

Transnational Migration and the Kyopos' Role in World Mission*

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As opportunities for socio-economic enterprises increase in Asia, more Asian Americans will participate in transnational migration between North America and Asia. In the case of Korea, highly educated Korean Americans, also known as Kyopos,¹ are participating in transnational migration for various reasons. Several theories focus on why people move based upon economic factors such as the neoclassical economic, the new economic, segmented labor market, and the World system. Basically, these theories predict the motivation of economic security as impetus for international migration. Such factors certainly play into the decision to move; however, they do not give a full explanation for why Christian Kyopos migrate to South Korea.

The first reason has to do with family and social reasons. Many second generations are returning to Korea to be closer to their extended families. The second reason why Kyopo Christians are moving back to Korea concerns their religious convictions. Korea is becoming the new epicenter of Christian missionary work in Asia. The country is strategically located to train and send out Christian workers to the world. The third, and arguably more obvious, reason to return to Korea is because they have more economic opportunities. Unfortunately, regardless of why Westernized Koreans relocate to the peninsula, the truth is that they have limited roles because they lack, among many resources and characteristics, the network of natives with whom they can work. In

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1. Kyopo is a general term for a person of Korean descent who has immigrated and lives abroad from Korea. Although technically limiting, the term Kyopo and second generation Korean American will be used interchangeably in this article.

many ways, Kyopos are underutilized. This article will examine some of the opportunities and challenges facing second generation Westernized Koreans in Korea from a transnational perspective. Thus, the first part of the article will provide a basic overview on the scholarly discussions on transmigrants. The second part will discuss how family plays an important role in Korean Americans' return to Korea. The third part of this essay will discuss how Christian Kyopos can enhance the Christian culture of the Korean church and global mission. Finally, the last part will discuss drawbacks for Kyopos.

Transnational Migration

The latest model of studying international migration is to observe the linkages that tie emigration and immigration regions. There are several ways to describe these connections between nations so that transnational social fields are multilayered between the sending and receiving countries. This section will discuss various terms regarding international migration.

Faist describes international migration as

a multi-dimensional economic, political, cultural and demographic process which encapsulates various links between two or more settings in various nation-states and manifold ties of movers and stayers between them. (2000, 8)

For Faist, international migration is when people relocate in another nation-state without completely severing ties of their place of origin. Another term is transnational migration, which refers to migration that occurs between two or more nations. Here, we have the idea of transnationalism, a term has been used loosely in a wide variety of disciplines to describe many different social interactions so much so that it is rendered as not scientific. For example, Basch defines "transnationalism" as "the processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement" (Basch, Glick-Schiller, and Szanton Blanc 1999, 7). In contrast, Guarnizo and Smith present transnational migration under more complicated factors: (1) the micro-dynamics of migration, where global economic restructuring facilitates international migration; (2) the globalization of capitalism and the new economy, with less industrialized countries being destabilized; and (3) the technological advancement in transportation and communication (Guarnizo and Smith 1999, 4).

A transnational identity belongs to immigrants who have affinities and affections for their original homeland; they "continue to be members of the state from which they originated" (Basch, Glick-Schiller, and

Szanton-Blanc 1994, 8). They are people who have emigrated from, for our context, Korea to America and their descendants in America continue to have linkages with Korea. This means that these immigrants have rights and responsibilities in the place of origin, Korea, even though they may have physically left that country (Schiller and Fouron 1999, 133). The constant flux of social and cultural values in the forms of media, music, tourism, religious or secular festivals and rituals produce transnational social linkages (Guarnizo and Smith 1999, 19), which are valued by immigrants and their offspring.

How do we define transmigrants? Not everyone who travels is considered a transmigrant. Levitt distinguishes individuals who (1) travel regularly to conduct their economic and political affairs yet whose lives are primarily rooted in a single nation and (2) those who do not move but whose lives are within a context that has become transnationalized (2001, 9). Transmigrants are people “who live their lives across borders so that they are simultaneously incorporated in two or more states” (Levitt and Waters 2006, 171; Glick-Schiller, Basch, and Szanton-Blanc 1992, 1). They are people whose daily lives are manifested in multiple relationships and connections across international borders. This multiplicity of relationships can be familial, economic, social, organizational, religious, and political. Transmigrants have points of references not just in one locus of residency, but have developed significant relationships and labor in two or more places around the world. Many contributing factors attributed to transmigration are economically-based (Levitt 2001, 18); however, there may be other factors such as governmental policy and familial ties. The case which we are dealing with in this article is the transnational migration of ethnic Koreans between two nations: the United States and South Korea.

Family Ties

One of the major reasons that finalized decisions for Korean Americans to migrate between Korea and the United States concerns not so much economic factors but family. This second section will discuss Korean-Americans who moved to Korea on familial grounds. They possess, in the very least, a bachelor's degree (some may have doctorates) from the West which makes them reasonably marketable in the United States and very well educated. Yet they have decided to live abroad in their ethnic country of origin.

DL came to Korea to take care of his brothers, and the fact that he could study theology at the graduate level was an added incentive. DL's parents suggested that he come to Korea to study theology and take care of his brothers simultaneously:

My brothers are singers in Korea. I have two brothers here in Korea, who are *gasoo* (singers). Originally they were here before me. Obviously my parents worry about my brothers. They asked me whether I would like to study in Korea. I speak Korean just enough to go to bathroom and to eat, that's about it. There's no way I could study theology. (DL, personal interview, April 14, 2002).

Though DL hesitated at first to move to Korea, he eventually relocated and fulfilled the suggestions of parents. In addition, JM shared about his strong ties with his mother and his desire to know his extended family members better:

I have many of my family members still in the U.S. My immediate family is not, however. My mom lives here in Seoul, twenty minutes away from me. My sister lives in Barcelona, Spain with her husband and two girls. My wife's family is mostly in the U.S. and we visit them every summer. One of the things I considered as I finalized the move was being closer to mom and other family whom I hadn't had too much contact with for many years. (JM, personal interview, April 11, 2002).

Again, family plays a strong role for Kyopos to move back.

Some of the Kyopos working in Korea shared their extended-family issues which traditional foreigners never had to consider. On one hand, there were positive factors in having extended families because it increased the social and work-related networks depending upon the influence of one's extended family. On the other hand, working in one's country of ethnic origin as an expatriate also possesses some challenges. Some of the extended family members brought unforeseen set of challenges into the lives of the Kyopo migrants such as obligations. JM shares his extended family's expectations:

Expectation from the extended family can also be burdensome. My family's need to get together for every reason possible, makes work and life with wife and son more stressful because of time and emotional reasons. (JM, personal interview, April 11, 2002).

Some Kyopo migrants decided to come to Korea to work out their problems with family members. In one case, a Korean-American woman moved to Korea to resolve marital issues. SB shares her personal tragedy as follows:

The reason why I came to Korea was to try to work out my situation with my ex-husband. But it did not work out and we eventually ended up with a divorce. We were married for four years and he was not coming to the States. The reason why I came to Korea was that I was so sick, emotionally, spiritually, and everything. I had no way out and I felt that

I needed to come to Korea where my parents were to recuperate. When I came here, I told my parents everything. We prayed and fasted and God started to really heal me. My parents finally accepted my divorce because I was going through such a hard time. And then I realized that the only person that I had was God. (SB, personal interview, April 15, 2002).

CK came to Korea for two reasons: (1) to understand his family especially his father and (2) he wanted to escape from his problems in America. He states:

My family life is not satisfactory. My dad has been in Korea for two years doing nothing. I came here trying to find out what my father was doing here. I did not know that I had a sister in Korea until ten years ago. I came to Korea to get to know her too. The relationship with my sister... I didn't know who she was. My relationship with my sister is now closer; she's cool. I had a girlfriend that I really cared about; however, the parents disliked me and forbade me to see her. Out of respect I tried to stop but she tried to contact me. She needed to mature as a person and so I had to leave. This is one of the main reasons I left. (CK, personal interview, April 23, 2002).

SK migrated to Korea to understand his father's circumstances better. His father failed in his business enterprises. SK's father's dire situation was an added incentive to stay.

SC decided to come to Korea to be closer to the mission field but the presence of his in-laws in Korea helped ease his decision.

There was a lot of pull to come to Korea. My wife's family, her older sister is here; family ties were very strong. Dr. Park (a professor at the school) being here was another pull. (SC, personal interview, April 12, 2002).

SC moved his whole immediate family back to Korea where his children are able to meet with their grandparents monthly. In addition, he was able to work with one of his mentors who also moved back to Korea.

In this research, most of the Kyopos' social networks were a means of facilitating migration to Korea from the United States. Extended family issues were very important to the Kyopo respondents. The Kyopo migrants used their social and family networks in making the decision to migrate to Korea. Economics did not play a role compared to the value of maintaining strong family bonds. For other Christian Korean Americans, missions are the other impetus for moving to Korea.

Kyopo's Involvement in World Mission

Korean-American Christians believe that they are excellent candidates for the mission field because of their multicultural background.

They argue among many beliefs that the first useful part of their background concerns their experiences living in both Eastern and Western countries. They have lived in America as Koreans, and live in Korea as Americans. Their dualistic background gives them confidence about understanding, assimilating, and articulating different environments and cultures which is required to evangelize abroad. The second practical tool is their command of the English language. As English becomes a new medium by which the rest of the world communicates, Korean-Americans use their English fluency as a valued asset in Asia. They propagate the gospel in Korea and abroad by translating, teaching English to natives or by teaching courses in English.

Multiculturalism in Korean-Americans

Korea is a nation-state that is sending out great number of Christian workers around the world. Although the number has hit a plateau in the recent years (Ro 2002, 112), many Korean churches and denominations are still adamant about training and producing mass numbers of workers for overseas work. However, Korea is basically a monolingual and mono-cultural nation. It is imperative that Korean workers headed overseas receive extensive cross-cultural training before they go out for their international assignments.

SC believes that one of the best candidates to train the native Koreans for enculturation is the Kyopo. Many of the Kyopo respondents in this study have learned to move across cultures and they have the propensity to appreciate the differences in the multiplicity of cultures around the world. Due to their cross-cultural and discrimination experiences in the United States,² Kyopos have become more tolerant of cultural differences. Their cultural awareness compels them to acknowledge that the Korean culture is different from the American culture. Each country possesses its own culture, and each nation appropriate ways of living, socializing, and behaving. They can appreciate the differing perspectives of various cultures.

South Korea is a strategic place for cross-cultural training and preparation. One of the major reasons why SC decided to come to Korea was to be closer to the 10-40 Window. He felt that being in Korea was more strategic for missions than staying in the States. SC gives his reason for being in Korea:

The number one reason was not because we wanted to come to Korea, but because we did not want to be in the U.S. The U.S. is our home; we

2. For more information about discrimination faced by Korean-Americans in Korea, see footnote 1.

feel most comfortable in the U.S. Korea is close to the mission field. We wanted to be close to a place where there was not an over-abundance of resources. I believed in the vision of the school, to train indigenous leaders from less-Christianized regions. Korea is a much more strategic place than the United States, much cheaper. We have a calling and vision for the international settings. Korea has become a missionary sending country. Korean Americans have an instant linguistic and cultural competence in Korea. We have a contribution to make in terms of enculturation. (SC, personal interview, April 12, 2002).

As well as its advantage of being in close proximity to the 10-40 Window, as SC stated, Korea is a missionary-sending country. The opportunities to reach Asia are immeasurable. LB explains the latitude in Asian missions because he lives Korea:

There are more opportunities for mission. There is more accessibility of countries. I've been to China, Japan, and North Korea. From here (Korea) to Japan, it is only two hundred bucks for an airfare. It is easily accessible. It opens your mind to an international perspective. Generally speaking, most of the Americans are sheltered from the rest of the world. Canadians may be a little different. Americans generally hate world news; they don't care about what happens around the world. The traveling and seeing other people opens up your mind to other perspectives. (LR, personal interview, April 19, 2002).

The choice of maintaining transnational ties, of going back and forth between the United States and Korea is pointed out by SB. With regard to nation-states of people, Kyopos have a choice of interacting comfortably with all types of cultural people. Native Koreans grew up in a mono-cultural and mono-lingual society. The Kyopo population, on the other hand, grew up with multicultural and multiethnic experiences. These experiences lend themselves to allow the Kyopo to interact with people of different cultural and ethnic backgrounds in a natural manner. For example, SB states her potential to be an international player because of her dualistic background:

Second generation Korean Americans can contribute to Korea; I never knew that I would be in Korea. I never thought that God would use me. I thought that I can [could] stay in Korea and be used by God. Maybe I can go back and forth; I have choices. I am very open. I love different cultures and different ethnic backgrounds. Native Koreans have a barrier with the internationals, but I have no barriers. There is much less gap. I can relate to Koreans, Americans, and internationals. God has given me a

compassionate heart for the different ethnic backgrounds. (SB, personal interview, April 15, 2002).

She feels fulfillment in doing the work of God as she is preparing for missions: leading small group, counseling, prayer, praise, worship, and all tasks in preparation for missions. SB believes that Kyopos like herself have a natural affinity toward international people and their experiences.

The natural affinity toward foreigners must be complimented by missional action. GK believes that Kyopos can make contributions to Korea if they can come with a learning attitude as well as an attitude to be proactively engaged in mission work. GK gives the following advice to Kyopos:

Yes, Korean society in general, in schools, companies and churches do need a new leadership model that's more open to the world. With the language and the experience of the United States, they truly can impact the people with honesty, faithfulness, [and] effectiveness with the love of Jesus Christ. More people will be drawn to the church if second generation Korean Americans can be mission-minded to approach Koreans and non-Koreans. (GK, personal interview, April 20, 2002).

The need for Korean Americans to be more proactive in order to be globally-aware is recognized by Kyopos. Many Korean Americans are ignorant of the affairs outside the United States. KB also acknowledges that she was uninformed in global events and news before she moved to Korea. She confesses that when she was residing in the United States, she was complacent, living in the most powerful and sufficient country in the world. KB postulates that if the Kyopo population is going to become major players in the international scene, especially in missions, they must become more globally aware.

LR believes that there is a strategic role that Kyopos can play in the once Western-dominated world without the opprobrium of colonialism and imperialism. Kyopos have the education and the experience of an Anglo, with the appearance of a non-Anglo. As a result, they can be accepted worldwide. LR points out the opportunities for Korean Americans:

For white faces, they are not readily accepted as compared to a Korean face; it (Korean face) is not associated with imperialism. Korea has been beat up by almost every country in the world. People are not as defensive to Koreans as a missionary or businessman. There is so much potential

for Korean Americans to make a world-wide impact. (LR, personal interview, April 19, 2002).

Reaching the world can also be accomplished by ministering to foreigners living in Korea. There is a growing population of foreigners working in Korea who need Christian services. With the growing economy of Korea, many migrant workers from underdeveloped nations are flocking to Korea in the thousands. Moreover, many from the developing nations are opting to come to Korea for theological education because education costs are lower as opposed to attending a school in Europe or the United States. Some of the Kyopos stated that they were able to relate with this growing international population. DL finds fulfillment in interacting with the international students in his theology school:

What is fulfilling is my relationship with international students because they bring a whole different package. We are talking about people coming from Third World nations. To get a sense of what their priorities are compared to mine, and to sift through, you really get a better sense of what real priorities are and what are not. Especially in a Christian context, loving each other is the truth of what you should live for. When it's all said and done, it's not about your car. Guess what, they don't have cars where some of these people are from. Not everyone drives a car. It's not about nice clothes because they don't wear Versace or Hugo Boss. They don't even care. (DL, personal interview, April 14, 2002).

Many of the Kyopos testified that they had natural affinity toward other minority ethnic people in Korea. This natural affinity for a very diverse multicultural society has yet to be fully actualized. More than the native Koreans, who grew up in a mono-cultural society, the 1.5 generation leaders pointed out that Kyopos have tremendous potential to impact the international community that is growing in Korea.

English as a Tool to Evangelize

Another extremely useful tool Korean Americans possess is the fluency of the English language. Having been educated in the American school system, their natural speaking ability becomes a valued asset in Korea and in Asia. LR recognizes God's plan for Koreans to be educated in the United States:

From a mission perspective, native Koreans must speak English. English is such a powerful force in the world. God has blessed Korean Americans in such a way that they can make a world-wide impact, whether in busi-

ness, missions, culture, society or whatever. We had educational opportunities. (LR, personal interview, April 19, 2002).

Many Kyopo respondents realize that there are many more opportunities for them to work in Korea. Their English speaking abilities allows them to have access to a whole country of people who want to learn English. They have an opportunity to reach the majority of the population and share the gospel in English. This opportunity often brings fulfillment to Kyopo migrants for the first time in their lives.

As a Korean who speaks English, PK has the advantage of reaching out to many Koreans. In the United States, most Korean American pastors do not have access to the whole nation. They are limited to the pool of Korean Americans or at most Asian Americans. The increasing opportunities to serve a whole population persuaded some of the Kyopo respondents to stay in Korea.

However, due to the lack of transnational ties, the longer the Kyopo migrant stays in Korea, the less connection they will have in America. Without developing institutional ties, the Kyopo migrant in Korea will become less relevant in the West. PK finds more opportunities in Asia the longer he stays in Korea. In contrast, the longer he stays in Korea, the less he is connected to people in America; there is less for him to do there. JC is another case where he realizes his increasing time in Korea is diminishing his opportunities in the United States.

I feel Korea is a mission field for me. I feel at home in Korea in some sense because this is where the people are that I minister to. I do not fit in anymore in the U.S. I get excited in Korea not because of comfort or money, but I feel I have something to contribute. (JC, personal interview, April 29, 2002).

Young and inexperienced Korean-Americans find very little opportunity to minister in the United States. In contrast, they have ample opportunities in Korea simply because they speak English. Some were able to find enviable jobs in the Korean media from radio to television outlets.

LB hosts a cable television program in Korea and met highly profiled Christians. Without a doubt, this position would not have been readily obtained by Korean-Americans in the United State:

There are things which I have done here which I have never had the opportunity in the U.S. I have a cable TV. I share daily Quiet Times. All over the world, I receive feedback. I host special events and people like

Bob Fittz and Ron Kenoly. I had meals together with Bob Fittz. (LR, personal interview, April 19, 2002).

Famous Christians who travel to Korea are introduced to Kyopos to assist them in their endeavors.

The Kyopos' ministry opportunities expand beyond imagination because of their English fluency. PK is leading a morning program on a Christian radio station at a time where secular radio stations have their English programs. He teaches in English at a competitive time slot.

Yes, I am doing more than I have done than in the States. I am doing a daily one-hour English program on a Christian broadcasting station. The program includes doing Quiet Time, English lessons, and lots of Christian music. It's on 6am every morning. There are a lot more opportunities for me here just because of my English. As I see the need for English speaking pastors in Korea, I see my need to be here. There is much need for English Ministry pastors in Korea and they can't just find them. (PK, personal interview, April 26, 2002).

In addition, DL was able to access the hard-to-reach places like the entertainment industry, which is extremely limited to native Koreans.

There are specific opportunities which are available only because I am in Korea. For example, I am able to teach English and there are financial rewards that go with that. In the States, I could only do so much because everybody speaks English. I teach English to movie stars, in iMBC (an internet television network in Korea). It's fulfilling work. (DL, personal interview, April 14, 2002).

More opportunities in schools and ministries are offered to Kyopos as native English speakers. Korean American Christians can reach people outside the church. There are increasing number of schools and churches that offer courses and services in English. Institutions take advantage of the growing desire and need for more proficiency in the language. Working Kyopos often feel valuable and fulfilled when they are able to work and influence a large number of people. AL is able to teach at a university where many of the subjects are taught in English from English textbooks. CK and PK are leading youth ministries in prominent churches in a suburb and in the city of Seoul respectively.

Working with these kids, watching them change their lives is such... that really winds my clock. I love the fact that they are finding more to their

lives, more than what they think is important. Trying to give them priorities in life is satisfying. (CK, personal interview, April 23, 2002).

Kyopo respondents take advantage of their jobs to teach English to share the gospel message. Students who would normally not go to church were encouraged by their parents to attend the English services in order to learn English. Thus, Christian Kyopos were able to infiltrate those parts of the population who would normally not have gone to church had it not been for the opportunity to learn English there.

Drawbacks

However, not everyone was able to feel fulfilled in their calling to live in Korea. Some respondents shared that they were not developing professionally while living in Korea. KB sometimes feels that she and her husband are trapped in Korea and that everyone is advancing in the United States in terms of career and life. To remind her of the significance of her work in Korea she remembers that she is a tentmaker in Korea, equipping many to go overseas as missionaries. She is able to forgo her desire to return to America when she realizes her mission with the church. The church S, which happens to be a ministry for an international population in Seoul, sent out their first missionary to China in 2002.

While living in Korea, some of the Kyopo respondents shared their frustrations of limited upward mobility. Many Kyopos felt that they were falling behind the people in America. Most Kyopos interviewed had the United States as their point of reference. With the United States as a point of reference, some professionally minded Kyopos indicated their concerns about personal and professional development while living in Korea. They had limited upward mobility. JK, for example, does not sense fulfillment in terms of his academic career development:

No, I am not being utilized to my full potential. But the reason why I qualify it (the statement) is that people appreciate it a lot more. Even though my full potential is not being realized, people are appreciating it. In terms of academics, this environment does not facilitate my growth simply for the reason that it is not a linguistically unified environment. Ministry opportunities and expectations will be a lot higher in the States than in Korea. I am not being stretched in Korea. I can do 70% of my potential and people are wowed. Therefore, there is very little incentive to perform 100%. In Korea, I can speak Konglish (hybrid of Korean and English) and people are awed, while in the U.S., people make fun of me

as a FOB (Fresh Off the Boat). I do not feel the academic stimulation. (JK, personal interview, April 12, 2002).

JK may one day decide to leave Korea, not because he does not feel that he is being effective, but because he is not growing personally and professionally. JK feels that he is falling behind his friends, colleagues, and counterparts in the United States.

There are very few places where Kyopos are being professionally challenged and stimulated. School D is one such place. JM feels fulfilled in the caliber of students he works with, the professional development of the teachers, and the clear mission of the school:

Professionally, School D is an ideal school to work in as an educator from the quality of students to its treatment of the teachers. I feel School D has a clear mission in mind that is completely in tune with what I believe education should do for the kids. This synergy helps make my professional life more fulfilling. (JM, personal interview, April 11, 2002).

Kyopos can play a more significant role in preparing Korea to participate in the global community. However, with the limited access to native positions of influence, Kyopos will need the help of leaders in Korea to better utilize their potential. With the network and resource of the leaders of Korea and the cross-cultural and international propensity of the Kyopo, Korea can advance further in its international goals for both the Church and the secular society. The Kyopo population can be better utilized in Korea's global outreach in terms of religion, economy, and education.

Conclusion

This article discussed aspects of the transnational ties of the Kyopo migrants living in Korea by focusing on why Korean-Americans moved. Scholarly theories such as the neoclassical economic theory cannot account for this new generation's decision migrate to Asia. The fact is that they are moving to a country that is economically weaker than America; the financial opportunities and salaries are generally much greater in the West than in the East. Yet there is a large enough number of Korean-Americans living and working in Korea. Why would highly educated Korean Americans relocate back to the Korean peninsula? This study showed that they move to be geographically closer to their families to strengthen familial bonds. For Korean-American Christians, they also move and stay to help with missionary work.

There is a need to help these Christians maximize their potential to advance the gospel broadly and effectively in Korea and abroad. It is

important to equip these transmigrants to bear more fruit through their professional careers and ministry in Asia. Although they are working diligently using their gifts to propagate the gospel, they have limited mobility to advance their careers or work beyond the simple English-teaching context. There ought to be an organization that assists the professional development of Korean-Americans who are considering work on the peninsula so that the person, country and church can capitalize on their education, talents, and background.

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