

The Peripheral Experiences and Positionalities of Korean New Zealander Returnees

Skilled Return Migrants and Knowledge Transfer

ABSTRACT

This article examines the peripheral experiences of skilled return migrants in their homeland and the wider social implications of global knowledge transfer. Through a case study of Korean New Zealander returnees, I argue that the process of skill transfer is not easy, as shown by the returnees' difficulties and social alienation. Korean New Zealander returnees have a more alienated experience than Koreans of similar backgrounds returning from other Western countries.

KEYWORDS: South Korea, New Zealand, skilled return migrants, knowledge transfer, 1.5-generation migrant

INTRODUCTION

When South Korea needed to redevelop its firms after the financial crisis of 1997,¹ it considered changing its citizenship policies to attract back its diaspora, especially from English-speaking countries.² The Overseas Korean Act of 1999 introduced a new residency right under the F-4 visa, allowing overseas

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1. D.-M. Shin, *Kim Young Sam jeongbu eui sa-hwae bokji jeongchek: Saekawha sa-hwae bokji* [Social welfare policy during the Kim Young-sam government: Globalization and social welfare], unpublished PhD dissertation, 2000, Ewha Womans University, Seoul.

2. C. Lee and H. Oh, "Global hwangyeong beonhwa ae daebihan cheong-so-neon injae gaebal junryak-ae gwanhan gookjae haksul whaei" [International congress on world talent development], National Youth Policy Institute, Seoul, 2009; S. Lee, "Moonjaein jeongbu, jaewae dongpo jungchaek ae gwanshim eul . . ." [President Moon becomes interested in overseas Korean policies . . .] *France Zone*, May 25, 2017, <<http://www.okja.org/saseol/58344>>, accessed July 25, 2017.

Korean returnees prolonged stays in Korea, with almost the same living rights as local Koreans in areas such as banking, property ownership, medical insurance, and pensions, and without giving up their overseas citizenship. That is, the new law allowed overseas Koreans to have quasi-dual citizenship.³ Many overseas Koreans responded to the offer. Between 1999 and 2010, many returned from America, Canada, Australia, Japan, and New Zealand. In 2017, a total of 391,892 overseas Koreans reported residency in Korea.

The transfer of knowledge and skills through skilled labor has become a central topic in contemporary migration studies.⁴ Using neoliberal logics in migration policies to attract the ideal types of skilled and economically viable migrants is a globally growing phenomenon. Countries that are not traditionally immigrant destinations often turn to their diaspora communities to increase the chances of knowledge transfer.⁵ Yet, once the returnees return home, they are a relatively invisible population, as they share the same ethnicity and often also speak their mother language. Within Korea, particularly because there are other co-ethnic, less privileged Korean migrants (such as North Korean refugees and Chosunjok⁶), the overseas Korean returnees who are living in Korea under the new law of 1999 have received little attention, either in the academic literature or in policy discourse.

This paper seeks to understand what it means to be a skilled migrant returnee in Korea by examining returnees' personal stories through a case study of 1.5-generation Korean New Zealander returnees.⁷ This group was chosen as a case study to offer a different kind of insight into returnees' feelings of inferiority. Their experiences illustrate that Korean ancestral

3. J. S. Park and P. Y. Chang, "Contention in the Construction of a Global Korean Community: The Case of the Overseas Korean Act," *Journal of Korean Studies* 10:1 (2005): 1–27.

4. G. W. Shin and J. N. Choi, *Global Talent: Skilled Labor as Social Capital in Korea* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015); W. Friesen and F. Collins, "Brain Chains: Managing and Mediating Knowledge Migration," *Migration and Development* 6:3 (2017): 323–42.

5. C. Kuptsch and P. E. Fong (eds.), *Competing for Global Talent* (Geneva: International Institute for Labour Studies, 2006); J. Skrentny, S. Chan, J. Fox, and D. Kim, "Defining Nations in Asia and Europe: A Comparative Analysis of Ethnic Return Migration Policy," *International Migration Review* 41:4 (2007): 793–825.

6. Ethnic Koreans who were forcibly taken to China in the early 1940s during the Japanese colonial period.

7. The 1.5 generation refers to "children, aged between six and 18 years, who migrate as part of a family unit, but who have experienced at least some of their formative socialisation in the country of origin." A. Bartley and P. Spoonley, "Intergenerational Transnationalism: 1.5 Generation Asian Migrants in New Zealand," *International Migration* 46:4 (2008): 63–84.

homeland migrants are hierarchicalized in South Korea by their country of origin, including those from English-speaking Western nations. Generally speaking, this association is based on the positioning of the country in the global political economy. The US and UK are at the top of the list, followed closely by Canada and Australia.⁸ New Zealand, though also an English-speaking Western nation, lags in economic competence and cultural reach. By studying Korean New Zealander returnees, this paper offers a more nuanced understanding of the peripheral “overseas Korean” (*gyopo*) experience and how it is embedded within the wider perception of the country returnees have returned from.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. First, I give a theoretical overview of return migration and knowledge transfer. Second, the study context of Korean New Zealanders and the study methods are briefly discussed. Third, the results are given within a chronological storyline: the paper discusses how the returnees perceive their own contribution to Korean society as “global talent,”⁹ their alienation and disconnection at work as they further integrate into Korean society, and then their coping strategies over time. Lastly, the broader social and academic implications of the findings are discussed.

UNDERSTANDING SKILLED RETURN MIGRANTS' KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER ON AN INDIVIDUAL SCALE

Studies affirm that return migrants play a key role in contributing to their original home country's globalization and economic development with their skills gained from overseas, often providing innovation and entrepreneurship.¹⁰ Jones says that returnees are more likely to participate in economic life, therefore contributing more to national economic growth than active migrants

8. It is important to note the particular strength of this hierarchy in Korea. The US is at the top not only because of its global cultural-economic power but also because of its historical, post-colonial ties to South Korea.

9. A common term for highly skilled workers who can be competitive in international markets.

10. B. Ghosh, “Return Migration: Reshaping Policy Approaches,” in B. Ghosh (ed.), *Return Migration: Journey of Hope or Despair?* (Geneva: IOU and UN, 2000): 181–226; A. Saxenian, “The Silicon Valley Connection: Transnational Networks and Regional Development in Taiwan, China, and India,” in A. D’Costa and E. Sridharan (eds.), *India and the Global Software Industry* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004): 164–92; A. Saxenian, *The New Argonauts: Regional Advantage in a Global Economy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

(who lack the commitment).¹¹ Conway and Potter argue that youthful returnees can be “agents of change” in their home nation, yet the actual impact of returnees on local societies depends on how advanced they are in their careers, or how culturally adaptive they can be.¹² Wang affirms that skilled return migrants can be effective “cross-border brokers” if they are fully/equally embedded in both their home and host society.¹³ Indeed, returnees—with their local and global knowledge, bicultural and bilingual skills, and a commitment to their home nation—are an “ideal” type of global talent.

On the other hand, sociological research indicates that skilled returnees may encounter readjustment difficulties and social alienation, preventing them from performing as global talent,¹⁴ and many eventually leave their home country for their original host country or a third destination.¹⁵ Hence, how to retain returnees in the home nation is a key policy question scholars have asked, pointing out that for “sustainable return development” to be achieved, there needs to be an effective policy in place to attract the needed skills to the right industries.¹⁶ In other words, it is not simply the pulling back of skilled returnees that will stimulate positive development, but knowing who returns and how the home nation can help them settle in for the long term.

Studies on skilled return migrants often take for granted that the “transnational presence” of returnees will be more meaningful and influential in an era of globalization, and hence the original homeland societies are taking a greater interest in pulling back their overseas co-ethnics.¹⁷ Yet, it is uncertain to what extent we can measure the actual impact that skilled return migrants bring to their home societies. As Block states, “It is not actual human beings who are an input into the production process, but one of their

11. R. C. Jones, “The Local Economic Imprint of Return Migrants in Bolivia,” *Population, Space and Place* 17:5 (2011): 435–53.

12. D. Conway and R. Potter (eds.), *Return Migration of the Next Generations: 21st Century Transnational Mobility* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009).

13. D. Wang, “Activating Cross-border Brokerage Interorganizational Knowledge Transfer through Skilled Return Migration,” *Administrative Science Quarterly* 60:1 (2015): 133–76.

14. Conway and Potter, *Return Migration of the Next Generations*; J. Y. J. Lee, “A Trajectory Perspective towards Return Migration and Development: The Case of Young Korean New Zealand Returnees,” in R. Frank, J. Hoare, P. Kollner, and S. Pares (eds.), *Korea: Politics, Economy and Society* (Brill, 2011): 233–56.

15. Shin and Choi, *Global Talent*.

16. R. King, “Generalisation from the History of Return Migration,” in Ghosh, *Return Migration*.

17. Conway and Potter, *Return Migration of the Next Generations*.

characteristics—their capacity to work.”¹⁸ Williams and Balaz also note that while the impact of returnees has been examined on various levels and in numerous forms, their “total human capital” has been oversimplified.¹⁹ Total human capital includes not only the diversity of socioeconomic status and occupational position, but also the range of social and interpersonal skills of diverse cultural backgrounds.²⁰ Rather than grand narratives about how returnees contribute to their homeland, we need a more precise understanding of what causes the returnees’ behavior and how their transnational networks develop and are put into practice: “the ‘glue’ that holds them together; their membership structure, their interaction structure, and so on—key subjects of economic sociology.”²¹

A major limitation of the current literature is that studies tend to assume that skilled returnees contribute successfully to their home nation if they have the right skills. Hence, most studies remain at the national level of development,²² focusing on the wider geopolitics of return policy, which often attracts only economically favorable overseas co-ethnics.²³ Despite the discussion of returnees as contributing to national development, the returnees themselves may not have this intention, and few studies have considered the perspectives of the returnees themselves.²⁴ Indeed, past work has been criticized for considering skilled migrants as economic and financial entities and not as human beings, with personal histories and life complexities. One ethnographic study on Senegalese returnees from Italy suggests that the demand that they be a “useful resource” negatively affects the returnees’ experiences.²⁵ More studies are needed to understand the process of skilled migration and the practical and emotional challenges faced by highly skilled transnationals.

18. F. Block, *Postindustrial Possibilities: A Critique of Economic Discourse* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990): 75.

19. A. Williams and V. Balaz, “What Human Capital, Which Migrants? Returned Skilled Migration to Slovakia from the UK,” *International Migration Review* 39:2 (2005): 439–68.

20. *Ibid.*

21. M. Storper, review of *The New Argonauts* by AnnaLee Saxenian, *Journal of Economic Geography* 7:1 (2006): 113–17.

22. Ghosh, “Return Migration: Reshaping Policy Approaches.”

23. Skrentny et al., “Defining Nations in Asia and Europe.”

24. L. Jeffery and J. Murison, “The Temporal, Social, Spatial, and Legal Dimensions of Return and Onward Migration,” *Population, Space and Place* 17:2 (2011): 131–39.

25. G. Sinatti, “‘Mobile Transmigrants’ or ‘Unsettled Returnees’? Myth of Return and Permanent Resettlement among Senegalese Migrants,” *Population, Space and Place* 17:2 (2011): 153–66.

KOREAN NEW ZEALANDER RETURNEES

Koreans are a recent immigrant group in New Zealand. In the 2006 census, the Korean population had increased to 30,792 (from 19,026 in 2001), but since then there has been a slight decline, to 30,171 in 2013.²⁶ About two-thirds of the Koreans in New Zealand reside in the largest metropolitan area, Auckland (2008 population, 1.4 million).²⁷ Differing from traditional patterns of assimilation, Korean New Zealanders are considered transnational migrants,²⁸ maintaining economic, social, and political connections between their home and host societies. A high proportion are well educated, and many were originally employed in skilled occupations.²⁹ However, unable to find formal employment commensurate with their skills, many become self-employed, establishing small businesses such as “dairies” (i.e., variety stores), restaurants, souvenir shops, and hair salons.³⁰ Since the mid-2000s, the number of migrants returning to Korea has grown. For various reasons, including job opportunities in Korea and wanting to reconnect with their own ethnic culture, many of the 1.5-generation Korean New Zealanders returned to Korea upon completing tertiary education.³¹ In 2011 approximately 6,000 Korean New Zealander returnees were living in Korea.

With the Overseas Korean Act, the number of migrants returning from overseas has increased dramatically.³² The Korean Ministry of Justice

26. Statistics New Zealand, <<http://www.stats.govt.nz>>, accessed March 20, 2014.

27. W. Friesen, “Diverse Auckland: The Face of New Zealand in the 21st Century?” Asia New Zealand Foundation, 2008.

28. L. Basch, N. Glick-Schiller, and C. Szanton-Blanc, *Nations Unbound: Transnational Projects, Postcolonial Predicaments, and Deterritorialized Nation-States* (Langhorne: Gordon and Breach, 1994).

29. J. Lidgard and H. Yoon, “The Unemployment Experiences of Recent Korean Immigrants in New Zealand,” paper presented at the conference on Labour, Employment and Work, Victoria University of Wellington, November 26, 1998.

30. Ibid.

31. J. Y. Lee, W. Friesen, and R. Kearns, “Return Migration of 1.5 Generation Korean New Zealanders: Long Term and Short Term Reasons,” *NZ Geographer* 71 (2015): 34–44.

32. Despite the strong “blood kinship” emphasized in the policy, however, the act was explicitly aimed at attracting the “desirable” return migrants with capital and global skills, so only those who moved overseas after 1948 were allowed to apply for the F-4 visa, which excluded labor migrants and refugees, such as “unskilled” Chosunjok. This criterion was criticized by many politicians and NGO communities, so a new visa category was created in 2007 to include all overseas Koreans with blood kinship. The contention over who are “legal ethnic insiders” and who are “legal ethnic outsiders” in the initial act illustrates that Korean ancestral homeland migrants are hierarchized in South Korea by their country of origin, and this positioning is associated with the global political economy. D. Seol and Y. Lee, “Recent Developments and Implications of Policies on Ethnic Return Migration in Korea,” *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal* 20:2 (2011): 215–31.

has been measuring the numbers of those who obtained F-4 Visas and Overseas Korean National residency cards since 2001, which is the only available data quantifying the growth of returnees.³³ In 2017, over 390,000 overseas Koreans reported residency in Korea. Korean Chinese returnees are the largest group (291,646), and Korean Americans are the second-largest (44,893). Korean New Zealander returnees are the eighth-largest group (6,004).³⁴ The increase varies among countries. While the entire returned overseas Korean population increased by 10 times between 2001 and 2011, those from the US increased by six times, from Australia by five times, and from Canada by 14 times.

But overseas Koreans from New Zealand increased the most: by 29 times.³⁵ Korea's newest emigrant destination country has the highest rate and proportion of return migration population (around 10% of the Korean New Zealand population in 2011). A number of studies have examined the reasons for this, including the relatively stronger transnationalism of Korean New Zealanders in their migrant character and circumstances,³⁶ as well as the smaller job market in New Zealand, which has motivated overseas Koreans to seek job opportunities and a better future in Korea.³⁷ Despite being the eighth-largest group within the return migrant population of Korea, the Korean New Zealander returnees have been less examined in the literature.

METHODS

This paper is based on qualitative research conducted between 2009 and 2013, and again in 2017. The study focused on 1.5-generation Korean immigrants to Auckland, New Zealand who permanently returned to Korea between 1999 and 2009. Forty-nine returnees were chosen as study participants by snowball

33. <<http://www.moj.go.kr/moj/index.do>>, accessed February 20, 2017.

34. These numbers are estimates based on the government's data. The exact number of returnees is difficult to measure because some do not report their return and some have more than one passport; this is the most common case for Korean New Zealanders.

35. I. Park and S. Kang, "2011 neon wae-gook-in joomin hyung-hwang josa geol-gwa" [Study of foreign residents in Korea, 2011], Department of Multicultural Society, Seoul, <<https://www.mois.go.kr/frt/a01/frtMain.do>>, accessed January 28, 2014.

36. Lee, Friesen, and Kearns, "Return Migration of 1.5 Generation"; E. Ho, "Reluctant Exiles or Roaming Transnationals? The Hong Kong Chinese in New Zealand," in M. Ip (ed.), *Unfolding History, Evolving Identity* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2003).

37. *Ibid.*

sampling.³⁸ The returnees' lives were studied through an ethnographic method including semi-structured interviews, follow-up interviews, participant observation in various social and online contexts, and auto-ethnography.³⁹ The use of an ethnographic approach was designed largely to "understand parts of the world as they are experienced and understood in the everyday lives of people who actually 'live them out.'"⁴⁰ This research also used a life history approach⁴¹ to collect information about the initial migration from Korea to New Zealand and hence gain a holistic understanding of the participants' experiences. Between 2011 and 2012, I conducted in-depth interviews, lasting up to three hours each, with all 49 study participants, in their houses and workplaces and in cafes. Five participants were revisited in 2017 for further information on how their experiences had changed over time. These five were chosen for their willingness to be interviewed again, and for their permanent return status.

At the time of the fieldwork in 2011, the returnees were aged between 22 and 35. There were 30 female and 19 male participants. Most had lived in New Zealand for over 10 years. And most had returned to Korea alone, which meant that their parents were still in New Zealand. Twenty-one participants were overseas Korean nationals: they were still Korean nationals (with Korean citizenship) but had permanent residency in New Zealand. Seventeen were foreign national Koreans: holders of New Zealand citizenship, and no longer Korean nationals. Most of the participants were single; only eight were married. The names I have given them in this paper are fictitious.

The study participants were employed in various job sectors, including IT, finance, education, and the arts. Most had found highly skilled professional jobs as international lawyers, lecturers, doctors, engineers, business consultants, researchers, or designers; only four worked as English teachers. Twenty-five worked in a Korean firm or institution, and 12 in international firms owned by foreign investors, in which they encountered different

38. Due to the snowball sampling method, most of the study participants had resided in Auckland as migrants in New Zealand, and lived in metropolitan Seoul once they returned to Korea. I acknowledge this urban bias of the study sample.

39. For more on the study's methods, see J. Y. Lee, "Narratives of the Korean New Zealanders' Return Migration: Taking a Life History Approach," in N. Worth and I. Hardill (eds.), *Researching the Lifecourse: Critical Reflections from the Social Sciences* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2015): 183–98.

40. I. Cook and M. Crang, *Doing Ethnographies* (Norwich: Geobooks, 1995): 4.

41. J. B. Wallace, "Life Stories," in J. F. Gubrium and A. Sankar (eds.), *Qualitative Methods in Aging Research* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1994): 137–54.

experiences based on the different work culture and environment. They were asked to reflect on their own performance at work and say whether they felt they were making a contribution to Korean society as “global talent.” The five who were reinterviewed in 2017 were asked to reflect on how their work performance had changed over time and how they had coped with difficulties at work.

RETURNEES' TRANSFER OF KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS, AND CULTURE

Skilled return migrants (and not just in Korea) are generally thought to possess important interpersonal skills: being culturally adaptive, creative, open-minded, and able to form international networks.⁴² Some interviewees said they felt they were valuable “global talent” in their workplace for various reasons, including enhancing communications among workers, helping international collaborations, and being culturally and socially flexible to make positive impacts. Many perceived themselves as contributing to the internationalization of local and global firms in Korea.

Some returnees said that they generated better communications at work with their stronger and more outgoing personalities engendered by living abroad. Some said that, unlike local Korean workers, who tended to be more submissive and obedient to their senior managers, returnees were willing to take the risk of attempting to communicate rather than stay silent. Alicia Choi (F, 26), who worked at a Korean financial company, said that Korean workers tend not to challenge their senior colleagues, and she realized that this would hinder communication and hence productive work output. When asked to explain, Choi replied:

There was an incident during a meeting. . . . The general manager kept suggesting something that was completely out of context and we all knew that he was wrong, because we had been working on the project for months . . . but no one dared to say anything to him, right? So I kindly told him that he actually misunderstood and suggested something different. So . . . the meeting went well in the end. If it weren't for me, we would have had to just follow what he said and produce something that would not have been worthwhile to the company.⁴³

42. Lee and Oh, “International Congress”; P. Brown, A. Green, and H. Lauder, *High Skills: Globalization, Competitiveness, and Skill Formation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

43. Alicia Choi interview, Seoul, 2012.

Choi wanted to make a change rather than being passive like everyone else. Because she was better at communicating her ideas to her senior manager, things did flow better at certain times. Alicia further related that although she could have come across as rude, she did not worry. She felt that she could get away with saying things up front because there was an assumption among the local Korean workers that she was different from everyone else based on her “overseas Korean” identity. And along with other returnees, Alicia believed that this willingness to verbally confront senior managers is a skill she acquired by growing up in New Zealand.

Those who were working in the financial and research industries stated that with their English skills and diverse cultural understandings, they were much more effective and adaptive at working on global projects, helping their companies become globalized more smoothly. Many of the participants defined “global skills” as being not only bilingual but also bicultural. Returnees explained that their global skills were a big plus on many occasions, from writing reports in English and organizing international meetings to enhancing cultural understanding and collaboration. Edward Gwak (M, 29), who worked for a marketing company, said that, as a returnee, he could fulfill his job requirements much better than the local Korean workers:

I work for a foreign company, so I tend to work with people from different countries . . . and the fact that I’m from New Zealand really helps. For example, when I first meet someone at a work meeting I can easily relate to another person from overseas . . . so I can generate stronger teamwork. Sometimes there can be miscommunications between local Korean workers and foreign workers, so I help them understand each other. Also, my manager sends me on overseas work trips a lot because he knows that I can do a much better job interacting with foreign people. In terms of sharing my knowledge, when we talk about other markets and consumers’ behavior, I can bring in examples from New Zealand, Australia, and so on . . . and being able to make those comparisons between different cultures is a big plus in our company, because it is all about international networks these days.⁴⁴

Gwak seemed to be highly valued at his work. He not only maintained a good working environment with the mixture of Korean and foreign workers as a “cultural mediator,” but also went to many overseas meetings and worked

44. Edward Gwak interview, Seoul, 2012.

well with the foreign investors. He said that it was not just his English skills that made him more desirable as an international collaborator but also his wider and lived understanding of Western culture. It seemed that while the number of Korean New Zealander returnees may be smaller than the number of Korean Americans or Korean Canadians, they equally brought valuable skills back to Korean society in various forms. Perhaps the 1.5-generation returnees were most valuable; as Bovenkerk argues, they lived in their overseas setting for “just the right amount of time” to be adapted to both Korean and New Zealand cultures.⁴⁵ They showed greater enthusiasm and loyalty toward the development of their homeland and were culturally more adaptive to Korean society, compared to the second- or third-generation returnees (including many Korean American returnees).

A few of the study participants worked in English-language schools or at local primary schools as English teachers. Studies indicate that despite their “privileged” position in Korean society as native English speakers, foreign English teachers often feel that they are just “performing monkeys,” or they feel distanced from their co-workers and their students as they do not share the same culture and ethnicity.⁴⁶ Interviewees shared some similar (but also different) experiences of teaching in Korea. Some said that because they could speak Korean, they were able to communicate with parents to give feedback on their child’s progress, and they also interacted easily with their bosses and other local Korean teachers to share administrative work. Michelle Jo (F, 25) said that the returnee teachers can do multiple tasks at work because they are bilingual. Jo, with her New Zealand nationality, was employed as a native-speaking teacher under a work contract, yet her task involved more than what other foreign English teachers did. Although Jo did not enjoy having too many tasks at work, she eventually became the head English teacher and took over a managerial role as well, giving her a stronger sense of achievement in her professional career. Such experiences were shared by other returnees working as English teachers. As Korean New Zealander English teachers, these returnees were also able to give advice to students and their parents about studying and living overseas:

45. F. Bovenkerk, “Why Returnees Generally Do Not Turn Out to Be ‘Agents of Change’: The Case of Suriname,” *Nieuwe West Indische Gids* 55 (1981): 154–73.

46. M. Jeon, “Globalization and Native English speakers in English Programme in Korea (EPIK),” *Language, Culture and Curriculum* 22:3 (2009): 231–43.

There are a number of parents who want to send their children overseas to study English, so I give them advice sometimes. Some of them know that I am from New Zealand, so they ask me about New Zealand's education system and lifestyle and what to do on their arrival in New Zealand and so on. . . . They feel that my advice is more trustworthy than information on various websites, because I am actually from there. As a co-ethnic Korean, I am a lot more approachable than talking to a foreign teacher, who may be able to explain a few things, but not from an immigrant's and Korean's perspective.⁴⁷

Interviewees indicated that returnee English teachers had higher cultural competency for Korea and were better positioned to be not only English trainers but also overall mentors for the students and parents.

The returnees working in the English teaching industry also said that when they were teaching students who were in middle school or older, it was useful to be able to explain things in Korean as well as in English. There are certain English words that are not translatable, just as there are some Korean words that cannot be fully translated into English. Hence, being able to sometimes switch languages aided understanding for students who were very young or who were very poor in English. As true bilinguals who lived in both countries, the returnees had an important role in the English teaching sector. Tara Hong (F, 26), for instance, worked in a company which made Korean-English textbooks. She was astonished by the poor quality of the textbooks, and as an almost native speaker she worked extremely hard editing the previous and current books to improve the accuracy of Korean translations of certain English terms.

EXPERIENCES OF DISCONNECTION, ALIENATION, AND "KOREAN NEW ZEALANDER INFERIORITY"

This section delves into the interviewees' everyday work experiences and illustrates some of the pitfalls of considering returnees as global talent and how their privileged identities generate certain disconnections at work, which in turn hinder their ability to fully perform as global talent. In general, it was apparent that those who worked in local Korean firms experienced greater social distance and stress at work, as they were surrounded by more traditional and rigid working environments and ethics. The work environment

47. Grace Kim interview, Seoul, 2012.

was much more lenient in international firms, as the supervisors were either foreigners or Koreans with overseas experience. However, most of the returnees experienced insecurity and disconnection at work to some degree, whether they worked in a local or an international firm, based on their “overseas Korean” identities—they were never fully accepted as Korean. What was unique to the Korean New Zealander returnees was that they often felt that they did not fall into the well-identified category of “overseas Korean” (*gyopo*) within Korean society, as most local Koreans associate *gyopo* with Korean Americans.

Many of the Korean New Zealander returnees said that the local Koreans seemed to think that they had an easy life compared to their competitive lives in Korea. Indeed, along with the optimistic view of seeing the skilled returnees as global talent, there are also undermining representations of skilled returnees, such as their being “privileged” transnationals who can easily move across nations, or who might not even be loyal to their country.⁴⁸ A young returnee who is in their early or mid-twenties, recently graduated, fluent in English with an overseas degree, who may even be in a more advanced position in the workforce, may come across as “spoiled” and “well-off.” Moreover, there is a conception that those overseas Koreans who did not go through the competitive educational experience are less disciplined. The study participants were constantly reminded of these negative stereotypes at work.

Such experiences of disconnection were related to the fact that they were still considered outsiders, despite sharing the same ethnicities and often nationalities. Alicia Choi (26, F) felt that Korean society insists on seeing *gyopo* differently because Korean people are still reluctant to accept different cultures and other ethnicities. She speculated that had she worked in New Zealand, she would have felt less like an outsider:

If I had tried harder and found a job in New Zealand and mingled with co-workers, I would have been more accepted and wouldn't be seen as much

48. S. Park, “Park Jaewan a-deul-eun mansa chungtok, ddal eun 0.01% e-joong gook-jeok ja” [The naughty son of Park Jae Wan and the daughter who is one of the 0.01% dual citizens], *Pressian*, May 25, 2011, <http://www.pressian.com/article/article.asp?article_num=20110525115722>, accessed June 6, 2011; H. Jo, “Yoo Yeongsook hwankyeongbook jang kwan naejeong-ja, e-beon aen jangnam e-joong gook-jeok non-ran” [The son of Yoon Young Sook with dual citizenship], *Chosun*, May 20, 2011, <http://news.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2011/05/20/2011052001670.html>, accessed June 3, 2011.

different from the rest of the Kiwis, because New Zealand is such a multicultural country already. But here [in Korea], I am always seen as different. . . . It could be little things, like not knowing certain Korean words, that makes them think I'm a New Zealander. Nobody fully accepts me as Korean here.⁴⁹

This narrative illustrates that being an outsider can be experienced as a greater stress when experienced by someone who considers themselves an ethnic or a national insider. Unlike Chosunjok, who often identify as separate from Korean or second-generation Korean American returnees,⁵⁰ Korean New Zealanders and especially the 1.5-generation returnees, who grew up in New Zealand as transnational migrants in the 1990s, consider themselves fully Korean. Many of the study participants imagined returning to Korea as they grew up in New Zealand, because they believed that Korea was their “home” nation and “where they belong”—and a place they have longed for. Hence, when they were not fully accepted as a Korean national, they felt “in-between” and distanced, as if they did not belong to either their home or their host society.

What was unique about Korean New Zealander returnees' experiences of disconnections at work was that they felt inferior compared to returnees from America or Canada. Most of the interview participants indicated that they were often frustrated by the fact that their Korean New Zealand status was not as “recognized” as that of Korean Americans. Korean New Zealander returnees often felt that they did not fall into a well-identified category of “overseas Korean” (*gyopo*) within Korean society, as most of the local Koreans associate *gyopo* with Korean Americans. The participants said that they felt a slight sense of discrimination against their educational background during their initial job-finding processes and job interviews because they did not have a degree from the US:

Not many people know about the University of Auckland. Even if our university is higher on the world university rank, Korean employers will pick up a CV that has an American university on it. Even if it's not a well-known university, they still like to see “America” on a CV. That's the reality in Korea.⁵¹

49. Alicia Choi interview, Seoul, 2012.

50. W. G. Choi, “Ethnic Koreans from China: Korean Dream, Adaptation, and New Identity,” paper presented at Asia Culture Forum, 2006; S. Suh, *Nostalgic for the Unfamiliar: US-Raised Koreans and the Complexities of “Return,”* unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Minnesota, 2016.

51. Hannah Choi interview, Seoul, 2012.

Although these narratives are from the returnees' perspectives, they are not completely subjective. The subtleties of facial expressions and the ignorance of their national identity can indeed bring stress and feelings of inferiority. Erica Kim (F, 30), who studied clinical psychology in New Zealand, was working as a clinical psychologist intern in Korea. Kim said she used to feel proud about what she had achieved until she started working in Korea:

My colleagues do not approve of our clinical psychology degree. It's a little frustrating. . . . There is this other returnee intern who is from America, right? All of my colleagues, even the professors, ask her what the education is like in their psychology department [in America] all the time, but they never ask me. One time, when we were discussing something, I gave an example from our psychology department and I was completely ignored. They were like, "Oh really?" and didn't ask me anything further. So these days, I just don't say anything about where I'm from, because I don't want to be hurt again. Korean people don't know much about New Zealand and our education system.⁵²

Among the returnees who were English teachers, "Korean American superiority" was also experienced. Michelle Jo (F, 25) reported that her manager at work urged her to use an American accent in teaching English at school. Other Korean New Zealander English teachers further explained that most English institutions in Korea use American textbooks, so they had to learn some words in American English and hide their New Zealand background on certain occasions. Grace Kim (F, 29), who had been working as an English teacher at a large institution in Seoul, shared a similar feeling to Jo's:

In my profile page on our English school's website, my education background is not shown . . . or I should just say hidden . . . but all other teachers who are graduates from American, Canadian, and Australian universities have theirs all clearly written. I asked the IT manager twice already to state my university name and he hasn't done it. I feel that it's because our English school just wants to show that they have all the good teachers from those larger countries, and not someone from New Zealand.

Being inferior to Korean Americans or Korean Canadians was strongly felt by some of the returnees. Although a few said that there were people who highly valued their degrees from New Zealand, most returnees had to work "extra hard," and "show other skills" aside from their English, to gain

52. Erica Kim interview, Seoul, 2011.

employment. But feeling inferior based on their New Zealand national identity was not something that could be spoken about, because their situation could certainly not be compared to that of Korean Chinese returnees, for instance, a group that has been historically and politically discriminated against in Korean society.⁵³ At the end of the day, Korean New Zealander returnees were still employed for their English skills and were seen as privileged by local Korean employees. Yet, they still faced these subtle discriminations.

RETURNEES' COPING STRATEGIES OVER TIME AND THE POTENTIAL FOR FURTHER CONTRIBUTION

While some returnees find coping strategies and have a prolonged stay in Korea, some leave their home society and return to New Zealand or move to a different country. This section examines some of their coping strategies and how their work experience changed over time. Overall, around 60% of the study participants wanted to stay in Korea for the long term; the rest wanted to move back to New Zealand or try a third destination. Interestingly, 75% of those who worked in Korean firms wanted to stay in Korea, compared to 50% of those who worked in foreign firms. One might have thought that those who worked in foreign companies, and who seemed to be less stressed by their co-workers, would be more likely to stay in Korea, because they were generally happier at work, but this did not show up as a strong correlation. Despite the experience of social alienation at work, some returnees are willing to reside in their homeland for the long term. As mentioned earlier, sustaining the skilled return migrants is a key policy question, as it is believed that long-term skilled return migrants would be more beneficial to the home society.

Most of the returnees who planned to stay in Korea on a long term-basis did acquire certain coping strategies to survive in their workplace and in Korea in general. For instance, they found ways to network with other Korean New Zealander returnees through university alumni groups and their personal networks.⁵⁴ Another coping strategy at work was accepting the

53. Park and Chang, "Contention in the Construction."

54. J. Y. Lee, "Returning Diasporas: Korean New Zealander Returnees' Journeys of Searching 'Home' and Identity," in A. Christou and E. Mavroudi (eds.), *Dismantling Diasporas: Rethinking the Geographies of Diasporic Identity, Connection and Development* (London: Ashgate, 2015): 161–74. In

cultural and social differences and simply moving forward. Some participants said that they had to be quick learners and ask their peers about the unspoken norms and rules at work:

I had a number of colleagues at work whom I could trust . . . and I used to take them out for coffee and drinks and kept on asking them what I was doing wrong, what I should know about Korean work culture, and so on. . . . It was reassuring for me, and it helped me find ways to interact better with other colleagues at work.⁵⁵

The five participants who were revisited in 2017 reported some noticeable differences in their work performance and experiences compared to when they were first interviewed, in 2011 and 2012. They had moved into a more senior role in their employment, and they had learned to work around the Korean work culture. Jennifer (F, 36) said that she no longer felt the same stress she had felt in 2011:

After working in the same company for 13 years, now I am in a position where I can make partial business decisions, and I have to take risks and be responsible for my decisions. So I no longer care about what others think of me, and I am no longer a people-pleaser. I am only focused on work and getting the work done properly. So I am no longer afraid to say something to others that may upset them. And because I do this, I started to gain more respect from the people senior to me. I think someone like me, who is in a middle rank position, can do these things. When I was a junior, I couldn't do what I do now. I no longer feel the same stress I experienced when I first moved to Korea and cared about all the little things that people said to me, just because I was not part of them.⁵⁶

Jennifer, who arrived to Korea right after college graduation, had started working at a very young age compared to her work colleagues. In the beginning she faced discrimination at work, and she remembered others being jealous of her situation and making her feel very uncomfortable. While at times these experiences hindered her whole life in Korea and made her want to move back to New Zealand, she kept on working because overall, she did

this book chapter, I also explore other “home-making” mechanisms, such as searching and connecting with New Zealand food, TV shows, and culture, that gave them empowerment over time as they practiced their Korean New Zealand identity in Korea.

55. Sunny Kim interview, Seoul, 2017.

56. Jennifer Yum interview, Seoul, 2017.

enjoy the kinds of work she did for her company. On top of this, she had many Korean New Zealander friends in Korea with whom she could share her stories, and she used to talk to her extended family members in Korea about her situation and receive advice from them. After 13 years of working in the same company, Jennifer had now moved into a more senior role and was able to perform freely without being worried about what others might think of her. She had also learned to accept the “Korean way” of working and acquired coping strategies of just accepting, ignoring, or understanding. She now felt more part of Korean society than when she first arrived in Korea, back in 2005.

Justine Park, who was in a situation similar to Jennifer’s, shared a similar experience of gaining empowerment at work over time. She also felt that she was now in charge of her work performance and not bothered by being an outsider:

Now, I am in a managerial role, I can at least manage a meeting the way I want. And I always like to have open discussions with our team. I don’t like to tell them what to do, like all other Korean bosses do, but to ask them what they want to do. Because I’ve been doing this, I was able to create a more positive environment to work for everybody in my team, and I’ve had some positive feedback from my senior managers, and I know what I’m doing is working. Before, I was lost and I was afraid to say something different. But now I am no longer afraid to be different. I feel that as I get older in this company, and enter a more senior role, I will have a better chance of creating a better work culture. As younger generations enter the work force, there will be more synergy between us and them to create a better work environment. I’ve seen so many projects that fall apart because of poor communication and because Korean people are so passive. I want to change that, and hope to change that, as I get older in this company.⁵⁷

Both Jennifer and Justine felt that they simply needed to move on and focus on the actual work itself rather than the “people problem” they had previously faced because they were from overseas and had poorer understanding of Korean society and limited social networks. Because both of them were now in a managerial role, they felt less stressed about their positions as outsiders in Korean society, and producing good work was all that really mattered to them. In order to do this, they decided to push for a more upfront ways of communicating with their co-workers, which was, from their perspective,

57. Justine Park interview, Seoul, 2017.

a skill the local Korean workers mostly lacked (because of the hierarchical society in Korea). Justine predicted that if more and more overseas Korean returnees work in these companies for a long term, and as they enter even more senior roles, they will be able to really alter the work environment.

Edward Gwak, who had been living in Korea for almost 10 years, also stated that Korean work culture itself had been changing over the past few years, and looking back, he felt that this change was part of why he decided to stay in Korea for the long term:

Korea is also changing fast. The work culture has changed a lot since I started working in the business in 2011. The company is trying to give more opportunity to the younger generation. Now having an open discussion between the seniors and juniors is a norm. Twenty to thirty percent of the junior roles are filled by those who have had little long-term overseas experience. These days, there are also many *gyopo* like me who work in our company, which makes me feel more “normal” at work [laughter].⁵⁸

Like other Korean New Zealander returnees who were revisited in 2017, Gwak felt that he was well placed at work to bring in what he believed to be better for the company. He felt that he was in a better position and more positive about working and living in Korea not only because he was in a more senior role but also because Korean work culture was changing. The senior workers were now more interested in their junior workers' thoughts when making certain decisions, and it was now considered good to have overseas experience, and thus no longer seen as a privilege for *gyopo* (which had often opened a distance between “us” and “them”). It is important to note that Gwak worked for an international firm, so the work culture and environment may have been different. But many of the senior roles were still held by local Korean workers, who may not have had overseas experience like the younger generations did.

CONCLUSION: KOREAN NEW ZEALANDER RETURNEES' CONTRIBUTION TO KOREAN SOCIETY FROM THEIR VARIOUS PERIPHERAL POSITIONALITIES

This paper has offered a nuanced understanding of how a group of skilled transnational returnees transfer their particular skills to their homeland, and

58. Edward Gwak interview, Seoul, 2017.

how they experience and manage their various social and cultural barriers as returnees. In contrast to true foreigners or second- or third-generation overseas returnees, 1.5-generation New Zealander skilled returnees perceive themselves as contributors to Korean society in various job sectors with their bilingual and bicultural skills and a greater sense of loyalty to Korea.

Additionally and ironically, the findings also highlight the diversity of social experiences among the overseas Koreans working in Korea. Korean New Zealanders often face greater discrimination than second-generation overseas Koreans from certain “preferred” English-speaking Western countries, such as America and Australia. These experiences of social distance prevent the returnees from contributing to Korean society as much as they would like to.

Despite some of the personal stories of disconnection and discrimination faced by the Korean New Zealander returnees, some were able to stay in Korea for the long term and gained empowerment over time. They were able to find coping strategies at work, such as attempting to understand Korean work culture, embracing their Korean New Zealander identities by connecting with their fellow Korean New Zealander returnees or New Zealanders living in Korea, or simply accepting Korean culture and moving on. Some returnees were able to bring positive changes to their work environment once they moved into more senior roles.

Cross-border movements of people and skills are contested and negotiated processes, and this study further illustrates these processes using the case of 1.5-generation Korean New Zealander skilled returnees. Unlike earlier studies that focused on the negative experiences of the returnees and how they are less likely to stay in Korea for the long term,⁵⁹ this study argues that over time, skilled return migrants might be able to transfer a more positive work culture and other related positive influences to Korea, and freely express their identity at work, as they move into more senior roles. These findings suggest the need for greater social acceptance of skilled returnees and a better policy mechanism for sustaining return migration.

59. Yoon, B. (1992) Reverse brain drain in South Korea: State-led model, *Studies in Comparative International Development*, Spring, 27 (1): 4–26; Shin and Choi, *Global Talent*.