

Korea's Migrants: From Homogeneity to Diversity

An Asian Survey Special Section

ABSTRACT

Korea's migrants have diversified in recent decades. This special section gathers articles that address this development by examining issues of class as an analytical lens in addition to ethnicity and citizenship, and also by considering the contributions of migrants from both human and social capital perspectives. By doing so, we aim to provide a better understanding of the varied experiences, realities, and complexities of Korea's increasingly diverse migrant groups.

KEYWORDS: migrants, Korea, diversity, human capital, social capital

INTRODUCTION

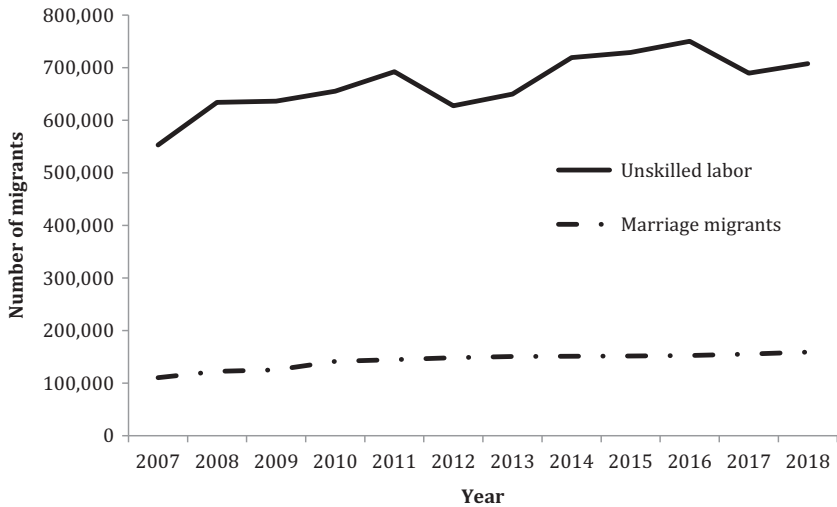
Over the last few decades, the number and diversity of migrants in South Korea (Korea) has grown substantially. In 2018, the number of foreigners stood at approximately 2.3 million, or 4.5% of the total population, and almost 50 times the number in 1990, when there were only 49,000 foreigners comprising a mere 0.11% of the population.¹ Unskilled migrant workers, mostly from China and Southeast Asia, remain the largest group of migrants (approximately 550,000 in 2018). Their presence became significant in the late 1980s, when they came to Korea to fill labor shortages in low-wage, menial jobs created by shifts in the Korean labor market (Figure 1). Also during the same time, falling marriage and fertility rates due to native women's out-migration from rural areas and local governments struggling

GI-WOOK SHIN is Director of the Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center and Professor of Sociology at Stanford University, Stanford, CA, USA. RENNIE J. MOON is Associate Professor at the Underwood International College at Yonsei University in Incheon, South Korea. Emails: <gwsin@stanford.edu>, <rennie.moon@yonsei.ac.kr>.

1. Ministry of Justice, Korea Immigration Service Statistics, 2018, <<http://www.moj.go.kr/bbs/moj/160/487707/artclView.do>>, accessed May 18, 2019.

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FIGURE 1. Unskilled Labor and Marriage Migrants in Korea, 2007–2018



SOURCE: Ministry of Justice, Korea Immigration Service Statistics, various years (2007–2018).

with decreasing population-based tax revenues led to increasingly steady inflows of marriage migrants, the second-largest migrant group, with numbers peaking in the mid-2000s and stabilizing over the past decade (approximately 159,000 in 2018).² China has been from the very beginning and continues to be the major country of origin of migrants (44% of foreigners in Korea in 2018). Of such Chinese migrants, most (66% in 2018) are ethnic Korean-Chinese, commonly referred to as *Joseonjok*.³

While migrants make up less than 5% of Korea's total population, a small proportion compared to most other countries, especially the "settler societies," this is still a significant development for a country widely regarded as among the most ethnically and linguistically homogeneous in the world and where purity of blood and ethnic uniformity remain dominant notions of national identity and pride among its citizens. The influx of migrants has naturally led to increased attention to Korea in various areas, including academic scholarship, the domestic and international media, and government

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

policy and NGO activism. In particular, “multiculturalism” has become a buzzword in policy and social/media discourse since the mid-2000s.

No less important but less attended to is the growing diversity of migrants coming to Korea. For example, migrant workers now increasingly include both unskilled and skilled labor in their various forms, including international students and language instructors.⁴ Marriage migrants are from both Western and non-Western countries (e.g., the United States, Russia, and Canada). The latter origin reflects a broader trend, in which the national origins of migrants in Korea have diversified in recent years: the US is now the fourth most-common country of origin (6.3% in 2018), with percentages close to those of Thailand and Vietnam (both 8.3% in 2018). This was not the case just a decade ago, when the most common countries of origin were non-Western.⁵

These recent shifts call for a better appreciation of the growing heterogeneity and multiplicity of migrants in Korea. In this special section, we seek to address this by examining issues of class as an analytical lens, in addition to ethnicity and citizenship, and also considering the contributions of migrants from both human capital and social capital perspectives. We then suggest a new framework in both social discourse and policy that reflects these complexities.

THE GROWING DIVERSITY OF KOREA'S MIGRANTS

Unskilled labor and foreign brides from China and Southeast Asia still constitute the largest groups of migrants, but the composition of migrants in their national origins and level of skills has become much more diverse in recent years. Due to Korea's rapid demographic changes, including low birth rates and an aging population, as well as efforts to find new engines of economic growth in an increasingly globalized world—issues shared by most advanced countries in Asia and Europe—in more recent decades these major groups have been accompanied by additional populations of migrants in smaller numbers, less often recognized in the literature (Table 1).

4. International students as a potential source of skilled migrant labor is well documented. See e.g., G. Liu-Farrer, “Educationally Channeled International Labor Mobility: Contemporary Student Migration from China to Japan,” *International Migration Review* 43:1 (2009): 178–204.

5. Korea Immigration Service Statistics, 2018.

TABLE 1. Migrant Groups in Korea

<i>Migrant group</i>	<i>Number as of 2018 (*as of 2017)</i>
Unskilled labor	548,140
Marriage migrants	159,206
Marriage migrants (China)	58,706
Marriage migrants (US)	3,471*
Marriage migrants (Canada)	1,345*
Foreign national Koreans	775,715
Foreign national Koreans (US)	44,147
Foreign national Koreans (Canada)	15,746
Foreign national Koreans (Australia)	4,545
Foreign national Koreans (New Zealand)	2,395*
International students	160,671
Skilled labor	46,851
Language instructors	13,749

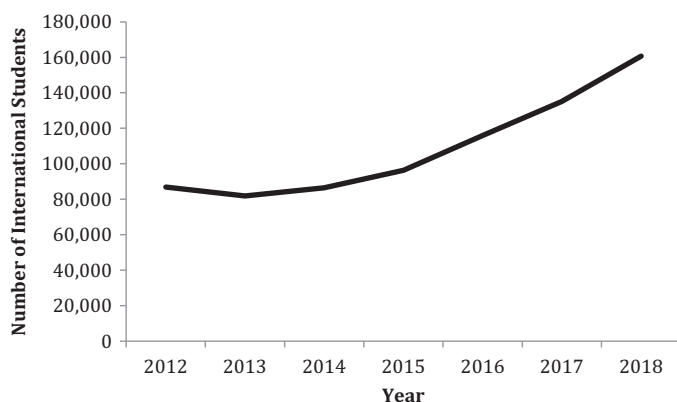
SOURCE: Ministry of Justice, Korea Immigration Service Statistics, 2016.

Foreign students studying abroad in Korean universities are one such example. The number of international students has grown over eight-fold since 2003, to over 100,000 in 2016 (Figure 2). This stems largely from several factors: Korean government efforts since the early 2000s to internationalize Korean universities, the improved reputation overseas of those universities, a growing recognition of international students as potential skilled migrants for Korea, and the declining domestic college student population. Most foreign students are from China (42.9%), followed by Vietnam (28%) and Mongolia (5.3%), are self-funded, and major in the humanities and social sciences (all 2018 figures; for details, see Rennie Moon's article in this issue). International students themselves have also diversified over the years. In 1995, they came from 59 different countries, but this grew to over 160 countries by 2014.⁶

In addition to unskilled migrants, the number of skilled migrants and their subgroups, such as highly skilled professionals, language instructors, and

6. Kwon Dae Bong, "Student Mobility in Korean Higher Education: Trends and Key Issues," in Yeon-Cheon Oh, Gi-Wook Shin, and Rennie Moon (eds.), *Internationalizing Higher Education in Korea* (Stanford, CA: Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center and Brookings Institution Press, 2016).

FIGURE 2. Number of International Students in Korea, 2012–2018



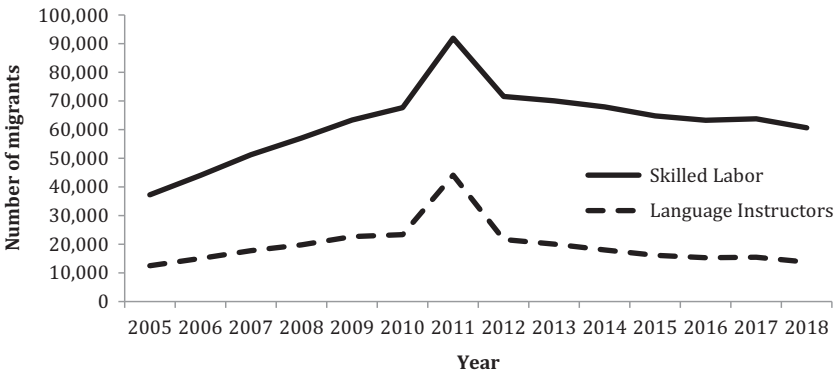
SOURCE: Ministry of Justice (2018); Korea Immigration Service Statistics (2018).

return migrants from developed countries, have also gradually increased in recent years (Figures 3 and 4). This is consistent with a global trend spurred by the higher demand for skilled labor in advanced countries due to demographic crises, along with the greater mobility of highly skilled professionals across national borders. The inflow of return migrants from developed countries can be explained by their identity-driven motivations to return and contribute to their homeland, as well as relaxed immigration policies to attract the diaspora back to Korea (see Jane Lee's article in this issue). The flow of language instructors into Korea has also derived from a number of factors, including English-language education acquiring prominence in globalization policies, foreigners overstaying their tourist visas, and direct local and state government recruitment of English teachers from a select group of Anglophone countries.⁷

Marriage migrants, too, originate not only from developing countries, the stereotypical image of foreign brides in Korea, but also increasingly from a range of developed Western countries (Figure 5). These more recent inflows of ethnically non-Asian marriage migrant arrivals are part of the broader phenomenon of professional mobility and transnationalism, with marriage

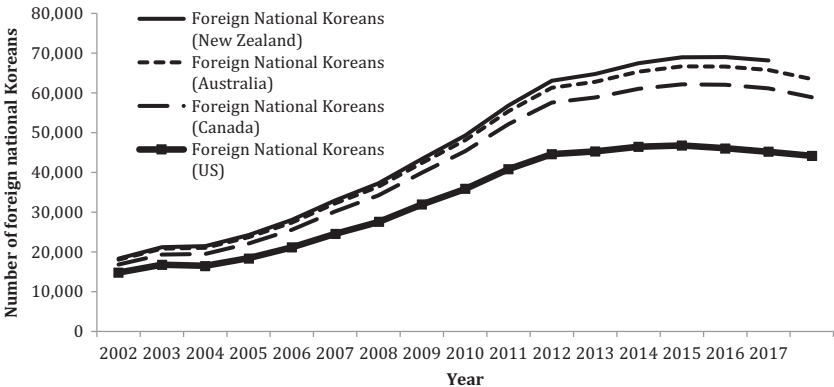
7. Francis L. Collins, "Teaching English in South Korea: Mobility Norms and Higher Education Outcomes in Youth Migration," *Children's Geographies* 12:1 (2014): 40–55.

FIGURE 3. Skilled Labor and E-2 Language Instructor Visa Holders, 2005–2018



SOURCE: Ministry of Justice, Korea Immigration Service Statistics, various years (2005–2018).

FIGURE 4. Foreign National Koreans by Nationality, 2002–2018

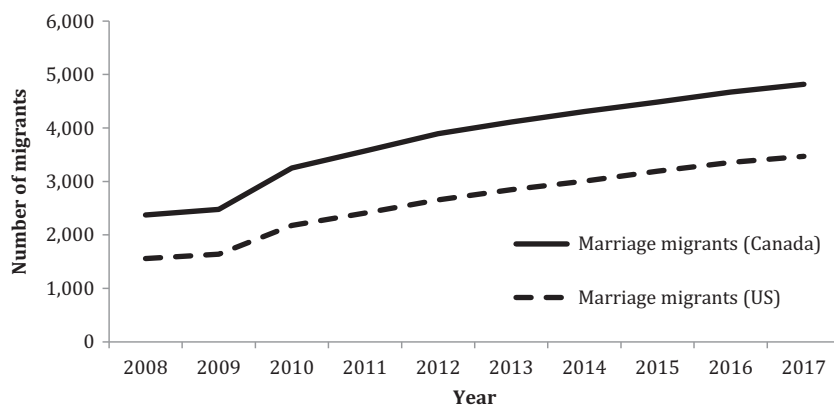


SOURCE: Ministry of Justice, Korea Immigration Service Statistics, various years (2002–2018).

migrants having met their Korean spouses while working abroad or as expatriates in Korea, as opposed to simply migrating to Korea for marital reasons, the typical scenario for foreign brides originating from developing nations (see Sarah Son’s article in this issue).

These figures clearly demonstrate the growing diversity and complexity of migrant groups and the heterogeneity *within* each of them. Nonetheless, these more recent migrant groups often remain invisible in Korean society

FIGURE 5. Marriage Migrants from Anglophone Countries, 2008–2017



SOURCE: Ministry of Justice, Korea Immigration Service Statistics, various years (2008–2017).

and are largely left out of social discourse and government policy due to their smaller size and because they do not fit into the dominant framework of Korean multiculturalism. These new trends thus call for a new perspective on Korea's migrant groups beyond the dichotomized categorizations and depictions of migrants as Korean versus non-Korean in ethnicity and citizenship, as well as the current emphasis on assimilation and integration under the rubric of multiculturalism. The articles collected here seek to illustrate the growing heterogeneity and complexity of migrants in Korea by considering the element of class (measured by skill level) in addition to the two conventional markers of ethnicity and citizenship, with an eye to a better appreciation of the values of diversity and transnationalism.

CURRENT LITERATURE ON KOREA'S MIGRANTS AND SPECIAL SECTION CONTRIBUTIONS

Given that from the late 1980s onward the earliest and largest groups of migrants in Korea were unskilled migrant workers and marriage migrants from China and developing countries in Southeast Asia, most studies have understandably focused on these groups. This literature has examined the various economic and social factors that gave rise to the flow of these groups into Korea and their intended contribution to Korean society, as either low-

skilled or reproductive labor, respectively.⁸ The literature to date has also examined the changing government policies toward these groups, the plight of these populations as subjects of abuse and discrimination, and the changing social perceptions of them.⁹ Scholars have also repeatedly pointed out that the policies and programs implemented by the government in regard to Korea's migrants have been highly selective (largely focused on female marriage migrants and their families) and assimilationist, working in contradiction to the positive rhetoric and basic principles of multiculturalism.¹⁰ In recent years, this has also been accompanied by a growing literature on skilled labor, including international students studying in Korea.¹¹

But few studies have examined the growing diversity *within* each migrant group. To capture the diversity and complexity of Korea's migrants, we need to examine within-group variation. For example, for migrant labor, we need to examine skilled workers in addition to unskilled workers; and for marriage migrants, we need to expand our scope from those from Asia to include those from non-Asian countries. Likewise, we need to investigate cases of ethnic return migrants from developed countries such as the US, Canada, and New Zealand, in addition to those from China. And most studies have

8. K. H. Moon, "Strangers in the Midst of Globalization: Migrant Workers and Korean Nationalism," in Samuel S. Kim (ed.), *Korea's Globalization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000): 147–69; W. B. Kim, "Migration of Foreign Workers into South Korea: From Periphery to Semi-Periphery in the Global Labor Market," *Asian Survey* 44:2 (2004): 316–35; C. Freeman, "Marrying Up and Marrying Down: The Paradoxes of Marital Mobility for Chosonjok Brides in South Korea," in Nicole Constable (ed.), *Cross-Border Marriages: Gender and Mobility in Transnational Asia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004): 80–100.

9. D. H. Seol and J. D. Skrentny, "Ethnic Return Migration and Hierarchical Nationhood: Korean Chinese Foreign Workers in South Korea," *Ethnicities* 9:2 (2009): 147–74.

10. G. W. Shin, "Racist South Korea? Diverse but Not Tolerant of Diversity," in Walter Demel and Rotem Kowner (eds.), *Race and Racism in Modern East Asia: Western and Eastern Constructions* (Leiden: Brill, 2013): 369–89; A. E. Kim, "Global Migration and South Korea: Foreign Workers, Foreign Brides and the Making of a Multicultural Society," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 32:1 (2009): 70–92; H. K. Lee, "Gender, Migration and Civil Activism in South Korea," *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal* 12:1–2 (2003): 127–53; S. Kim, "Racism in the Global Era: Analysis of Korean Media Discourse around Migrants, 1990–2009," *Discourse & Society* 23:6 (2012): 657–78; H. J. Kim, H. J. Choi, K. W. Lee, and G. M. Li, "Acculturation Strategies Used by Unskilled Migrant Workers in South Korea," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 41:9 (2018): 1691–1709.

11. G. W. Shin and J. N. Choi, *Global Talent: Skilled Labor as Social Capital in Korea* (Stanford University Press, 2015); Jung-Eun Oh, Chi-Young Koh, Kyung-Mi Kim, Sang-Wuk Ahn, Ji-eun Jang, and You Kyung Han, "Long- and Short-term Strategies for Effective Utilization of Excellent Foreign Students," Report 2013–02, International Organization of Migration Research and Training Centre Research, 2013.

TABLE 2. Case Studies of Non-traditional Migrant Groups

<i>Group</i>	<i>Details</i>	
Marriage migrants	Anglophone wives	
Return migrants	Korean New Zealanders	
Highly skilled workers (mostly from developed countries)	International students and professionals as human capital (small and medium-sized firms)	International students and professionals as social capital (large firms)

focused analytically on just two dimensions—ethnicity and citizenship—when attempting to capture the diversity of migrants in Korea.¹² We need to expand this to additional dimensions of class, which might prove more significant.

The papers in this special section seek to address these limitations by examining the heterogeneity and multiplicity of migrants in Korea within the broader categories of migrant workers and marriage migrants and addressing issues of class as an analytical lens in addition to ethnicity and citizenship. We also look at the value of migrants as both human capital and social capital, in contrast to most existing works, which focus on their human resources contribution.

In doing so, we select three migrant groups—marriage migrants, return migrants, and skilled labor—and focus on the non-traditional, relatively under-studied, highly skilled populations, mostly from developed countries (Table 2). That is, we examine marriage migrants from Anglophone countries to add to the existing literature, which focuses on marriage migrants from developing countries. For return migrants, we examine the case of Korean New Zealander returnees to better understand the dynamics of skilled return migration for subpopulations other than Korean-Chinese. The latter return migrants represent the line of the oldest Korean migration, beginning almost a century ago. Others are more recent, having left Korea in the 1980s and 1990s. Lastly, we consider skilled labor as both human capital (in small and medium-sized firms) and as social capital (mostly in large firms).

12. I. J. Yoon, "Multicultural Minority Groups and Multicultural Coexistence in Korean Society," *Korea Observer* 41:4 (2010): 515–57.

We start with a study on marriage migrants. Sarah Son's article on cross-border marriages between Anglophone women and Korean men shows sharply contrasting experiences and social expectations, compared to the typical view of foreign brides from developing countries in existing studies. As Son notes, by virtue of their economic position and educational and cultural background, these Western women escape the stereotypical image of, and have very different lived experiences from, Asian female marriage migrants from developing countries. As such, they are excluded from the current government programs of multiculturalism.

The next article explores Korean ethnic return migrants. Jane Lee's paper on Korean New Zealanders demonstrates the varying experiences, challenges, and coping strategies of return migrants. Studies on traditional migrant populations such as Joseonjok return migrants have documented and emphasized the hardships experienced by such groups due to their status as unskilled labor.¹³ In contrast, Lee shows that Korean returnees from New Zealand fare much better, thanks to their educational and economic status. Interestingly, however, even ethnic return migrants from developed Western countries experience a hierarchy of preferential treatment based on their country of origin's global economic position (the US versus New Zealand, for example).

In their article, Gi-Wook Shin, Joon Nak Choi, and Rennie Moon focus on elite groups of skilled labor migrants, including both international students and professionals, commonly referred to as "global talent," or individuals with key technical and professional skills who provide valuable advantages for large firms competing in global markets. In particular, they stress the social capital value of such global talent as "transnational bridges" between Korea and other countries. Moon, in her own article, also examines international students and professionals as skilled labor, but in Korea's less prestigious, low-status small- and medium-sized firms, where such individuals are valued more for their human capital contributions and technical skills rather than the kind of social capital contributions expected of global talent employed in Korea's large firms such as Samsung and LG. The two papers nicely show the specific areas and modes of contribution that skilled labor migrants can bring to Korea.

13. Nora H. Kim, "Hierarchical Ethnic Nationhood in the Formal Membership and Beyond: Joseonjok and Formal and Substantive Citizenship in Their Ethnic Homeland," in Takeyuki Tsuda and Changzoo Song (eds.) *Diasporic Returns to the Ethnic Homeland: The Korean Diaspora in Comparative Perspective* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018): 79–97.

Although they consider the analytical category of highly skilled labor, the papers in this issue reveal that no migrant group fits neatly into this classification and that the experiences of Korea's migrants are highly complex, overlapping, and interrelated. For example, most of the international students who study and find employment in Korea are from China and other developing countries (in contrast to other skilled labor migrants). They sometimes become marriage migrants, and can be further differentiated into categories of unskilled migrant labor, human capital, and global talent. Taken together, the papers in this special section can help us capture the growing complexity and diversity of Korea's migrant groups—old and new, ethnic Korean and non-ethnic Korean, skilled and unskilled, and as human resources and global talent in small and large firms.

This collection of papers shows that class is a *significant* dimension in the lived experiences of migrants, perhaps more so than the traditional markers of ethnicity and citizenship often underscored in previous studies. Citizenship and ethnicity might still be valued at the level of policy, social perception, or social consciousness, but socioeconomic and cultural status often become the deciding markers of social acceptance, at times superseding the effects of even ethnicity and citizenship. Thus, an approach that takes into account the added layer of class not only points to new research directions in the study of Korea's migrants but also has important implications for understanding the evolution of multicultural discourse in Korea, as the current one is limited to one particular group: marriage migrants from developing countries. All of the migrant groups included in this special section, except for migrant brides from a select group of countries, are largely invisible in the multiculturalism discourse in Korea.

What Korea needs is a new framework that includes these various groups of migrants as legitimate members of Korean society, not just instruments for achieving specific objectives (economic or social reproduction), or as fellow ethnic Koreans who are still considered cultural outsiders. The papers in this section show that migrant groups in Korea are considered either ethnic or cultural outsiders. New Zealander returnees, for example, are cultural outsiders: they are ethnically Korean, are considered skilled economic migrants, and have strong identity-related ties to Korea as 1.5-generation migrant returnees—yet these returnees report that although they perceive themselves as ethnic insiders, they feel like cultural outsiders, alienated and discriminated against in professional settings (see Jane Lee's article in this issue). North

Korean defectors, as shown elsewhere in previous studies, also fall into this category of cultural outsiders.¹⁴ On the other hand, migrants who are ethnically non-Korean—marriage migrants, international students, or foreign skilled professionals—although they are insiders in the sense that they might hold legal Korean citizenship or be permanent residents of Korea, remain outsiders, both ethnically and culturally.

Further research along these lines that emphasizes the growing diversity and complexity of migrants in an increasingly multiethnic Korea will be particularly important as Korea will be struggling with a larger question in the coming decade: whether it is prepared for mass migration in the face of changing structures in the economy as well as the demographic crisis. Korea needs to better appreciate the value of the cultural diversity these groups bring to its society and economy, as well as their human and social capital contributions. The current stress on assimilation and social integration will no longer be adequate in dealing with the growing diversity and transnationalism of migrants. We expect the collection of articles in this special section to provide a good starting point for addressing the social, political, and migration-related challenges Korea will be facing in the coming years.

14. A. Lankov, "Bitter Taste of Paradise: North Korean Refugees in South Korea," *Journal of East Asian Studies* 6:1 (2006): 105–37; J. U. Kim and D. J. Jang, "Aliens among brothers? The Status and Perception of North Korean Refugees in South Korea," *Asian Perspective* 31:2 (2007): 5–22; B. H. Chung, "Between Defector and Migrant: Identities and Strategies of North Koreans in South Korea," *Korean Studies* 32:1 (2008): 1–27.