Transnational Interactions among Korean Immigrants in Toronto*

Samuel Noh, PhD
University of Toronto
Centre for Addiction and Mental Health

Min-Jung Kwak, PhD
University Toronto

Joe J. H. Han, BA
Centre for Addiction and Mental Health

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Introduction

Transnationalism has been a buzz word in migration studies since it was first introduced by Schiller and her colleagues as “the process by which immigrants build social fields that link together their country of origin and their country of settlement” (Schiller Basch and Blanc 1992:1). The concept represents a set of new perspectives of international migration that emphasize active and productive strategies of migration based on consciousness in the global capitalist system, in contrast to the old image of migration as a painstaking process of being ruptured or uprooted from one’s home country. Over the last two decades, the field of transnational migration has become enriched with rigorous theoretical discussion and empirical findings. Yet, there has been little research conducted on Korean-Canadian transnationalism and even Korean-American transnationalism (Kwak and Hiebert 2007, 2010). This study presents descriptive results on the nature and extent of engagement in transnational activities among Korean immigrants in Ontario in Canada. It focuses on transnationalism in three domains: informal social ties and contacts (cultural, emotional and financial ties) and organizational participation.

Transnationalism: Concepts and Research

Although transnationalism provides new perspectives of the contemporary patterns and processes of international migration, immigrants have always been engaged in cross-national activities and social exchanges. Pre-1965 immigrants also kept in touch with relatives and friends back home through letters and telegrams, and a large number of them returned home to settle permanently. In addition, migrant workers traveled back and
forth between home and host countries looking for seasonal work (Levitt 2001). Indeed, transnational migration is not a new phenomenon (Foner 2001; Portes et al., 1991). Some researchers believe that transnationalism has become an overused term to explain nearly everything associated with migrants and migration, and has exaggerated the actual scope of immigrant transnational practice (Portes et al., 1999, 2001, 2003). In fact, Portes (2001, 2003) found that transnationalism was only a minority phenomenon among Caribbean immigrants living in American cities, and argued that the classic position in immigration theory that emphasizes the assimilation of migrants to the host society was still valid. This is consistent with the critical analyses of transnationalism indicating that the concept of transnationalism is losing explanatory power (Kivisto, 2001; Hiebert and Ley, 2004; Levitt, 2001).

Notwithstanding the radical criticism, there appear to be at least three important characteristics that separate contemporary transnational practices from those of the past (Levitt, 2001; Portes et al., 1999). First, the contemporary concept of transnationalism recognizes critical en mass movement of money, commodities and people. Second, because of rapid technological development in telecommunications and transportation, information travels substantially faster than ever, and transnational activities have become enormously efficient, if not effective. Third, the impact of the grassroots level of transnationalism has prompted responses from government institutions and other organizations. Authorities have argued that these characteristics are sufficient to merit research on the transnational ties and practices of 21\textsuperscript{th} century immigrants (Levitt, 2001; Portes et al., 1999). In particular, the prevalence of \textit{grassroots} transnationalism as a
collective response to new global order seems to be a salient issue for many social science researchers.

Transnationalism from Above vs. Transnationalism from Below

Transnational ties and activities of grassroots immigrants have been the primary concerns of social scientists of migration studies. Grassroots movement has been considered as collective responses of the general public to social stratification and conflicts. In many writings on transnationalism, the term “grassroots” is conceived as diverse forms of collective identities that are led by ordinary migrants and different from the institutional transnational agents. Smith and Guarnizo (1998) and Portes et al. (1999) distinguish and further clarify two types of transnationalism – from above and from below – based on the level of institutionalization and initiating points. Institutional transnational actors typically include multinational corporations and national and international government bodies. Multinational corporations’ direct investments in Third World countries and various efforts to expand global markets are prime examples of economic transnationalism from above. Some national governments have become interested in granting dual citizenship for their emigrants and made an effort to enhance cultural and economic ties with them by taking necessary political measures. The South Korean government has known for making such effort by establishing Overseas Korean Foundation. Transnationalism from below refers to various private transnational networks and cross-border interactions of individual migrants.

Examples of transnationalism from below include the business investments of Chinese-American entrepreneurial elites (Smart and Smart 1998, Willis and Yeoh 2002).
in their home countries, as well as the efforts of undocumented migrants from Latin American countries (Levitt, 2001; Mahler, 1999; Bailey et al., 2002) to maintain transnational households by sending regular remittances. Fundraising for electoral candidates in home countries and promoting cultural events in ethnic/immigrant communities are also typical examples of transnationalism below (Portes et al. 1999). Adding to the existing transnationalism literature, the present study provides a snapshot of grassroots transnational ties and activities among a sample of Korean immigrants living in an urban setting.

**Typology of Transnationalism**

A number of scholars have attempted to sketch out actual patterns of transnationalism, paying particular attention to its shape, contours, structure, as well as the processes and agencies that sustain transnational trajectories and edifices. There have been many case studies that draw more or less different dynamics of TN activities. However, efforts to examine overall transnational morphologies and consequences have been mainly undertaken within the sociological and geographical disciplines. Portes’ (1999, 2003) attempt to identify a general pattern of transnationalism (TN) between American host cities and three Caribbean home countries is a good example. Three sectors of transnationalism – economic, political, and socio-cultural – were observed, with each sector classified as having low or high level of institutionalization. Examples of economic TN at a lower level of institutionalization include informal, small scale trades and continuing circular labor migration. Highly institutionalized economic TN may include home country banking in the immigrant communities and organized tourism. In
general, activities initiated and performed at the individual, family or local community level were considered as “low institutionalization”. They typically overlap from below and grassroots transnational practices.

Based on a review of earlier studies of transnationalism among Asian immigrants in Canada (Waters 2003, Walton-Roberts 2003, Hyndman 2003, Ghosh and Wang 2003, Angeles 2003), Kelly (2003) noted that political, emotional, and social transnational linkages across the Pacific Ocean were deeply embedded in the everyday lives of Asian immigrants. Ley and Hiebert (2004) also found extensive transnational activities among most recent immigrants in Vancouver, Canada. They reported that many immigrants appeared to maintain informal social ties with family, relatives, and friends over years. However, transnational economic activities (e.g., business ownership), which was intensive at the early period of settlement, deemed to be fading over years.

Social Correlates

Among immigrants in the U.S., Portes (2001, 2003) found that the level of their economic, political, and socio-cultural transnational activities was associated with greater education, increased length of U.S. residence, and higher employment status. Findings from a large scale survey on transnationalism in Vancouver, Canada (Hiebert and Ley 2004) were substantially different from the results of Portes’ (2001, 2003) study of transnationalism among Caribbean immigrants living in the U.S. For immigrants in Vancouver, the level of transnational activity was inversely associated with the length of residence in Canada, as recent immigrants tend to maintain stronger network than older immigrants with their country of origin. Socioeconomic status indicators, such as
education and income, were not good predictors of transnational activities. For example, lower-income immigrants and those at lower educational level were more likely to own property in their home country, but less likely to own business property. Hiebert and Ley (2004) also noted that transnationalism in Vancouver seemed to represent an alternative source of social network and economic activities, and may exert an adverse effect on social and economic integration in Canada.

From the studies of immigrants in the U.S. and Canada, it is plausible to conclude that contexts of sending and receiving countries of immigrants groups determine the characteristics, intensity, and process of transnationalism. This paper provides data on associations of transnational ties among Korean immigrants in Canada with an array of social and demographic factors.

**Korean Immigrants in Canada**

A large scale of immigration of Koreans to Canada began officially in 1963, after Canada had removed discriminatory immigration policies and established diplomatic relationship with the Republic of Korea. The adoption of a ‘point system’ of immigrant recruitment in 1967 accelerated immigration from Korea. Except for the period from 1977 to 1986, Canada has experienced a steady growth of Korean-Canadians in each of the last five decades from the 1960s to the 2000s. Korean immigration flows to Canada was unprecedentedly high in the late 1990s. The Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MOFAT) reported that the number of Koreans who directly emigrated from South Korea to Canada surpassed the number of those who reported emigration to the United
States for the first time in 1999 and the trend lasted until 2003 (Korean MOFAT 2008). According to the Korean emigration data between 1999 and 2003, those who reported permanent migration to Canada and the U.S. were 32,310 and 23,536 respectively (ibid.). The U.S. has been the most favored destination of immigration among Koreans for almost 35 years with a large number of emigrants who directly moved from South Korea to the U.S. as well as a sheer number of those Koreans who adjusted their status while they resided in the U.S. Thus the figures may not be too meaningful for overall immigration statistics to the U.S. However, considering the fact that there has been no significant level of local landings among Koreans in Canada, the trend between 1999 and 2003 is noteworthy for the Korean immigration history to Canada.

According to Canadian immigration statistics, Korea was the fifth largest source country between 1999 and 2001, with an annual influx exceeding 7,000 (CIC 2006). Amendments to immigration policy in 2002 may have resulted in reduced annual landing statistics. Although Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) reduced the threshold of passing points for skilled workers in the following year, the latest system still emphasizes high standards of educational qualification and proficiency in official languages (English and French), resulting in fewer Koreans being admitted to Canada. Changes to the business immigration programs also have impact. For example, those qualifying as entrepreneurs now need at least one year of actual business management experience (www.cic.gc.ca). As a result, the annual inflow has slightly dropped. Since 2004, approximately 5,000 to 6,000 Koreans have earned permanent residency status each year.

The revised policies, while reducing the scope of application for permanent migration from Korea, seemed to encourage more temporary migrants from Korea to
apply for permanent residency rights while staying in Canada. Since 2002, more than 7,000 Koreans residing in Canada have reported their acquisition of permanent residency rights to local consulate general offices (Korean MOFAT 2008). With a rapidly growing number of international students and visitors from Korea, the trends suggest that migrants with temporary permits will be an important source of future immigrants.

In terms of entry class, most recent Korean immigrants have arrived in Canada as economic immigrants rather than through the family reunification program or other programs. The economic class consists of four subcategories: ‘other independents’ (skilled workers), ‘entrepreneurs’, ‘self-employed’, and ‘investors’. The business program includes the last three of these subcategories. Since 1984, about 80 percent of the total Korean-Canadian immigrant population arrived as economic class migrants. The percentage climbed to 86 percent between 1996 and 2005 (LIDS 1980-2005). The number of Korean business class migration that processed between 2000 and 2005 is especially significant, accounting for 13 percent of the total business class migration. The annual number of Korean business class applicants has been large enough for Korea to be ranked as the fourth largest source country since 1981. This indicates that a large proportion of recent Korean immigrants are likely to be involved with business activities in Canada. The already high propensity of self-employment among Korean immigrants in Canadian will seemingly persist for some time (Ornstein 2000, Razin and Langlois 1996).

1 The data for local landings are only available from 2002 when the Korean MOFAT became able to collect information through consulate general offices.

2 However, this does not necessarily mean that they are experienced entrepreneurs. As Ley (2002) found in his study of immigrant entrepreneurs in BC, Korean business migrants are less likely to have entrepreneurial experience in their country of origin. Unlike their counterparts from Hong Kong and Taiwan, most Korean principal applicants to the business program worked as managers in large corporations.
Source of Data

This study is based on results of a survey. The survey was a part of multi-site, international research project focusing on migration, ethnicity, culture, and depression. Data for this study were derived from a community-based survey of Koreans living in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) (Canada). Data were collected through person-to-person interviews over a period of five months (January – May) in 2010. Most interviews were conducted in Korean, except a few cases that were conducted in English. We aimed to mimic the demographic profile of the Korean community in the GTA in our sample by obtaining balanced representations of gender, age, and higher education (i.e. university degree). We planned to recruit respondents from all regions of the GTA. Our sampling also considered proportionate representations of religious affiliations (Protestant, Catholic, Buddhism, and no religious affiliations) to reduce potential sampling bias.

A total of 274 adult respondents (20-72 years of age) provided written consent to participate in the study and completed a face-to-face interview. There were 130 (47.4%) male and 144 (52.6%) female participants. The age of the participants ranged from 20 years to 72. All age groups were well represented in the sample. A large majority of the participants immigrated prior to year 2000 (N=212, 77.4%); less than one quarter of the sample came to Canada on or after the year 2000 (N=62, 22.6%). About 43 percent (N=119) of the sample reported having completed university education. The figure is consistent with the rate of university education found in previous research (Noh and Avison, 1996).
Informal Ties and Contacts

Informal or personal social relations are critical indicators of social behaviors. Many informal social relations are intimate, personal, and unorganized. Informal relationships are often long lasting, exemplified in intimate groups such as family and close friends. Informal relations are thus labeled as primary social relationships that involve ‘whole’ persons where forming personal bonds or connections are a goal in itself. This is opposed to secondary or formal social relations in which people engage with specific goals or benefits they intend to achieve through formal structures and rules. As such, secondary social relations involve exchanges of specific functions, capital or talents. Business transactions are typical case of secondary or formal social relations. Transnational ties and contacts based on informal or personal relations and secondary relations typically represent *from below* and *grassroots* transnational practices.

Informal Ties

In our study, we found that more than half (54.6%) of the respondents had at least one parents living in South Korea at the time of interview (see Figure 1). Two-third (66.7%) of the sample had siblings living in Korea, respectively. Nearly 85% had extended family members (grandparents, uncles/aunts, and cousins) and nearly three quarters (74.2%) of the sample had other distant relatives. As expected, the reports of having extended family and relatives were highly consistent regardless of gender, age, and level of education. One exception to this finding was that a significantly smaller proportion of older adults (56-72 years) had parents living in Korea, whereas younger adults (20-35 years) were less likely to have siblings living in Korea (Figure 1). The
finding should not be surprising to many because parents of older immigrants are more likely to have died than the parents of younger immigrants. Overall, the results on informal social ties suggest that a majority of Korean immigrants in the GTA have informal social ties in Korea. Based on the results so far, it seems plausible to expect high levels of transnational contacts and exchanges among Korean immigrants in the GTA.

**Figure 1.**
Family or relatives living in Korea by age group

![Bar chart showing family or relatives living in Korea by age group.](chart)

**Informal Contacts**

Figure 2 presents cumulative frequencies of contact with parents, siblings, relatives, and friends living in Korea during the past 6 months prior to the interview. The solid lines show the frequencies of contacts on telephone, and the shaded lines are for the on-line contracts (e-mail, internet calling, chatting, etc.). First looking at the top-left corner of Figure 1, we found that of those who have parents living in Korea, about 45%
talked to their parents on the telephone weekly or more frequently. The figure also shows that almost 80% had telephone contacts with their parents at least once a month. Thus, it seems as if Korean immigrants are in very frequent contact with their parents living in Korea.

In contrast to telephone contacts, on-line communications with parents were substantially lower; about 50% reported that they have never used online mediums to contact their parents. But, about 30% used internet-based means to communicate with their parents in Korea once or more times per month.

Contact with siblings was considerably lower compared to the frequency of contacts with parents. About 25% of the sample contacted siblings on a weekly basis, and 50% talked on the telephone with siblings at least once a month or more. Online contact was also significantly lower. In total, only 30% had ever used online forms of contact. Contact with extended family and distant relatives were fairly low; during the last six months, less than 50% and about 35% had made contact via telephone and internet, respectively; only 10% reported making either telephone or internet contact at least once a month. Telephone and internet were used equally when contacting relatives. The participants contacted their friends in Korea slightly more frequently than they contacted their relatives, and the internet was used more frequently than telephone for this purpose.

The findings suggest most active transnational contacts are with parents, followed by contacts with siblings. A majority of our sample indicated that they have never been in contact with distant relatives; about 30% have never been in touch with friends in Korea during the past year. It is interesting to observe that the contacts with friends were
made by using on-line means. The telephone use was limited as the means for contacting friends.

Figure 2.

Cumulative Percentage of Contacts using Telephone and Internet, Last 6 Months

Men and women showed nearly identical data with respect to the frequency of transnational informal social contacts. With respect to current age, overall, young adults
were most active in transnational contacts. Young adults (20-35 years old) contacted their parents significantly more frequently than middle-age and older-age adults. It is interesting to note that middle-age adults made the least contact with extended family members and relatives, compared to younger and older adults. We also found a trend showing that immigrants who had been in Canada for less than 10 years were more active in maintaining their transnational contact with their kin than those who had been in Canada for 10 years or longer.

**Informal exchanges**

While the information about the ties and contacts are important indicators of transnational practice, data on personal visits and exchanges of material resources provide another dimension of transnationalism. About one third of our sample visited Korea during the past 12 months prior to interview, and a few (3.6%) visited more than once. Most visits to Korea lasted less than a month. Considering the distance between Korea and Toronto, the data appear to be indicative of strong transnational contacts among Korean immigrants living in the GTA. Twice as many immigrants exchanged gifts. Two-thirds of study participants reported that they have *sent money or gifts* to persons in Korea during the past year. Another 67% of respondents said they have *received money or gifts* from Korea. Our data demonstrated that the pattern of exchanges may be related to age. There was a trend indicating that young adults (20-35 years) are more likely to receive money or gifts compared to middle age and older age adults, whereas middle and older age adults are more likely to send money and gifts compared to
young adults. Thus, exchanges of gift or money seem to flow from older members of the family to the younger regardless of the place of residence, Canada or Korea.

**Cultural, Emotional and Financial Ties**

We have examined the extent of transnationalism in terms of informal social ties and activities. In this section, we report findings on transnational practice ties with respect to the utilization of cultural products of Korea (i.e. media), as well as emotional attachment to Korea. Furthermore, we will also examine financial assets the immigrants still keep in Korea. Although the information on these areas may not be direct indicators of transnational activities, they clearly provide salient information on transnational attachments at behavioral, emotional and financial aspects of life.

At behavioral level, a large majority of respondents consumed cultural products of Korea. Over 80% of respondents watch Korean TV programs or films *often or daily*, and nearly 90% of respondents read news from Korea in newspapers, magazines, or on internet websites *often or daily*. We also collected data on *emotional tie* with Korea. To evaluate the degree to which Korean immigrants hold emotional attachment to Korea, survey respondents were asked to indicate how often they wished they were living in Korea. The results showed that almost 50% of our survey respondents prefer to re-migrate back to Korea. In addition, about one in eight respondents (11.7%) indicated that they wished they were living in Korea *frequently or all the time*; more than one third (37%) indicated that they *sometimes* wish they were living in Korea. Therefore, our data appear to suggest that extremely large proportions of Korean immigrants in the GTA are frequent users of Korean media and cultural programs, and they wish they were living in
Korea. Furthermore, a large majority of Korean immigrants do possess wealth in Korea. Almost 75% of Korean immigrants have asset(s) in Korea (home, land, cash or stock, and business). One-third (33%) of the sample indicated that they own assets worth a total of more than $100,000 but less than $500,000. Nearly 14% of the current sample reported that they own assets worth a total of more than $500,000; 10% reported owing assets worth a total of over $1 million.

Overall, we find strong transnationalism among Korean immigrants in Toronto with respect to their attachments to family and personal ties. This is exemplified in frequency of long distant contacts, resource exchanges and visitations, cultural emotional ties as well as the extent to which the immigrants keep capital wealth and property over in Korea.

**Organizational Participation**

Our study had relatively fewer data on organized transnational activities. Specifically, our survey included two questions on the organizational participations in educational programs (for children) in Korea and personal involvement in Korean politics and election. Among married respondents of our survey, 7.5% said they sent a child or children during the *past year* to organized educational programs, such as summer language and history courses in Korea. The participation in educational programs was most prevalent among middle-age immigrants (36-55 years of age), with almost 10% of them participating in educational activities. Transnationalism in political activities was kept minimal; 3.3% of respondents voted in an election, 1% reported participation in a political organization or party. Therefore, compared to the social and cultural
transnationalism, Korean immigrants’ transnational activities regarding institutional or organizational sphere (transnationalism \textit{from above}) was negligible.

**Discussion**

The present study aimed to provide descriptive profiles of transnational ties and activities among Korean immigrants living in the Greater Area of Toronto, based on data derived from a relatively small sample of adults. Overall, the findings of the study suggest that a substantial proportion of Korean immigrants report family members, relatives and friends living in Korea. About 20% to 50% of Korean immigrants seem to make telephone or online contacts with them at least once every week. It seems reasonable to conclude that \textit{transnational informal ties are prevalent among Korean immigrants} living in Toronto, especially \textit{among younger and more recent immigrants}. These findings are consistent with the patterns reported by Kelly (2003) and Ley and Hiebert (2004) with respect to immigrants in Vancouver.

In contrast to informal network contacts, participation in transnational politics and organized social programs is limited to a small minority of immigrants. However, strong transnational ties are evident in social and economic transnational ties. About 60% to 75% of adult immigrants of all ages send over and receive either money or gifts from Korea. Three out of four immigrants reported that they still keep assets in Korea. About one in ten have assets worth more than one million dollars; almost one in four have more than one half million dollars worth of assets. Koreans appear to invest in real estates in Korea which has appreciated in a significantly faster pace compared to the Canadian market. As proposed by Schiller and colleagues (Schiller, Basch and Blanc 1992), our
Findings suggest that immigrants adopt conscious and productive transnational strategies based on the perceived opportunities of the global capitalist systems. The trend is much stronger among recent immigrants, and the intensity dissipates as the immigrants extend their residency in Canada. This is also consistent with the findings of Canadian immigrants (Kelly, 2003; Ley and Hiebert, 2004), and inconsistent with the reports on Caribbean Americans (Portes, 2001, 2003).

Are transnational ties and activities salient for the well-being of immigrants? Although it is beyond the scope of this chapter, preliminary analyses of our data (unreported) deemed to support the view. While affirmative implications must await complete analyses, a preliminary examination of data suggests that TN contacts with family members, relatives and friends were associated with lower degree of acculturative stress, an increase in self-esteem, and a decrease in depressive symptoms. The results support the view that the distant transnational networks and capital provide salutogenic social support effects. Thus, it is possible that transnationalism may offer an alternative model of migration and social integration, and the concept of transnationalism provides an intellectual framework that is effective in understanding and explaining alternative migration strategies.

Our measure of emotional tie represented the degree to which immigrants wish they live in Korea. Some preliminary results (not shown in this chapter) indicated associations of emotional ties with increase in Korean ethnic identity, increased level of acculturative stress, lower self-esteem, and higher in depressive symptoms. Thus, the variable emotional tie as assessed in this study may represent an emotional reaction to
settlement difficulties and frustration of living in Canada. There is a need for further investigation of measuring emotional ties.

Limitations of the current study include the non-probability sampling and small sample, as well as the use of non-standardized measures of transnationalism. Despite these limitations, the present study discovered a number of important and new findings, which suggested needs for more systematic approaches to empirical and theoretical studies of transnational migration and its impact on immigrant well being.
References


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