in this study stated that they had migrated with their families. In the retelling of their migration stories, they recalled hearing that in New Zealand, as families, they could find their own voices, and could make their own choices.

**Hoped-for migration stories: Lifestyle change**

Stories fuel migration because they offer imaginary cities where ideals can contradict or subvert current stressful realities (Manguel, 2007). Collins (2006), in his study of young Korean migrants to New Zealand, likened these imaginaries to a series of tropes that are not dissimilar to marketing material. Such stories are embedded with possibilities, providing a vantage point to rethink experience. One hoped-for story that was repeatedly mentioned by participants in this study, and that had been noted in Korean migration literature two decades ago (Abelmann, 1997), is the dignity of work in New Zealand and the freedom this gives. Mrs Kang, a participant in Abelmann’s (1997) study, encouraged her son’s emigration to New Zealand because “she ha[d] heard that in New Zealand the discrepancies between the rewards and prestige for white- and blue-collar workers are not as large as they are in South Korea” (p. 413). Stories of
flatter employment structures inspired hopes of a better life regardless of school and university achievement. Ironically, New Zealand’s income inequalities have escalated over the last two decades (Easton, 2013).

Korean migration that is driven by dreams and desires of a more fulfilling way of life may not be frequently discussed in the literature; however, relocating to find a better way of life is a recognised (albeit under-researched) phenomenon (Benson & O’Reilly, 2009). Benson and O’Reilly (2009) conceptualise this form of migration as a “search” rather than an “act”. They contend that lifestyle migration has grown as a result of particular historical and material conditions, particularly globalisation, increased mobility, flexibility, increased relative wealth, and increased opportunities for reflexivity. The Longitudinal Immigration Survey: New Zealand (LisNZ) study reported that, in general, the chief motivation for choosing New Zealand was the “relaxed pace of life or lifestyle” and the second was “climate or the clean green environment” (Department of Labour, 2009). Benson and O’Reilly (2009) contend that future research needs to focus on post-arrival needs such as the interactions between the migrants and hosts, a contention with implications for this study. For migrants, the embodiment of dreams in a host country requires links not only to the past, to the home culture, but also links to the mainstream host society to access the stories of salient, motivating others (Bauman, 2001). Imagining possible trajectories is reliant on social connectivity.

Host societies typically offer limited hospitality to migrants. In New Zealand, Gendall, Spoonley, and Trlin (2007) found little take-up among the general population for the development of settlement strategies to support migrants. Internationally, too, disconnect has long been the reality. Abelmann’s (2009) long-term study of Korean American students at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign suggests that segregation rather than integration characterises first- and second-generation migrant life.

The Study

Background to the study

My involvement in a Ministry of Education initiative to introduce Korean language to selected Auckland schools in the 1990s resulted in ongoing networking with some members of Auckland’s Korean migrant community.
The stories told within the informal English classes for Korean migrants that I was running alerted me to the value of formalising my networking with the school the English class members’ children attended. This was the commencement of an ethnographic and participatory doctoral study in 2009.

Yeoh, Graham, and Boyle (2002) assert that ethnographic work has established the salience of the family as the context in which people make plans, yet fields of study such as demography have tended to be “pre-occupied with the ‘two extremes’ of individual and nation in accounting for demographic behaviour. This leaves a substantial gap in between” (p. 2).

Participants
This study involved 13 participants, all of whom were permanent residents of New Zealand. Most of the participants were members of a Korean parent group who attended regular parent-school information-sharing evenings, and most were living with their spouses (there were only two exceptions). Focus groups were held with the 13 Korean parents, whose children all attended the same school.

A Korean ancillary staff member responsible for international students and parent liaison helped with the research organisation. One of the parents asserted that the parents who came to these school meetings, and therefore the research participants, were only those who had concerns about their children. Those whose children were successful (and who, it is assumed, were therefore following more traditionally Korean career pathways) had no need to attend the information-sharing evenings. In order to be fully immersed in the study, and to create more speaking opportunities, I also invited some of the parents in my English class to participate. For this second group I used purposive criteria to invite those participants who knew me and each other well and who could communicate their thoughts in English. Five English class parents volunteered to participate, mostly as they sought opportunities to interact in English.

Altogether, there were nine females and four males, all aged between 35 and 55 years. The length of time they had lived in New Zealand varied, from one to 10 years. Pseudonyms have been used throughout.
Interviews and ethnographic talk

The school group had two very long focus group interviews in Korean, and email exchanges in English following data-confirmation checks. I also took field notes at the regular Korean parent-school group meetings and I talked to the participants informally on these occasions. The English class group had two focus group interviews in English, and countless informal conversations. My habit was to keep a journal and write up these informal talks as soon as I could. Later in the process I used these informal opportunities to test out my emerging hypotheses in anonymised scenarios.

I chose focus groups for the Korean participants because I thought this would be a comfortable way for the participants to express, or not express, their opinions as they shared similar backgrounds. I considered that bringing the parents together to reflect on their experiences might be useful in their making sense of their experiences in New Zealand, particularly in relation to their children’s trajectories at school.

In the Korean language interviews the parents ran their own focus groups. The parents talked in turn, introducing themselves at first, and then, as familiarity grew, gradually crafting a collective thread. This was exemplified by individual stories that were told with detail and emotional force in order to garner empathy and respect. Each speaker would respond to what had previously been said, before adding their own story. In this way, the participants directed their own interviews, and consequently, the coding. The big themes gained momentum illustrated by these small stories. Their stories tapped into issues that group members found familiar and important: barriers to participation, participation in education, and participation in society.

The talk was audiotaped for the translator. There is not space in this article to address issues of the use of translators except to comment that I followed Goldstein’s (1995) advice in viewing the translator as a provider of sociocultural and sociolinguistic background knowledge which can strengthen analysis. The translator accepted my invitation to comment on the focus group interviews. I returned to the participants both Korean and English versions of their oral texts for confirmation checks and further comment. While not within the scope of this article, it is important to note that language is a significant barrier to research with people who are not
like the researcher in various ways and presents unique threats to validity (Esposito, 2001).

I used the same questions for the English focus group interviews although these were personalised discussions because the group was small and I knew them well. In these interviews I managed the discussion, and it veered in various directions depending on responses. English was a constricting factor and consequently, while they gave illustrative examples, their stories were shorter with less detail.

Finding a Voice

This paper reflects on a subset of the data that was collected, namely the responses to the question “What you were thinking about when you decided to leave Korea and put your children in school in New Zealand?”

I was well into the project when I was somewhat surprised by a comment from one informant. She contended that migrants left Korea due to mid-life crises, and that the stories of leaving for educational reasons were provided for convenience, as older family members found such reasons palatable. The informant, who had a degree from one of Seoul’s top universities, said she had wanted the chance to emerge from the shadows of being known only in terms of her children: she wanted her own identity. She explained that if I were to visit the Korean locale where she had been living with her family, I would need to inquire after “Min’s mother” as her friends would not know her by her own name. In saying this, she mirrored the sentiments of some of the women in Park and Abelmann’s (2004) study who were unhappy with the constraints of having to derive satisfaction by zealously securing their children’s educational success, employment and marriage opportunities. However, in the informant’s case, her desires coincided with those of her husband, who sought relief from relentless hours of work. Reflecting on this informant’s voice motivated a re-examination of the data, and further conversations with other research participants. They all agreed that education was not the primary reason for migration. While they did not use the phrase “mid-life crisis”, they reported that they wanted more family time, and they imagined a more satisfying lifestyle than in their home country.

As mentioned in the previous section, the translated data from the school group was characterised by collective stories. Although the parents’
own migration imaginaries were often conflated with those they held for their children (who were the core of the larger study), the story fragments were there and the connecting threads clear. The collective, hoped-for story centred on New Zealand as a society where everyone could find their own voice free from societal strictures. Education and employment were dominant themes.

A collective migration story illustrated by detailed small stories

The first focus group told a collective story of desiring an environment where both parents and children could make their own non-traditional choices. As the talk progressed, generalised comments were increasingly replaced by detailed anecdotes.

Kevin began the story by saying that, when he returned to Korea after being stationed overseas, he was restless. He said that he “did a lot of thinking. People in Korea started talking … [saying that] New Zealand was a beautiful country. … I came here because the environment was favourable for me.”

The next speaker, Andrew, endorsed Kevin’s comments, and then introduced the topic of work equality, asking for confirmation from the group that his perceptions matched reality:

I have a similar reason [for coming here] as the person who talked before me. … I’ve always wanted my children to be able to choose what they want to do. … People here don’t think there is a world of difference between them [jobs] whereas in Korea people do, right?

Andrew wanted a less prescribed and more uncertain, exciting and adventurous future for his children. He created a scenario of negative talk circulating in Korea: for example, “If you don’t do well academically, people talk in a bad way, like, ‘Would you be able to earn enough to eat? What are you going to do? Work in a factory?’” He wanted his children to exercise choice:

I came here because I found a hope here. … I think that they [children] themselves should think about their living as they grow up. They should lead their own lives. I think like that and I have led them towards that way. So they have always thought for themselves, rather than parents pushing them to do things.
Gloria agreed that everyone should have the opportunity to find their own voice, to be able to choose: “I like here because the education system ... eventually leads them to examine themselves, although it seems a bit loose for now.” She saw the risks inherent in loosening control over her children’s educational experiences, while voicing a non-traditional notion that parents should not worry about education.

Simon positioned himself alongside Gloria: “Children can do what they want to do very well if parents are not too obsessed with their education.”

As the talk continued, generalised comments were replaced by detailed anecdotes. Amy described an incident that caused her to finally pack up and leave Korea.

We could hear noise from [our neighbours'] apartment when we opened the windows. One day, the daughter of the neighbour in front practised singing a song in a major key. On another day, she sang a song in a minor key. So I asked her mum whether she wanted her daughter to study singing (translator's note – meaning at university level). I said that I heard her singing. Then she told me that she got a music teacher when her daughter sat a singing test in music (translator's note – the music test was in school).

Amy sought freedom from the constraints exemplified by her neighbour. She rejected what she perceived as prescriptive tutoring, even when the tests were low stake. Her anecdote added to the collective story that was one of hope that their children could find their own life pathway.

The parents had aspirations for themselves, too. Rosa’s story gives a more in-depth account of her search for an adventurous life.

**Rosa: The first reason, adventure**

Rosa was the only participant to initially cite adventure as her reason for migrating, relegating education to third place. She commented: “The first reason for coming to New Zealand, adventure; second reason for husband to get away from drinking culture; third, education.” In New Zealand, Rosa and her husband did indeed seek adventure, purchasing a small lifestyle block on the urban fringe and consequently learning completely new skills of land management, animal husbandry and horticulture. While Rosa continued her work as a teacher of Japanese, although in a different after-school, informal, self-employed context, her husband retrained completely. In Korea he had worked in the automobile spare parts industry, and for a
time he set up in business in New Zealand in a related field as a panel beater. However, he later retrained full time over three years in natural therapies such as acupuncture and homeopathy.

Rosa and her husband authored new identities in New Zealand, as lifestyle farmer and practitioner of alternative medicine. Rosa's identity was no longer encapsulated within her children's success at school, although her interactions were still largely within the Asian community. Later, at the end of the study, once her children were approaching university, she and her husband travelled in South-East Asia searching for a possible location for their next adventure. They found Myanmar, where opportunity (commercial opportunities with a burgeoning automobile industry) and imagined need (alternative healing therapies and church volunteering to meet needs) coincided. After eight years in New Zealand, Rosa and her husband sold their lifestyle block and bought an inner-city apartment for their children. Rosa said that it was now time to give back to society, and in Myanmar both she and her husband planned to work in the voluntary sector while her husband would support them financially by also working in the growing automobile industry. Rosa would perhaps teach Korean or Japanese or English language. Rosa and her husband were not planning on returning to Korea. They illustrate Vasil and Yoon's (1996) contention that “Those who migrate permanently often tend to be among the more adventurous, those who are prepared to adapt and change” (p. 48).

Rosa was living out her hoped-for dreams in some ways, but what bothered her at the time of data collection was that her teenage son and his friends were not seeking adventure and were not motivated. The teenagers she knew were aimless. When she questioned her son about his dreams she reported: “Didn't have adventure. Didn't have hope.” In the following conversation with Clara and the interviewer (MK), Rosa recalled her conversation with her son in more detail.
In Rosa’s reconstructed conversation her son’s responses are repeatedly negative (e.g. “No, I don’t know”). In reporting his failure to develop plans, and to dream, she equated his lack of adventure with a lack of direction. She painted him as “comfortable” and “satisfied” but being without hope.

Other parents echoed Rosa’s concern. Andrew, for example, lamented his children’s passive participation in school: “They participate in school passively although there are a lot of opportunities to jump in.”

Rosa had ideas about what would help her son, and his friends, but felt she didn’t have the English skills to approach the school. She wanted salient others (“inviting famous people and respect peoples” or “elder students”) to inspire her son and his friends at school with visions of what they might do, who they might become:

Sometimes inviting famous people and respect peoples. And open speech to all the people. This school has a short story so didn’t have appreciated people so other invited respect people come and give talk about their future. ... Yes, inspire. And so at that time they have lots of questions to the elder students. It’s good meeting I think.

Rosa imagined the principal and senior teachers giving encouraging talks to students about taking on challenging futures.

And then I hope to the principal. ... I hope they got lots of promotion or adventure. So that elder teacher and principal say lots of things about
future and hope and adventure. And then they got a good chance. Promotion. Adventure. Have to do this speaking.

She was worried that her son and his friends were unable to construct goals for themselves, because they had no inkling of their ideal future self (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009). Without their parents’ dreams at the point of migration, they were stuck in their actual selves, their complacent everyday New Zealand lives. Rosa complained that this included knowledge of the safety net of the welfare culture: “In this culture, lots of welfare.” Without goals they didn’t dream, she claimed. Rosa felt that the young friends lived day to day, and were going nowhere. So Rosa took her own steps: getting inspiration from the film *The Bucket List* which was popular at the time, she drew up her vision of her future self and encouraged her son and his friends to do the same. A year later she reported her son was developing his own vision of who he might become, and this enabled her and her husband to formulate new plans.

The Korean migrants in this study had migrated with their families and arrived with dreams of a transformed life with participation in, and connections to, the host society. Rosa and her husband orchestrated their own adventures. Vulnerable teenagers, and others on the margins, do not have the same resources with which to visualise future contexts. Interaction that occurs in shared institutions such as schools could provide the potential for a “creative multiculturalism” (Spoonley & Bedford, 2012, p. 248). However, Sinnema and Robinson (2012) in their investigation of school goals set by experienced school principals found that goals relevant to cultural and diversity issues were the ones least likely to be set. Beyond the school gates, the studies are equally depressing. In a survey of the wider society, Gendall, Spoonley, and Trlin (2007) found scant support for the development of settlement strategies geared to the post-arrival needs of immigrants. Spoonley and Bedford (2012) note that “compared with Australia and Canada, New Zealand has spent little on post-arrival support” (p. 248). Consequently, one thing New Zealanders of Asian origin “tend to feel especially unhappy about in New Zealand is that they find it extremely difficult to create a large enough circle of friends with whom they can enjoy life” (Vasil & Yoon, 1996, p. 44).
Implications and Conclusion

Prior to migration, the participants in this study sought a better way of life than they had in Korea, supporting Kim and Yoon’s (2003) thesis of lifestyle migration. They listened to stories and imagined a country whose ideals contradicted their existing stressful realities, particularly in education and employment. They sought spaces where they could find their own voices. While Rosa’s case illustrates that it was possible to realise these imaginings, she was forced to draw on her own resources in the absence of welcoming and supporting structures from the host society. Her case illustrates Benson and O’Reilly’s (2009) contention that future research needs to focus on post-arrival requirements, such as the interactions between the migrants and hosts.

Rosa’s sphere of friendship and work was still largely Korean, confirming Vasil and Yoon’s (1996) earlier findings about the difficulty of developing friendships in the wider community. The broader group of parents reported that their children participated only passively at school, both primary and secondary, struggling to find their own voices. This particularly worried the parents, who had dreamed of an array of opportunities for their children.

The trope of astronaut migration does not fit the experiences of the participants in this study. Contrary to other findings where children relocate for study or work and parents return to their country of birth, Rosa’s children were staying in New Zealand attending university while she and her husband were relocating to Myanmar for reasons of a continuing search for adventure. Thus Rosa’s story sits comfortably alongside Benson and O’Reilly’s (2009) notion of migration as search. Migration is not a one-off event which ends in settlement; instead, it is an ongoing process that may be re-evaluated and reconsidered several times over the life course (Ryan & Sales, 2013). In Rosa’s case, her search lens focal point shifted with age, allowing her to imagine a new adventure through offering her resources to what she saw as a needy community.

Ethnographic research of this kind illuminates the particular, not the general. Individuals’ narratives are always exceptional and provide insight into realities that theoretical approaches may miss. Individual reasons for migration escape the strictures of theoretical boundaries. There may be as many reasons for migration as there are individuals who do it.
Further research is perhaps required into the motivations of a broader range of Korea-born parents. As one of the participants pointed out, those who came to the school meetings, and participated in this research, perhaps represented the group of parents whose children were struggling.

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References


