

New York Koreans from Latin America: Education, Family, and Class Mobility

Bae, Jin Suk

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I. Korean Migration to Latin America

The majority of Koreans settled in Latin America after the 1960s, when the South Korean government encouraged agricultural family emigration to Latin America. Latin American countries in need of agricultural labor received Korean immigrants, who were expected to develop vast agricultural colonies and to further attract later migrants (I. Kim 1981; K. Park 2002: 164). Although Korean migration to Latin America started as agricultural immigration, a large portion of these Koreans soon moved from their original agricultural settlements to urban commercial centers (I. Kim 1981). Even after the official Korean government-sponsored agricultural immigrations ended in the 1970s, however, Koreans continued to migrate to Latin America as skilled or investment immigrants, family-based

immigrants, or by using other routes. Some Koreans came from Germany, Vietnam, Iran, and other countries to Latin America when they could not immigrate to the U.S. (K. Park 2008: 18). Besides these voluntary individual Korean immigrations to Latin America, there have been newly growing Korean influxes to Latin America. In the 1980s, Korean companies began establishing offshore factories in Central America and the Caribbean. Beginning in the 1990s, Korean conglomerates started to invest substantial capital in Mexico and South America, particularly in Brazil (W. Kim 1998: 14; K. Choi 2007: 268; Castilla 2009: 4). These recent developments spurred a new wave of Korean migration to Latin American countries, composed mostly of employees of Korean corporations.¹⁾

II. In Search of a Better Education and Future

Mr. Kang closed his sewing machine business in Brazil when his first son was about to start the elementary school and then relocated his whole family to New Jersey in 1985.²⁾ At age 15, Cecilia was sent alone from Paraguay to her aunt in New York.³⁾ Marcela is now pursuing her Masters' degree in Nursing and Public Health at New York University while her family runs a sweater-knitting business in Argentina.⁴⁾ Ms. Ryu left Argentina in 2003 and permanently retired to Flushing, Queens, in order to

1) Due to the increase in Korean trade and investment in Mexico, there has been a growing influx of business executives and their families of South Korean companies (e.g. Hyundai, Samsung, L.G., etc.) to Mexico. As of 2003, the Korean population residing in Mexico City was 17,000 people, 70% of whom were engaged in business, 10% were students, and 9% entrepreneurs (Castilla 2009: 31-32).

2) Interview, Mr. Kang, April 24th, 2011.

3) Interview, Cecilia, March 28th, 2011.

4) Interview, Marcela, February 13th, 2011.

*be reunited with her son who earned his college degree in Korea and works at the Samsung office of New York.*⁵⁾

Some Koreans originally settled in Latin America have returned to South Korea or relocated to the U.S. during political and economic crises in Latin America or for other reasons (Ropp 2000: 222; Joo 2007: 162; S. Seo 2007: 10; K. Park 2008: 7; C. Park 2009: 235).⁶⁾ Pertaining to causes for their remigration⁷⁾ to the U.S., education becomes one of major factors: 55.8% of respondents,⁸⁾ including those mentioned above, claim that one of the primary motives behind their relocation to the U.S. concerned the possibility of a better education for themselves or their children. First, with this in mind, this paper considers why and how education-related issues have impacted the U.S.-bound remigration decisions of Koreans in

5) Interview, Mr. Ryu, March 21st, 2011.

6) Sung Cheol Seo (2007: 10) shows that "[t]he number of Korean immigrants in Argentina has decreased from 32,069 in 1997 to 15,500 in 2003; their counterparts in Paraguay have shrunk from 10,412 in 1999 to 6,190 in 2001. This can be attributable that, due to economic and political instability in Argentina and Paraguay, Koreans in those countries relocated to Brazil, Mexico, the U.S. or returned to Korea." As to the size of the population of Korean remigrants in the U.S. from Latin America, Kyeyoung Park (2002: 161) estimates that "[a]lthough many Korean immigrants (some 100,000) are in South America, others (30,000) have moved on to the U.S., including 20,000 in Southern California."

7) *Note on Terminology*: I use *Korean remigrants* or *secondary migrants* to specifically denote Korean immigrants who took transnational migratory movements more than once or multiple times. This study focuses specifically on those who came to the U.S. via Latin American countries. The most common migration trajectories of my respondents are usually from Korea to Latin America, and to the U.S.

8) Methodologically, it is an historical and ethnographic study: I utilized newspapers, census reports, community records, and other secondary sources both in English and Korean. The most significant element of my research data, however, was empirically acquired through open-ended, in-depth interviews with 102 Korean immigrants from Latin America residing in the New York area.

Latin America, as not only individual student immigrants but also family-unit migrants with diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. This paper especially focuses on how Korean immigrants from Latin America address educational concerns by forming various types of transnational families, or by utilizing or sacrificing different types of resources and opportunities unevenly among family members. Second, this paper investigates migration and resettlement experiences of educationally-oriented Koreans from Latin America in consideration of the specific economic and ethnic structure of New York City. This path of inquiry will demonstrate how immigrants' diverse trajectories of economic as well as educational incorporation in the U.S. have entailed relocations of members of Korean diaspora communities in other countries, particularly to New York.

Within the Korean population who came to the U.S. via Latin America, education represents a pivotal issue that has shaped their immigrant experiences directly or indirectly. As noted earlier, educationally-concerned immigrants constitute the greatest number of Korean remigrants from Latin America. Moreover, some of the respondents, who answer that their own remigration purposes were non-educational, often followed other family members who previously emigrated from Latin American countries for educational reasons. Three patterns are identified in respondents' remigration movements that were primarily propelled by educational reasons: 1) parents who remained in Latin America but sent their children to Korea, Canada, or the U.S., mainly for college education and supported tuitions;⁹⁾ 2) adult children who came to the U.S. independently during or after their college education in Latin America; and 3) both parents and their school-age children who moved together to the U.S.

9) This first pattern includes cases where both or one of the parents remained in Latin America. In the latter cases, one parent who takes care of the business in Latin America and the other, usually the mother, lives with their children in the U.S.

In deciding if and where to move, potential migrants consider not only the skills and resources that they can utilize immediately, but also the long-term aspirations or the intergenerational purposes of the movement. Education-related concerns, in particular, can be an important motivation that stimulates transnational movements and even determine volumes and directions of migration flows (Choy 2003; Fujita 2003; Siu 2005).¹⁰ For instance, U.S. educational institutions, along with favorable conditions in the American labor market, have played a significant role in attracting both foreign students and immigrants with children to North America. Including English fluency, educational capital acquired in the U.S. helps to secure international as well as domestic recognition and is highly usable in various labor markets (Ong, 2006: 140, 149; Byun and M. Kim 2011: 472). For similar reasons, Canada, along with the U.S., has also been a popular educational site for Korean immigrants from Latin America, especially due to the less expensive living and educational costs there than comparative institutions in the U.S. Some Korean immigrants in Latin America, however, choose to send their children to Korea in the hope that they will further their educational opportunities and enhance their Korean language abilities and ethnic identity.

1. Occupational Limitations in Latin America

Apart from these reasons that are related to advantages of non-Latin American education, respondents assert that educationally-driven

10) Choy (2003) and Fujita (2003) identify the relationship between American colonial educational policies in the Philippines and Filipino migration to the U.S. as an extension of this education in their home country. According to Siu (2005), Chinese individuals of a certain privileged class in Panama sent their children to study in American colleges in order to increase their cultural capital.

remigration motives were more often directly associated with labor market conditions in Latin America. With this regard, this section examines how specific economic structures in Latin America have compelled Koreans' remigrations to other countries by comparing two representative types of Korean outflows from Latin America: 1) Korean parents seeking to provide their children with better educational opportunities in the U.S.; and 2) adult Korean professionals already educated in Latin America, who were motivated to move due to better occupational chances in the U.S.

Some Korean remigrants came to the U.S. with a very specific academic interest that could only be explored in U.S. institutions of higher education. New York-based educational institutions, such as art schools or universities, have drawn individual Korean immigrants with special educational needs. However, in many cases, academic interest is not solely responsible for the movement of educationally-driven Korean immigrants to the U.S. Rather, a larger number of Korean remigrants express their uneasiness about career prospects or the utility of a Latin America-based education, given the limited occupational opportunities and economic rewards in Latin America. Koreans who initially moved to Latin America mainly for economic purposes were motivated to remigrate, as they gradually realized that entrepreneurship would be the most lucrative occupational option available in Latin America for their children; and that even highly-educated professionals were not likely to be compensated adequately.

Education often turns into a central family matter and is interpreted in intergenerational terms. Thus, Korean immigrants who often considered migration options collectively as a family unit led to serial migratory movements. Depending on the changing available resources as well as individual and familial priorities, Korean immigrants made continuous and sequential choices throughout the generations. A greater number of

remigrant families exhibited shifts in their primary migration objectives; over time they went from business- to education-oriented. It appeared that, for these immigrant families, educational concerns gradually emerged as younger generation Koreans grew and Korean parents became economically more established in Latin America. Regardless of their educational or professional backgrounds in Korea, most Korean adult immigrants became subsumed into the small business sector in Latin American countries, where many of them achieved economic success. However, some of these Korean entrepreneurs in Latin America envisioned a different life path for their children with better professional opportunities, thus embarking on another round of migratory movements in order to realize their plans.

2. Movements of Highly-skilled Professionals in Medicine

Stemming from a perceived lack of well-paying white-collar occupations in Latin America, some Korean immigrants prefer to educate their children in the U.S., thus making it easier for them to enter the mainstream U.S. labor market later. In other cases, wage differentials as well as better working conditions between countries induced adult professionals who already completed their education in Latin America to participate in transnational movements to the U.S. These professional migrants, who included future American doctors and nurses were mostly in their mid-20s or 30s upon their arrival in the U.S. These migrants usually waited to finish their medical educations in Latin America, even when they had long planned to eventually move to the U.S., or when the rest of their family members left them behind and moved to the U.S. Ms. Oh, who is in her late 40s, details how she was educated in Nursing in Latin America, but, motivated by economic reasons, decided to become a nurse in the U.

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As a matter of fact, nurses were not well paid in Argentina. A monthly salary for nurses was 500 to 600 dollars, whereas I would make 5,000 to 6,000 dollars a month by embroidering clothes. After graduating from college, I moved to New York in 1990.

Another respondent, Dr. Eun, a 43-year-old surgeon, is a former medical school graduate of the University of Sao Paulo.¹²⁾ However, for the past seven years, he has worked at hospitals in several U.S. states, and has recently opened his new private clinic in Flushing, Queens. In Brazil, he completed his medical school and residency training. However, partly because he expected a better occupational opportunity in the U.S., he decided to join his family in the U.S. He remembers that even highly-qualified personnel like doctors were not economically well rewarded in Brazil. A number of highly-qualified foreign-trained professionals migrate to the U.S. in order to maximize their educational credentials. Some Korean medical graduates from Latin America have belonged to this influx of immigrants into the U.S. Aware of this situation where even highly-qualified medical professionals are generally under-rewarded and some of them opt to move to the U.S., Korean immigrants sought to access opportunities for social mobility that were not available in Latin America by remigrating to the U.S.

11) Interview, Ms. Oh, April 19th, 2011.

12) Interview, Dr. Eun, February 28th, 2011.

III. Education and Family Formations

1. Transnational Family: Separation and Reunification

South Koreans generally moved or were recruited to Latin America in the unit of an individual family or multiple households. Likewise, the majority of respondents for this study represent a family unit emigration to Latin America, with the exception of a few marriage migrants who went alone to join their future spouses there, and native Latin-American born Koreans. However, some of these Korean immigrants, who originally moved to Latin America as a family, have later chosen to live separately as a form of transnational household,¹³⁾ spanning between Latin American countries or between Latin America and other countries such as the U.S., Canada, and Korea.

Migration decisions of Korean remigrants are often influenced by their own sense of international divisions of education and business

13) Parrenas (2001) defines transnational families or households as “families whose core members are located in at least two nation-states.” Historically, in addition to contemporary Filipina domestic workers, migrants including the earliest Chinese laborers and Mexican braceros in the U.S. created and maintained transnational households in order to maximize resources and opportunities in the global economy (Parrenas 2001: 80–1). In contrast with global labor migrants, Korean remigrants, who were more concerned with the accumulation of foreign educational capital and long-term or intergenerational occupational mobility in receiving nations, have also participated in the formation of transnational families. In addition, the experiences of these educationally-driven Koreans from Latin America can be compared to cross-border educational activities by other Asian groups. Two such groups are “parachute kids,” who are brought to the U.S. or Canada from Hong Kong or Taiwan and are left there by their parents (Ong 1999: 128), or South Korean “flying geese families” where the father usually stays behind to send remittances in order to support his children and their mothers abroad (J. Park and Bae 2009: 367; Oh 2010: 321).

opportunities. Latin American countries are valued more for business opportunities for parents than educational reasons for younger generation Korean immigrants. Some respondents or their family members were raised in Latin America up until high school, and were later sent to non-Latin American countries for their college degrees. In addition, a few were sent as teenagers to non-Latin American countries for educational purposes and it was commonly arranged that they would live with relatives or other guardians there. More frequently, parents remain behind to sustain their businesses in Latin America, while their children study in other countries, rather than the other way around in these cases. These transnational families intend to acquire and maximize different kinds of resources and opportunities at different geographical sites (Waters 2005: 362; J. Park and S. Bae 2009: 368). The acquired financial resources through entrepreneurial activities in Latin America have been invested in children's education in North American countries or Korea.

The individual movements of adult children also triggered other family members to leave the Latin American countries for the U.S. later. These cases include Korean immigrants who studied in Korea or Canada rather than in the U.S., but who afterward settled down in the U.S. Often, migration decisions are determined not only by Koreans' former relocations to non-Latin American countries for educational reasons, but also by later concerns toward the future careers of younger generation Koreans. When Koreans from Latin America who first came as individual student migrants later decided to stay in the U.S., parents with a strong desire for a family reunion joined their adult children in the U.S. Other parents, however, preferred to live separately in Latin America in order to avoid the readjustment processes in the U.S.

2. Family Remigration: Working and Studying Together in New York

In contrast with these transnational split-households, some Korean families moved all of the family members to the U.S., motivated by educational concerns. The following arrangements were found in the experiences of respondents: 1) all of the family members live, study, and work together in the U.S.; and 2) while educating their children in the U.S., parents go back and forth between two countries to run their businesses in Latin America.

Some respondents comment that they relocated to the U.S. because their children, who had been influenced by other native classmates or short visits to the U.S., aspired to continue studies in the U.S. However, the majority of research participants consider family remigration decisions as a parental choice. Korean parents were often affected by other Korean families' remigration movements for educational reasons or by relatives in the U.S. The movements were children-centered but planned and executed by parents, who also usually decided on the timing of remigration. In addition, choices of remigration destinations were generally selected by parents who took into account multifaceted factors for each of the family members' best interests.

There are many overlapping reasons for Korean immigrants' preference for New York as their settlement location. These reasons range from personal networks, business and employment opportunities, good schools, and cultural amenities, to well-developed systems of public transportation. For educationally-driven Koreans from Latin America, student immigrants came individually to attend their prospective educational institutions in New York. On the other hand, some family remigrants chose to settle down in New York for economic reasons, combined with primarily

educational ones. When Koreans remigrate to the U.S. together as a family, showing a strong tendency toward family unity, immigrant parents expect to benefit from the existence of the New York Korean community with a sizable ethnic economy.

Korean remigrants decide to move to New York, not only because of a favorable educational environment for their children, but also due to their expectations that the economic adjustment to New York will be smooth, either with respect to starting their own small businesses or for working for other Korean enterprises. Even when Korean families remigrate to the U.S. primarily for their children's educational purposes, parents need to be engaged in continuous economic activities in order to support their family and their children's education. With a viable Korean ethnic economy and networks, respondents who lacked the U.S.-based education and English ability anticipated that they would survive and settle down relatively easily in New York. Relatively prompt economic adjustments of parents in the host society have supported the education of their children. In other words, Korean immigrants in Latin America, who are informed of and expect the possibilities of both small business opportunities for themselves and well-paying professional occupations for their children, chose to come to New York which has a particularly well-developed Korean community. They made efforts to convert economic resources into their children's educational capital through continuous movement.

3. Parents' Sacrifices and Downward Mobility

Sometimes, education-related immigrations negatively affect parents' occupational paths. Some of the Korean immigrants voluntarily accepted further downward mobility in the U.S. even though they were already aware of the hazards before their migration. In Latin American countries,

most respondents were self-employed entrepreneurs. It was relatively easy for Korean immigrants to start and manage their businesses, partly due to lower start-up capital in Latin American countries. Once Korean immigrants decide to move to the U.S., which they anticipate will offer a better education and future for their children, the possibility that they may not own their business, but have to work for others, does not hinder their remigration.

Korean remigrant parents left the comforts and economic stability that they had built for years in Latin America, and were ready to repeat the whole process of migration and adjustment as new arrivals. In this process, some Korean former business owners in Latin America became employees for other Koreans after their remigration to the U.S. In New York, Mr. and Ms. Cho who had operated a clothing store in Chile did not start a business, but instead, worked as employees for other Korean businesses, such as liquor stores, construction works, and nail salons.¹⁴⁾ Not all Korean families prioritize their children's education during their immigration; however, educational matters are considered central and interpreted in intergeneration terms among many remigrants. Although his own class mobility itself has been downgraded in the U.S., Mr. Cho evaluates his children's academic and career successes, in collective terms, as those of his family's.

IV. After U.S.-based Education

Korean immigrants from Latin America have acquired higher education in various places worldwide. Among a total of 102 respondents, nineteen received their college degrees in Korea: eighteen did so in their

14) Interview, Mr. and Ms. Cho, March 13th, 2011.

pre-emigration stage; one person returned to Korea for her postsecondary education after immigration to a Latin American country. Nine respondents obtained their Bachelor's degrees in Latin American countries. For U.S.-based college educations, eight are current students; eighteen are graduates; and three are dropouts of American colleges. Four other respondents completed both their Bachelor's degrees and post-college degrees in the U.S.; and another two have non-U.S. college degrees, but are currently enrolled in U.S. graduate programs. Reflecting religious zeal among Korean immigrants, five respondents are U.S.-based seminary graduates and two are current Theology students in New York. Overall, younger generation Koreans showed a high level of college education. Among the respondents who arrived in the U.S. at age 25 or younger, only 20 percent, or 8 out of 40 (including 2 U.S. college-dropouts) did not have a college degree.

In New York, Korean remigrants, in general, illustrate more diversified occupational choices, with a higher percentage of professionals among younger generation Korean remigrants. Korean remigrants with U.S. college degrees have used their educational credentials in various ways. Some Korean professionals were able to employ their previous education from Latin America to the U.S., but most of the remigrants engaged in professional occupations due to their U.S.-based educations. Others have secured white-collar employments at Korean-owned or mainstream firms or organizations. With a U.S. college degree and English proficiency, some remigrants still prefer to work in a Korean-owned establishment; others avoid working with Korean immigrants; both mentioned cultural differences, as the reason for their respective decision. Even Korean-owned enterprises in New York, which include subsidiaries of Korean conglomerates, tend to be larger than those in Latin America and those can absorb post-college graduates as well.

Some Korean immigrants with a U.S. college education who become entrepreneurs had previous experiences working in non-Korean companies. These Koreans chose to enter small business by preference due to the independence and flexibility afforded by the work, and still consider options to work in mainstream companies in the future. Even when embarking on entrepreneurship, some younger generation Koreans utilize non-Korean ethnic resources and rely on their American associates or transnational networks that are connected to Latin American countries. After graduating from a U.S. college, some respondents or their family members, using their language skills and educational capital, worked as English instructors or employees at Korean corporations in Korea.

Not all remigrants accomplish their American dreams or want to permanently settle down in the U.S. Some remigrants return to Latin America or Korea when their business fails or their children complete their education in the U.S. Other Koreans prefer to live in Latin America or Korea after spending some years in the U.S. Some Korean college students that came alone to the U.S. from Latin America intend to return to the sending country to be reunited with their family members, and to utilize their U.S. educations in their family businesses. Veronica majors in Fashion Design at the Fashion Institute of Technology, but plans to return to Brazil upon graduation.¹⁵⁾ For her future career, she expects to benefit from family supports and class resources, including well-established family apparel businesses in Latin America.

V. Conclusion

This paper has addressed how education-related concerns have

15) Interview, Veronica, May 3rd, 2011.

influenced Koreans' migratory movements from Latin America to other countries. Although some Korean immigrants in Latin America are more inclined toward entrepreneurial activities for their children, other Koreans' life trajectories have centered on educational concerns for both themselves and their children, which impacted their choice of where to study and work. More diverse and better educational and employment prospects in the U.S. in particular have drawn Korean immigrants from Latin America to the U.S. as students or professional migrants.

Moreover, for Korean remigrants from Latin America, education tends to be not only an individual choice, but also a family matter, which affects family formations and has significant intergenerational consequences. Sacrifices and economic accumulations by immigrant parents pave the way for better educational and career opportunities for children. Korean immigrants in Latin America have either sent their children to countries such as Korea, Canada, and the U.S. particularly for their college degrees. Or Korean families of diverse socioeconomic backgrounds moved together to the U.S.

New York City has been selected as a popular remigration destination among these Korean remigrants from Latin America, due to both favorable educational environments and parents' business opportunities available, along with other ethnic community resources. Both the Korean ethnic economy and publicly available resources in the U.S. institutions have contributed to a limited, but more universal, access to higher education and intergenerational mobility among Korean immigrants with different levels of personal financial resources. Some remigrants or their family members return to Latin America or Korea after completing their own or their children's education. Not all Korean immigrants from Latin America accomplish their educational aspirations. Some younger generation Koreans have engaged in small businesses without U.S.-based higher education or

work unrelated to their educational backgrounds. However, a significant number of Korean remigrants have attained U.S. degrees and utilized their educational credentials in various ways within the U.S. or internationally.

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Abstract

New York Koreans from Latin America: Education, Family, and Class Mobility

Bae, Jin Suk (Korea Univ.)

Some Koreans originally settled in Latin America have returned to South Korea or relocated to the U.S. during political and economic crises in Latin America or for other reasons. Pertaining to causes for their remigration to the U.S., education becomes one of major factors. First, with this in mind, this paper considers why and how education-related issues have impacted the U.S.-bound remigration decisions of Koreans in Latin America, as not only individual student immigrants but also family-unit migrants with diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. Second, this paper investigates migration and resettlement experiences of educationally-oriented Koreans from Latin America in consideration of the specific economic and ethnic structure of New York City.

More diverse and better educational and employment prospects in the U.S. in particular have drawn Korean immigrants from Latin America to the U.S. as students or professional migrants. Moreover, for Korean remigrants from Latin America, education tends to be not only an individual choice, but also a family matter, which affects family formations and has significant intergenerational consequences. Sacrifices and economic accumulations by immigrant parents pave the way for better educational and career opportunities for children. New York City has been selected as a popular remigration destination among these Korean remigrants from Latin America, due to both favorable educational environments and parents'

business opportunities available, along with other ethnic community resources. Some remigrants or their family members return to Latin America or Korea after completing their own or their children's education. Not all Korean immigrants from Latin America accomplish their educational aspirations. However, a significant number of Korean remigrants have attained U.S. degrees and utilized their educational credentials in various ways within the U.S. or internationally.

Key Words: Korean Immigrants, Remigration, Diaspora, Latin America, New York, Education, Transnational Family
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*이름: 배진숙

*소속: 고려대학교 아세아문제연구소 연구교수

*주소: (집주소입니다.)

서울특별시 영등포구 선유로53길 15, 401호 (양평동4가, 파크빌1)

우편번호: 150-867

*이메일: bae.jinsuk@gmail.com