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The Precarity and Strategic Navigation of *Chosŏnjok* Migrants in South Korea[1]

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Abstract

This paper investigates how ethnic Koreans migrating to South Korea from the People's Republic of China (PRC) have learned to adapt to precarity, tailoring their strategies to cope with an increasingly uncertain South Korean job market. Using archival analysis, participant observations, and in-depth interviews, the findings of this study demonstrate that the in-betweenness of those migrants' ethnicity and nationality gives them licence to slip into the South Korean job market. They find employment, albeit part-time or contract-based work, further upsetting an already precarious job market. This research argues that *Chosŏnjok*, Korean-Chinese migrants, have developed strategies to navigate unstable situations and use precarity to their advantage as a tactic to survive, relying on their Korean ethnicity to give them a foot in the door. In this paper, I explore the three strategies they employ to survive in increasingly precarious circumstances. One strategy is their willingness to seek employment through informal and unofficial job markets and broker systems. The second strategy is to engage in circular mobility, allowing *Chosŏnjok* to reap the benefits of citizenship in both South Korea and the PRC. The third strategy is place-making, and I used the enclave in the Kuro-Taerim area of Seoul, as an example. By engaging in South Korea's unstable job market, *Chosŏnjok*'s precarious circumstances are exploited by employers while at the same time the migrants learn to exploit the precarity to their benefit.

Keywords: Korean Chinese, *Chosŏnjok*, precarity, migrant workers, informality, place-making

Introduction

This paper discusses a particular group of "in-between" migrants whose ancestors migrated to another country, but now these descendants have, in essence, come to the country of origin of their ancestors. It focuses on how *Chosŏnjok* migrants, who share ethnicity and language, have managed to navigate the escalating precarity of the Korean job market and, as a result, contributed to the precarity of Korean society. Precarity in this research refers to employment that is becoming progressively more insecure, unpredictable, and uncertain, as a result of fluctuations in job markets. While there are those able and flexible enough to see these fluctuations as opportunities and capitalize on them,[2] most people, however, fall victim to and are marginalized by these constantly changing developments. Precarious employment has been on the rise and as such has received increasing attention from academics and governments.[3] While migrants are both the objects driven by and the agents who drive precarity, the relationship between migration and increasing precarity has gone by and large unexplored. This study is an attempt to analyze the critical role the "in-betweenness" of migrants returning to their homeland plays in the context of how it contributes to the increasing levels of precarity in that country.

The research subjects in this study are *Chosŏnjok* and local Koreans residing in Seoul, largely focusing on the Kuro-Taerim area. *Chosŏnjok* refers to those ethnic Koreans that crossed into China and settled mainly in the Jiāndǎo (間島, 간도) border region. Migration that started in 1627 right up until 1945 was precipitated by harsh conditions, starvation, or Japanese colonial rule. Considering the more than 300-year span, this exodus is viewed as an example of Korea's tragic history.[4] Long before the Korean War brought about the division between South Korea and North Korea, and long before the national border between the PRC and Korea formally emerged in 1962, *Chosŏnjok* migrants' mobility history illustrates the wider East Asian context of geopolitical shifting. These migrants became known in the PRC as the descendants of Chosŏn, the name of the Korean state prior to 1897, ruled by the Chosŏn dynasty.

Before South Korea and the PRC normalized relations in 1992, ethnic Koreans' mobility between China and South Korea was strictly controlled for more than three decades. Improved relations between the PRC and South Korea opened the door for their return. Significant changes were implemented during the Chinese government's Open Door Policy of 1978[5] and the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between South Korea and the PRC in 1992.[6] *Chosŏnjok* migrants could now cross into South Korea, but since Korea did not have bureaucratic procedures in place to issue work visas to temporary migrant workers, they were essentially

undocumented immigrants. Recognizing the country's labor shortage, especially in small- and medium-size manufacturing companies,[7] the South Korean government created the H-2 visa in 2007 that lifted restrictions on employment. These changes meant *Chosŏnjok* migrants could relocate to South Korea legally, and the reassurance of legitimately being allowed to work there encouraged greater migrations.

While times were good, *Chosŏnjok* migrants served their purpose. They were even once considered as 2nd or 3rd-generation returnees in the sense that their ancestors were originally from the Korean peninsula. However, in the 1990s and 2000s, *Chosŏnjok*'s high expectations were somewhat dashed as they were subjected to unexpectedly harsh treatment. The expectations of their Korean employers and neighbors were also disappointed as they realised that the *Chosŏnjok* migrants were neither fluent in Korean, complicating interactions at work, nor did they identify as Koreans.[8] However, their shared ethnicity and language, even at a remove, enabled *Chosŏnjok* migrants to sufficiently fill the gaps in the job market and fit in more quickly than other migrants without this advantage.

By looking at the case of *Chosŏnjok* migrants in South Korea, this study contributes to a better understanding of the interactive dynamics between larger global issues and individuals' responses to forces they can react to, but which are beyond their control. Rapid globalization followed by the Asian financial crisis in 1997 left South Korea's job market decimated. The financial crisis changed the way that South Korean society looked at *Chosŏnjok* migrants and how to employ them. The job market had to become flexible to mitigate the burden on businesses and the labor shortages in low-income but "dirty, dangerous, and demeaning" (the so-called "3D"), industries. The influx of *Chosŏnjok* returnees, regardless of the economic collapse, was vital to the country's industry. At first, *Chosŏnjok* migrants were limited in where they could work, but after several changes of migration policies in South Korea, they could obtain a variety of jobs including professional ones. However, service, manufacturing, and general labor still make up of 63% of the jobs *Chosŏnjok* migrants hold.[9]

In addressing their experiences as returnees, this research poses two important questions. First, how has *Chosŏnjok* migrants' in-betweenness been exploited by employers in this era of job precarity, at the same time as it increased precarity in Korean society? Second, how have *Chosŏnjok* migrants navigated these perilous dynamics and unstable job situations in South Korea? The first question seeks to address how *Chosŏnjok* migrants and the geopolitical and economic transformations have influenced each other and contributed to the increasing precarity of South Korea's labor environment.

Based on various sources used to illustrate *Chosŏnjok* migrants' experiences between 1992 and 2016, the findings of this study demonstrate that *Chosŏnjok* migrants' in-betweenness as simultaneously ethnic Koreans and foreigners gives them a flexibility that allows them to easily adapt to irregular job markets. For instance, as ethnic Koreans, their Korean language capacity and ethnicity means they are more readily accepted by South Korean employers. As foreigners whose expectations are different than those of native Koreans who have come to expect a certain quality of life, they are more willing to accept irregular work. Their presence has had a destabilising effect on labor costs, and even though they may not wish to make matters worse, they are not in a position to refuse jobs, no matter how lowly. As such, Korean society, already teetering on the edge of precarity, is given a push over it by the *Chosŏnjok* migrants. Even as lowly workers in the care and domestic job markets,[10] they significantly aggravate the situation. Should they refuse to accept low pay, then employers would be forced to offer better wages that Koreans might consider.

As for the second question, this study argues that *Chosŏnjok* migrants have managed to navigate unstable environments by engaging in three specific coping strategies: using informal job markets, engaging in circular mobility, and engaging in place-making in the Kuro-Taerim area in Seoul. While their ethnicity allows for greater interaction with Korean natives compared to migrant workers of other ethnicities, ethnicised migrant policies have sanctioned those place-making strategies that allow them to remain discrete from the local populace.

In addressing the above arguments, the paper is divided into five sections. The first section reviews the literature on precarity and suggests paying more attention to interactions between social environments and migrants, especially in the East Asian context. The second section introduces the historical and the geopolitical contexts of *Chosŏnjok* migrants, followed by a discussion on the research methods used for this study. The third section focuses on the findings that show how the mobility of *Chosŏnjok* as kin-migrants has contributed to South Korea's shift to an unpredictable state and, at the same time, how the *Chosŏnjok* themselves have become precaritized in the process. The fourth section discusses the findings on how *Chosŏnjok* migrants have navigated instability and the role their ethnicity plays in their interactions with Korean natives as they make the most of the opportunities available to them. The paper concludes by discussing the implications of this interactive approach to precarity and migrants.

Precarity and In-Between Migrants' Strategies

As uncertain socioeconomic conditions have increased in late capitalism, social scientists and policy-makers have paid much more attention to the notion of "precarity."[11] The increased mobility of people as cheap labor, flexible production and lifestyles, neo-liberal ideology, and the commodification of education and governmental services have constituted the changes affecting contemporary societies today. Precarious work is associated with part-time employment, contract-based work, fixed-term work, temporary work, on-call work, home-based work, self-employment, and telecommuting.[12] Precarity is not simply about a flexible job market but also about the ways in which societies and people define time and space and the particular emotions they evoke.[13] By linking the global political economy to individuals' lifestyles and emotions, this literature contributes to an understanding of the dynamics of contemporary society in a comprehensive way.[14]

Those people who suffer from or strategically use precarity are defined as the precariat, a term that combines "precarious" and "proletariat." Standing (2016) defines the precariat as a category of people lacking job security, guaranteed income and representation. Though Mosoetsa et al. (2016) debate this definition of precarity and criticize it for being overly simplistic and narrow, Standing's concept of precarity can be applied to broad social changes and not just individuals' employment.

The main groups making up such populations include youth, women, the elderly and the disabled, welfare claimants, criminals, and migrants. Eventually, the majority of those living in contemporary societies will be affected by such changes, with more members becoming part of the precariat because not only job markets are changing but, more fundamentally, societies and individual lives are undergoing transformation, too. As people live through temporary projects and contract-based jobs, their lifestyles and political inclinations also become unpredictable and unstable.[15] These individuals face decreased welfare and a challenging family life; they also suffer from debt and emotional turbulence.[16] There has been increasing attention to the importance of affect and sentiment in relation to geopolitics.[17] Dominant emotions in and consequences of such situations include anxiety, alienation, anomie, anger-driven political inclinations, and possible resistance.[18]

Despite contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the political economy and individual material and psychological well-being, previous studies on precarity have two significant gaps. The dynamics between returnees and their ethnic homeland is the first quite critical gap in existing studies. Migrants

in general are frequently viewed as outsiders and different from natives,[19] but ethnic returnees straddle a line between being the same and yet somehow different. The interaction between the returnees and the general population deserves more attention not just for the social changes but also job market changes. Through this relationship one sees the returnees as both victims and perpetrators of precarity.

The second gap in previous studies on precarity is that the discussion has not embraced the growing literature on migration in South Korea. The South Korean context[20] has often been a representative example of the flexible job market, because it has the highest rates of temporary employment (32.3 percent of the total workforce) among the member countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).[21] However, few studies address how precarity and migrants' coping strategies position them in South Korean society. There is a divergence in terms of the specific processes of dealing with precarization and the consequences of precarity. For example, migrants' coping strategies that result in ethnic enclaves demonstrate a proactive response to social instability. Despite their best efforts to create stability, the host society's view of migrants as transitory results in an uncertain social standing and little to no access to social resources.

I propose a reconsideration of precarity as a product of the interactive dynamics between structure and agents, especially in the East Asian context. By approaching migrants as an articulated example of such interacting actors, this research considers contemporary Korean society and the East Asian region from a relational and dynamic perspective. Migrants' decision-making—whether their decisions are made freely or are forced—needs to go beyond rigid binaries between a voluntary decision and a forced decision that leads to victimization.[22] For instance, as illustrated in Collins' study, these two distinct situations are mixed in the cases of highly educated and/or ambitious migrants. They approach precarity strategically, aspiring for socially upward mobility, but still end up being permanent precariat.[23] Another example is the case of Vietnamese marriage migrants who were forced to migrate to South Korea but, as time passed, ended up as activists advocating for other women migrating for marriage.[24] As the case of the *Chosŏnjok* demonstrates, the combination of geopolitical circumstances, the state's governing strategies, and *Chosŏnjok* migrants' mobilities have each played a part in creating this situation.[25]

This study focuses on the three coping strategies migrants use to survive. The first coping method is informality, which has been a part of ordinary life even in advanced societies as migrants use informal strategies to make their lives safe.[26] Migrants, undocumented migrants included,[27] integrate themselves into informal

job markets and institutions, as well as formal ones.[28] This liberalization of the system has spread and is increasingly taken up by those native to the regulated places.[29] Local governments and businessmen play important roles in maintaining informality by mediating geopolitical dynamics and migrant regulation within a particular local context.[30]

The second coping method is circular mobility.[31] Based on telecommunications and transport, permanent temporariness is possible for those who engage in high levels of mobility and lead transnational lives.[32] In the context of the Asia-Pacific region, circular mobility has been the dominant mode of labor migration. Seoul is one of the large urban areas where there are an overwhelming number of migrants with temporary permits.[33]

The third coping method is place-making, which is evidenced in the enclave located in the Kuro-Taerim area of Seoul. Place-making, creating their own places, plays an important role in maintaining their ties and identities.[34] One representative example is an ethnic enclave. Ethnic enclaves have a concentration of ethnic entrepreneurship[35] and ethnic churches[36] that preserve ethnic identity and bolster the effect of geopolitics on shaping migrants' emotional and political lives.[37]

Ethnic in-betweenness plays a significant part in the *Chosŏnjok*'s three strategies for coping with precarity. First, their Korean ethnicity helps them to establish a network with and receive sympathy from Korean natives, who play an essential role in developing informal ways to help migrants make a living. Previous studies on the *Chosŏnjok* have focused on the *Chosŏnjok* diaspora,[38] ethnic identities and conflicts,[39] changes in Korean migration policies,[40] including ethnicization,[41] and the Kuro-Taerim area.[42] They have contributed to a better understanding of the *Chosŏnjok* and the various issues surrounding them, but have not paid enough attention to conceptualizing the interactive evolution of *Chosŏnjok* migrants and Korean society. Previous studies have focused either on the receiving society or on the migrants.

Second, Korean ethnic migrants' circular mobility has been simplified by improved migration policies so that they travel to and from China without incident. Even before the creation of H-2 and F-4 visas that allowed for freer movement between the countries, however, most undocumented *Chosŏnjok* migrants had adopted a strategy of circular mobility to avoid detection as illegal residents. Now that the visas granted legal residence and made their comings and goings straightforward, circular mobility became doable and popular. Third, the place-making of ethnic enclaves is common in any migrant group, but *Chosŏnjok* enclaves are more closely related to and have stronger networks with Korean natives because of their shared language and culture. The ethnic similarity also can make them

notice discrimination and inequality and cause conflicts.[43] It should be noted that *Chosŏnjok* migrants were forced to develop those strategies first and later came to use them more actively.

Case Background: Increasing Need for Migrant Workers in Job Market Shifts

The 1990s and 2000s witnessed shifts in the global political economy and the dynamics of economic globalization, including the East Asian financial crisis in 1997. Chinese policies of economic opening and the emergence of the PRC as a global power brought about changes in the PRC's relationship with North and South Korea.[44] Also within the PRC, the mobility of people looking for better job opportunities significantly increased and brought about changing dynamics in people's lives.[45]

Facing a shifting global economy and trying to survive the economic crisis, the South Korean state attempted to ease the shortages in the job and marriage markets by promoting the mobility of people from outside South Korea.[46] The percentage of people who went to college increased, but the Korean job market was restructured, and there was an increase in low-income and temporary jobs. Low-income jobs in the service sector increased and attracted labor, while low-income manufacturing and agricultural jobs went unfilled. Compounding this issue, the unequal gender ratio left a number of Korean men (especially in rural areas) unable to find themselves brides willing to marry them. South Korea promoted an influx of transnational migrants so that those manufacturing and agricultural job markets could hire migrant workers from other developing countries and that the marriage market could bring in brides to balance the gender ratio.

The Korean government revised its migrant policies so that it could govern society through mobility. In 1993, the implementation of the Industrial Training Programme, following the South Korea–PRC Amity Treaty, responded to the influx of *Chosŏnjok*. It allowed small companies to hire migrant workers without a work permit.[47] After the Asian financial crisis, the Overseas Koreans Act in 1999, which purported to attract the capital of overseas Koreans in wealthy Western countries, served to protect linear descendants of a person who emigrated after the establishment of the Korean Government in 1948 from discrimination. This 1999 law predominately excluded *Chosŏnjok*, because their ancestors had left Korea before 1948. As a result, *Chosŏnjok* were not allowed to enjoy the same privileges that other Koreans abroad could enjoy, and they contested this act until it was deemed unconstitutional and overturned in 2001.

As social concerns emerged about the increasing number of undocumented migrants, two legal changes—the F-4 and H-2 visas—were made between 2002 and 2007.[48] *Chosŏnjok* were not given F-4 visa until the late 2010s. Undocumented *Chosŏnjok* were forced to leave South Korea during this period (2002–2004). That's why the number of undocumented migrant workers shrank in this period. The number of undocumented *Chosŏnjok* became much smaller after the introduction of the H-2 visa in 2007. Migrant regulations later became ethnicized, in that the state implemented an employment management system that legalized undocumented *Chosŏnjok* migrants and secured a job for them after they visited their home countries and returned. *Chosŏnjok* migrants without family or friends were allowed to stay and work in South Korea for five years, according to the Visiting Employee System implemented in 2007. Since the Constitutional Court deemed the Overseas Koreans Act unconstitutional, it was revised to include ethnic Koreans from the PRC and countries from the Commonwealth of Independent States in 2007.

The Ministry of Justice estimates the total number of *Chosŏnjok* living in South Korea in 2016 at 614,293 in an internal report.[49] Until 1988, very few *Chosŏnjok* lived in South Korea, but a system of home visits allowed the *Chosŏnjok* to visit South Korea legitimately.[50] The *Chosŏnjok* comprise 31% of non-Koreans[51] and hold either a work visa (42% of the total *Chosŏnjok* migrants) or an overseas Korean visa (39.4%). In Seoul's Yŏndŭngp'o-gu District, Taerim-dong has 50,378 *Chosŏnjok* (22.0% of the total *Chosŏnjok* population in Seoul) and Kuro-gu has 40,926 (17.8%).[52] To date, approximately 100,000 *Chosŏnjok* have attained Korean citizenship. The emergence of *Chosŏnjok* in South Korea has brought significant changes and societal challenges. *Chosŏnjok* as kin-migrants, meaning people with the same ethnicity that migrated from another country, raises questions about notions of belonging, ethnicity, and migration policies.

The *Chosŏnjok* have been concentrated in the Yanbian region of the PRC and have maintained their identity as Koreans through language, education, and culture.[53] At the same time, they have assimilated to Chinese society as both Chinese nationals and as an ethnic minority. The Open Door Policy that attracted foreign businesses in 1978 and the Amity Treaty between the PRC and South Korea in 1992 have brought about the out-migration of 70% of the *Chosŏnjok* working population in Yanbian to various countries in the early 2000s, including Russia, Japan, South Korea, and the large urban cities of the PRC. The Kuro-Taerim area used to be primarily industrial, and the main residents were factory workers until the late 1990s. The *Chosŏnjok* flocked to the area for the affordable housing and convenient public transportation.[54] Forty percent of the *Chosŏnjok* population in Seoul live in this area, the second largest after Kyŏnggi province.

Data and Methods

To gain a deeper understanding of the changes in Korean society and the reaction of *Chosŏnjok* to them over time, this research used a mixed methods approach, including archival research, participant observations, and in-depth interviews with native Koreans and *Chosŏnjok* in their enclaves. The qualitative research methods demonstrate the evolving dynamics between geopolitical environment, the Korean domestic job market, and individuals' everyday lives and emotions. Since the scope of the research covers an extended time period, I used archival data such as newspaper articles as the main method for the period of 1992 to 2016. In-depth interviews and participant observations were conducted as supplementary to 2011 and 2015.

I conducted a total of twenty-nine in-depth interviews with eleven *Chosŏnjok* migrants and eighteen Koreans who worked in the relevant organisations, as well as short on-the-spot interviews with a number of *Chosŏnjok* migrants. In-depth interviews with the *Chosŏnjok* were significantly limited because *Chosŏnjok* migrants were concerned about security and their visa statuses. Many refused to be interviewed and did not show up to meet me even after making an appointment. The unfortunate result was that the snowball method based on acquaintances' introduction did not work, because the migrants felt as if they were putting themselves at risk. As an alternative, I carried out a number of short, on-site interviews and participant observations in churches, shelters, restaurants, and coffee/beer shops. All interviews were recorded and then transcribed in Korean and translated into English when necessary. The interviews with the *Chosŏnjok* focused on their survival and coping strategies, while those with Korean natives included questions on how they engage in the developing *Chosŏnjok*'s strategies for dealing with precarious conditions.

I analyzed the data collected during my fieldwork and archival research by cross-checking the information in an interpretative fashion. The interpretations mainly pertain to how *Chosŏnjok* migrants and increased precarity in Korean society have influenced each other over time. I also address informality, circular mobility, and place-making for their religious and social gatherings such as ethnic churches and ethnic associations.

Precarious Job Market and Migrants' Flexible Labor

This section demonstrates how the geopolitical shifts in East Asia, the Korean state's attempt at governing through mobilities,[55] and migrants' navigation of their future directions mutually enhance each other.[56] *Chosŏnjok* migrants, due to their

ongoing history of displacement became even more unstable and temporary in South Korea than they had been in the PRC. At the same time, they contributed to creating a more flexible job market by providing flexible labor and fuelling the demand for more flexible labor in an already flexible job market. The influx of *Chosŏnjok* migrants to South Korea, and many other countries, coincided with the advent of neo-liberal policies in South Korea and the Chinese open-door policy, which resulted in increased precarity the world over. During South Korea's economic and geopolitical transformation, *Chosŏnjok* migrants accepted the newly forming temporary, part-time, and low-income jobs (Oh et al., 2016: 51) that native Koreans shunned while, since the adoption of H-2 visas in 2007, some of them could get into professional sectors with higher wages.

This strategy significantly increased contact between *Chosŏnjok* migrants and South Korean employers, which has influenced mutual attitudes and perceptions. Cases of discrimination, exploitation, and abuse by Korean employers have been reported, which raised the issue of human rights for migrant workers.[57]

Despite their shared ethnicity, *Chosŏnjok* migrants who used to live in the rural areas of the communist PRC were not familiar with Korean capitalist society. Working in restaurants, homes, and hospitals, they had to adapt to different expectations in terms of work ethic and work culture, such as the culture of hierarchy between employers and employees. A critical discourse emerged about *Chosŏnjok* migrants, citing that they lacked loyalty and would quit for another job that offered only slightly higher hourly pay rates. South Koreans may have been disappointed with the perceived lack of work ethic among *Chosŏnjok*, but *Chosŏnjok* migrants were also disappointed as they had expected a more welcoming reception from their compatriots. Besides, Korean employers and the public felt culturally and socially threatened by *Chosŏnjok* migrants who can speak Korean.[58]

Despite this mutual disappointment, the fact that the job market favoured hiring *Chosŏnjok* migrants over non-ethnic Korean migrant workers meant that *Chosŏnjok* migrants became pioneers of flexible labor as a result. As job security dramatically decreased in South Korea, the lack of economic security turned into an opportunity for *Chosŏnjok* in a society where the Korean people were unaccustomed to and less accepting of different ethnicities. For example, as an increasing number of Korean women entered the job market, the number of traditional multigenerational families living together declined, and households needed help with childcare, household work, and elderly care. In the care-work market, *Chosŏnjok* workers for babysitting, domestic work, private nursing, and postnatal care flooded the market. Babysitting used to mainly be done by women or grandmothers, who informally received pocket money at a lower than market rate. There were few Koreans willing to take jobs once held by rural-to-urban

domestic migrants in the 1970s and the 1980s. When *Chosŏnjok* women were willing to take these jobs, the availability of their cheap labor formalized the job market.

It should be noted that the *Chosŏnjok* did not wish to work as irregular or temporary workers. In fact, until the visa changes in the late 2010s, they had no choice but to adapt to the job market, accept the jobs allotted to them, and then leave once their work permits expired. Different education background and socio-economic status among them seemed to have influenced the adaptation process. The few *Chosŏnjok* with college degrees found stable desk jobs in the enclaves. But, the majority of the *Chosŏnjok* were forced to actively choose to be temporary and flexible labor for better job opportunities and social upward mobility. In the end, they gravitated towards temporary jobs, believing that these jobs were preferable because there was no guarantee that they could or would stay for long. In the process of adjusting their preferences, they developed three strategies to adapt to their limited situations. As time went on, according to the majority of *Chosŏnjok* interviewees, they either became increasingly savvy about using informal practices, fond of travelling, or attached to the Kuro-Taerim area.

The resulting migration of the *Chosŏnjok* cast these displaced peoples as both precaritized by and precaritizing South Korean society simultaneously. For instance, *Chosŏnjok* female migrants supplied labor for the increasing demand of the care-work market. The care-work market developed, and that motivated Korean workers to join the labor market as well. As a family's net income decreased, Korean women in low-income households increasingly participated in the job market. So both the demand and the supply of the precarious job market for care-work increased.

At first, those job markets were hierarchized.[59] Korean workers earned more money for the same work performed by *Chosŏnjok* workers, which was justified based on cultural differences and lack of references and skills. It meant that non-ethnic Korean migrants were relegated to the lowest levels of the Korean social structure. Care-work was one category in which Korean families were especially hesitant to hire non-Korean migrant workers. This was mostly because it would be difficult to convey sophisticated instructions in an efficient manner between people who speak different languages. *Chosŏnjok* migrants accepted care-work that was physically and emotionally demanding, and from my participant observations in the shelters, I often heard the *Chosŏnjok* women talk about full-time babysitting and nursing. One *Chosŏnjok* female migrant, for example, recounted,

> Staying in your employer's house and doing domestic work and babysitting is the worst. It is so demanding and exhausting. You lose weight if you do that more than three months. (29 January 2011)

Such statements could be heard mostly from *Chosŏnjok* women who fulfilled most live-in domestic jobs at the time of the interview, in 2011. Korean women avoided those types of jobs. Because *Chosŏnjok* women needed to work and make money, not one person said that she would refuse or quit her job.

However, eventually the hierarchy shifted as time went on. Mainly due to the willingness of the *Chosŏnjok* to take on such employment, the income gap decreased as *Chosŏnjok* attained the required skills and language proficiency. Irregular and/or temporary jobs increased as a result of the interaction between the job market and the availability of *Chosŏnjok* as willing and cheap labor. When *Chosŏnjok* moved to other countries where South Koreans had already settled, they would initially work in Korean-owned businesses (Shin, 2018). Due to their willingness to accept low-paying part-time jobs, they created a market for temporary, project-based jobs, sparking a vicious cycle leading to them taking low-paying jobs out of need, which, in turn, fuelled the job market that provided these jobs.

The in-between identities of *Chosŏnjok* worked in the following ways. On the one hand, the in-betweenness of *Chosŏnjok* migrants significantly influences the ways through which they co-constitute precarity and their reputations. In the 1990s, the arrival of *Chosŏnjok* in South Korea was viewed as a return migration[60] of second- or third-generation Korean migrants from the PRC. Indeed, there is a consensus among the *Chosŏnjok* that they should not be treated as "migrants" because of their Korean ethnicity. Such perception was reflected in a different immigration policy for *Chosŏnjok*. *Chosŏnjok* emphasized their Korean ethnicity rather than Chinese nationality in the Korean society, but at the same time, their Chinese nationality was an important part of their identity.

On the other hand, their in-betweenness motivated them to choose to work in South Korea. While the main perspective in South Korea focuses on ethnicity and identities, *Chosŏnjok* approaches and strategies are largely based on economic interests.[61] In order to gain access to opportunities in South Korea, kinships and marriages were instrumentalized and in some cases falsified until the early 2000s, when the migration policies that have been mentioned rendered these ploys unnecessary.[62] These actions raised questions as to whether the *Chosŏnjok* identified as endemic Koreans or as Chinese nationals who needed to leverage or falsify relationships to gain entry to South Korea. How they view themselves is just one aspect of the convoluted shared ethnicity as South Koreans too wonder where *Chosŏnjok* loyalties lie. Addressing this issue, one *Chosŏnjok* interviewee asked,

> Why do so many Koreans ask us about a football game, like which team we are going to support, the Korean or Chinese one …? They don't treat us as Koreans. They don't appreciate our multiculturalism, either. Once I went to a

> multicultural event sponsored by the local government. By the end of the event, they wanted to take a photo and realised that we don't look multicultural. So they paid some Western people to be in the photo so that the photo looks like a multicultural event. (22 January 2011)

While some *Chosŏnjok* could trace their families and relatives to South Korea, a number of them had mixed feelings about their new host country, because some of them originated from parts of North Korea. South Koreans, on the other hand, have a strong sense of national identity and therefore focus on how *Chosŏnjok* identify themselves. According to the majority of Korean interviewees, one of the main concerns was that they found the *Chosŏnjok* consider themselves to be Chinese, not Korean. Those Korean interviewees criticized the *Chosŏnjok* who did not feel as if they belonged to Korean society. In Korean society, this notion has become widespread, and it was used to justify discrimination against the *Chosŏnjok*.

Precarious conditions affected not only the circumstances surrounding their job status but also their family situations. *Chosŏnjok* migrant workers had to endure lengthy separations from family members who were prohibited from travelling to South Korea. The elderly and children were most frequently left behind in the PRC, and this received attention from the media and academia due to the risks to the wellbeing of the family unit and the children. The media dealt with the social concerns over the impact of family separation on the children's wellbeing, family dissolution, and the loss to the *Chosŏnjok* community due to the lack of workers back in Yanbian, PRC.[63]

It is worth noting how those first-generation *Chosŏnjok* migrants to South Korea were frustrated by the precarity in their children's life, not in theirs. While not being included in the scope of this research, because they were not willing to be in the job market, the second generation *Chosŏnjok* migrants' situations were a big concern to their parents. Older generations of *Chosŏnjok* chose to maintain their migrant status because it cost less.[64] They were willing to be deported back to the PRC rather than go through the process of legalizing their visas. In contrast, their children were only forced to be in precarious jobs without a proactive response. The majority of these children grew up in the PRC, were left behind by parents migrating to South Korea, and taken care of by their grandparents. The first generations' remittances provided a good-quality education and material goods as a form of recompense for not seeing both parents on a daily basis. Their concern was that their children were not as tough as they were to manage the harsh conditions that migrants have to face.

In the interviews that took place in 2015, a member of one of the *Chosŏnjok* ethnic associations expressed her concerns over the *Chosŏnjok* second generation. She said,

> Try any internet cafe in this area. There are so many second-generation *Chosŏnjok* who literally live there, playing computer games. They don't have jobs. They don't know how to get a job in South Korea. They just depend on their parents' income and kill time. It is a big problem for the *Chosŏnjok* society in South Korea. (14 August 2015)

This interviewee sighed and said that the parents came to South Korea and worked very hard to ensure a better future for their children. *Chosŏnjok* parents were finally able to bring their children to South Korea, expecting them to go to university or to find a decent job. However, their children were too old to integrate easily into South Korean society and too young and inexperienced to find a job. Given this situation, the first generation seems to finally experience the pains of precarity.

In-Between Migrants' Navigation Strategies

This section focuses on the strategic uses of precarity from the perspective of *Chosŏnjok* migrants. How have those self-selected migrants navigated precarity with little more than the desperate need to survive? This section looks at how they have developed social and individual capacities of navigation through unstable and flexible situations. Increasingly unstable situations turned into opportunities as well as challenges for the *Chosŏnjok*. That was because increased precarity provided a new niche in job markets for *Chosŏnjok* migrants, who do not mind working as flexible laborers and have a support network with other *Chosŏnjok* in the PRC that affords them flexibility. Since many of them prioritized making money and were free from day-to-day familial responsibilities, they could move freely from job to job, city to city, or stay in the workplaces or houses of their employers, while they performed domestic work, childcare, postnatal care, and patient care. Over the decades, *Chosŏnjok* migrants have honed their survival techniques and renegotiated their identities.

It should be noted that the capacity to navigate these changes is supported by connections to Korean networks and natives, especially those who are receptive to the *Chosŏnjok* in communities like those in the Kuro-Taerim area. Koreans in various sectors benefit from and have a growing interest in engaging with the *Chosŏnjok*.[65] Their attitudes to the *Chosŏnjok* became accommodating rather than controlling, and the collaboration between Korean natives and *Chosŏnjok* migrants was enhanced by a shared language and culture. A Korean local policeman said,

> I recently organized a mountain-climbing club with *Chosŏnjok* people so that I can network with them and get to know what is going on with them … I sometimes go to China [PRC] and meet the friends and relatives of the *Chosŏnjok* here in Korea. It might help for my future business if I showed interest in them. (7 March 2014)

This policeman became close with some *Chosŏnjok* and developed the skills he needed to navigate the job market based on his contact with *Chosŏnjok* people, as even his own occupation became unstable. Private businesses such as local coffee shops, real estate agents, and private hospitals also said that they benefitted from *Chosŏnjok* customers. Even though their presence in the area might be short-term, the *Chosŏnjok* and their lifestyles brought prosperity to local businesses.

Chosŏnjok migrants used the following three strategies to cope with precarity. First, as mentioned, the *Chosŏnjok* developed informal ways to manage their visa statuses, jobs, housing, and marriages. The number of brokers and agencies that linked *Chosŏnjok* migrants to the necessary services and jobs increased exponentially. They created new modes of organising new types of labor and legitimized them within existing regulations.[66] In response to a shifting geopolitical environment and fluctuating migrant policies, they developed casual attitudes and informal management styles. Despite the large-scale legalization undertaken by the state, which reduced the number of undocumented *Chosŏnjok*, approximately 19,000 undocumented *Chosŏnjok* still exist according to local actors of the Kuro-Taerim area.[67] The flexibility inherent in migrant policies led *Chosŏnjok* migrants to think that these visa statuses were not legal and ethical matters but practical matters that they could manage flexibly, *Chosŏnjok* interviewees said.

One *Chosŏnjok* interviewee who used to be an undocumented immigrant for seven years said,

> It [visa status] is a matter of money. You can do anything with money in this country. This is what I learnt here. Being undocumented is of course scary. But, you can live like that; you can have a job, a life, and a house. (27 January 2011)

True or not, this statement demonstrates how *Chosŏnjok* migrants perceived and approached their migrant status. As local Korean native actors mellowed over time and became accommodating rather than controlling,[68] *Chosŏnjok* migrants figured out various ways to stay in South Korea regardless of their expiring visas.

Prioritizing jobs over legal status, *Chosŏnjok* migrants responded proactively to informal jobs, which needed flexible and cheap labor. The influx of *Chosŏnjok* migrants was a boon to the informal job market that already existed, but, at the same time, their availability motivated the creation of more informal jobs. *Chosŏnjok* migrants found informal jobs in care-work, cleaning, agricultural work, construction, and various service sectors. One *Chosŏnjok* interviewee without a work permit said,

> You can find jobs on the Internet, wall boards, and job agencies in this area. I call the number and renegotiate the payment and time. (4 September 2015)

South Koreans started to associate *Chosŏnjok* migrants with informal work, which contributed to an image of people living outside the law.[69] There was a perception that the *Chosŏnjok* would be willing to commit crimes such as voice phishing[70] and even murder; never mind that the *Chosŏnjok*'s crime rate remained lower than Korean natives and other migrant groups.[71] Illegal businesses such as voice phishing need cheap workers who can speak Korean, and according to a police officer interviewed in the area, brokers approached *Chosŏnjok* migrants and tried to recruit them for these purposes. By accepting informal working conditions, *Chosŏnjok* were viewed as undermining society's values, which justified blaming them for illegal businesses cropping up even though a number of native Koreans participated as well.

The informal housing market also underwent a boost through the emergence of *Chosŏnjok* migrants. Cheap and temporary rental homes were built in the Kuro-Taerim area for factory workers, but because those workers left as the factories moved to smaller cities in South Korea or to other Southeast Asian countries or the PRC, the homes were planned to undergo renovation. It was at that time that the *Chosŏnjok* moved from the PRC and rented those vacant homes. One Korean local interviewee who was a realtor said,

> The *Chosŏnjok* saved the housing market in this area. Homeowners lost renters because those factory workers left, then the *Chosŏnjok* showed up. Now homeowners don't want to renovate. The rents even went up because there was more demand for cheap housing than supply. (7 July 2014)

As *Chosŏnjok* migrants replaced the previous and somewhat reliable renters, the renovation plan was cancelled, and, at the time of this research, urban regeneration has been planned instead.[72] The renter system changed to one based on temporary stays because *Chosŏnjok* migrants wanted to be ready to leave with very little notice.

Second, in addition to informality, *Chosŏnjok* migrants developed a strategy to manage precarious conditions in South Korea and to maintain their family in the PRC through circular mobility. Migrant policies would only allow work permits of limited duration, so a temporary stay in South Korea and eventual return to the PRC was inevitable. Even though it was enforced, a number of *Chosŏnjok* migrants developed a positive perception regarding circular mobility mainly because it allowed them to visit their families back in the PRC. By moving back and forth, they could visit their families often and still find transient work opportunities.[73]

Their in-betweenness was what helped them settle into a routine of circular or repeated mobility. *Chosŏnjok* interviewees would casually discuss the fact that they were thinking of going again to the PRC or South Korea. One interviewee said,

> At first, I wanted to make money as soon as possible and go back to my hometown to support my family. But now I see many good things in Korean society. I would like to bring my son over here. Eventually, I want to live here [South Korea] for a few months and spend the rest of the year in my hometown [Yanbian]. (30 January 2011)

I repeatedly heard this idea of circular mobility as an adaptive preference for a period of time in the majority of my interviews. Another *Chosŏnjok* interviewee who had lived in the UK and the US to make money said,

> When I went back to China [PRC], I thought I couldn't live there any longer. Of course, it doesn't mean that I will leave China forever. I just want to stay for a while to make money and experience a new life in South Korea or other places and go back to China and stay there for a while having a good time with my family and friends. (17 January 2013)

As the number of *Chosŏnjok* migrants developed circular mobilities, they also developed businesses that would buy products such as cosmetics in South Korea to sell in the PRC. Though the businesses were based on circular mobilities of *Chosŏnjok*, they included *Chosŏnjok* and Koreans alike. One interviewee explained that he had started a business that depended on his circular mobility with both his *Chosŏnjok* and Korean friends. Another interviewee affirmed that he has plans for a business that similarly includes *Chosŏnjok* and Koreans so that they have easier access to goods in Korea. While this is an example of an advantage of in-betweenness, it should be pointed out, that *Chosŏnjok* interviewees often felt that they were discriminated against more than other migrants and not accepted wholeheartedly while they consider the Korean society as their ancestors' land.

The third and final coping strategy is place-making in enclaves, which serves a dual role. On the one hand, place-making takes on the role of a hometown where migrants can rely on and get psychological comfort. As one interviewee described, they can eat familiar foods, speak freely without being self-conscious of their accent, and, most of all, simply be themselves.

> I love this Kuro-Taerim area because here I can shout as I want and use the *Chosŏnjok* accent without being self-conscious. I don't know. I just feel so comfortable here. (14 August 2015)

The making of *Chosŏnjok* churches, restaurants, associations, and places of leisure in their enclaves in the Kuro-Taerim area has provided opportunities for the *Chosŏnjok* to reaffirm their identities. Their in-betweenness helped them settle into Korean society relatively easily, but, at the same time, it also brought feelings of ambiguity and confusion. One interviewee said,

> I was so often asked by Koreans if I think of myself as Chinese or Korean. Well, I am *Chosŏnjok*. That's how I think of myself. Korea, not South Korea necessarily, is my father, and China is my mother. In this area, I don't have to think about it and just hang out with other *Chosŏnjok*. (22 June 2015)

That identity pressure made them feel anxious, according to the *Chosŏnjok* interviewees. Place-making was an effort to find a safe place, although in reality those places constantly renegotiated a sense of Korean-ness and *Chosŏnjok*-ness.

The second role is that the enclaves also provided information on jobs, temporary places, and various arrangements for short-term residence. There were particular spots where construction worker candidates were waiting to be picked up early morning for day labor. Job agencies provided various jobs, and job brokers approached people for job opportunities usually in informal jobs or for 3D jobs. Shelters, temporary housing, and job agencies enabled transient labourers to stay in South Korea temporarily and without too much trouble. By playing a dual role, the Kuro-Taerim area supports a variety of needs and helps *Chosŏnjok* migrants with navigation strategies.

Conclusion

The case of the *Chosŏnjok* migrants in this research shows that geopolitical changes and demands for laborers while the South Korean economy was booming led the government to invite migrant workers. But while most transnational migrants struggle with language barriers and culture shock, *Chosŏnjok* migrants are somewhat spared these difficulties. Yet, regardless of *Chosŏnjok* migrants' ability to blend in, they are still viewed as thieves there to take jobs from the native-born population, especially when the economy experienced a downturn. Suddenly, after the Asian Financial Crisis, the ready availability of *Chosŏnjok* migrants has been exacerbating the precarity of the South Korean job market. Their willingness to take on contract-based, part-time, or temporary jobs allows employers to offer employees less, and this makes it difficult for other jobseekers to compete. *Chosŏnjok* migrants are now a part of the precariat in South Korean society, and their in-betweenness plays an important role in their survival as they engage in three strategic coping methods. First, they sought informal job markets rather than go through official avenues. Second, they internalized the logic of mobilities and embraced circular mobility between the PRC and South Korea. Third, they engaged in place-making and created an enclave in the Kuro-Taerim area in Seoul.

While precaritization is a global phenomenon, *Chosŏnjok* migrants have contributed to a home-spun precarity in South Korea in three main ways. First,

following the easing of tensions between the PRC and South Korea after several decades, *Chosŏnjok* migrants' influx into South Korea accelerated the precaritization that globalization had already started. Second, due to shared ethnic and linguistic characteristics making adaptation to Korean society smoother relative to other migrants, *Chosŏnjok* migrants' immediate readiness to join the work force hastened South Korea's precaritization. Third, since some *Chosŏnjok* trace their roots back to North Korea, they pursued their economic interests without any feelings of allegiance to South Korea or concern for how their actions might adversely affect the country's overall wellbeing. The findings demonstrate that the contextualized geopolitics of the East Asian region has shaped a particular form of precarity. The interaction between macro-processes, such as globalization, national policy, and job markets, and individual responses is an important part of migrant studies. Migrants and other proactive individual citizens develop social or individual navigational capacities separate from a nation's best interests.[74] It is possible that, in future societies, precarious social economic conditions will escalate and these navigational capacities will become critical for survival.

This study has explored the theoretical implications that actions as well as preferences are often the consequence of a desire to survive. The state, private companies, and individuals cross national boundaries seeking what they need to not only survive but, hopefully, thrive. Unintentionally, precarity increases in the process, but then precarity itself becomes a tool for survival. In the case of South Korea, a lack of available cheap labor motivated the state to invite migrant laborers into the country, but in times of economic recession, migrant workers who are willing to take on temporary and part-time employment bring more instability to an already fragile job market. As a result of scarce employment, individuals increase their mobilities seeking work. In a sense, individual migrant workers become dependent on governing through mobility.[75] As Standing notes, "the precariat is not a victim, villain or hero but just a lot of us."[76] Where people fall within the spectrum that exists between victim and hero would partly depend on whether they stubbornly refuse to change their adaptive preferences and perpetuate insecurity or become proactive individuals and navigate precarity either individually or collectively.

Notes

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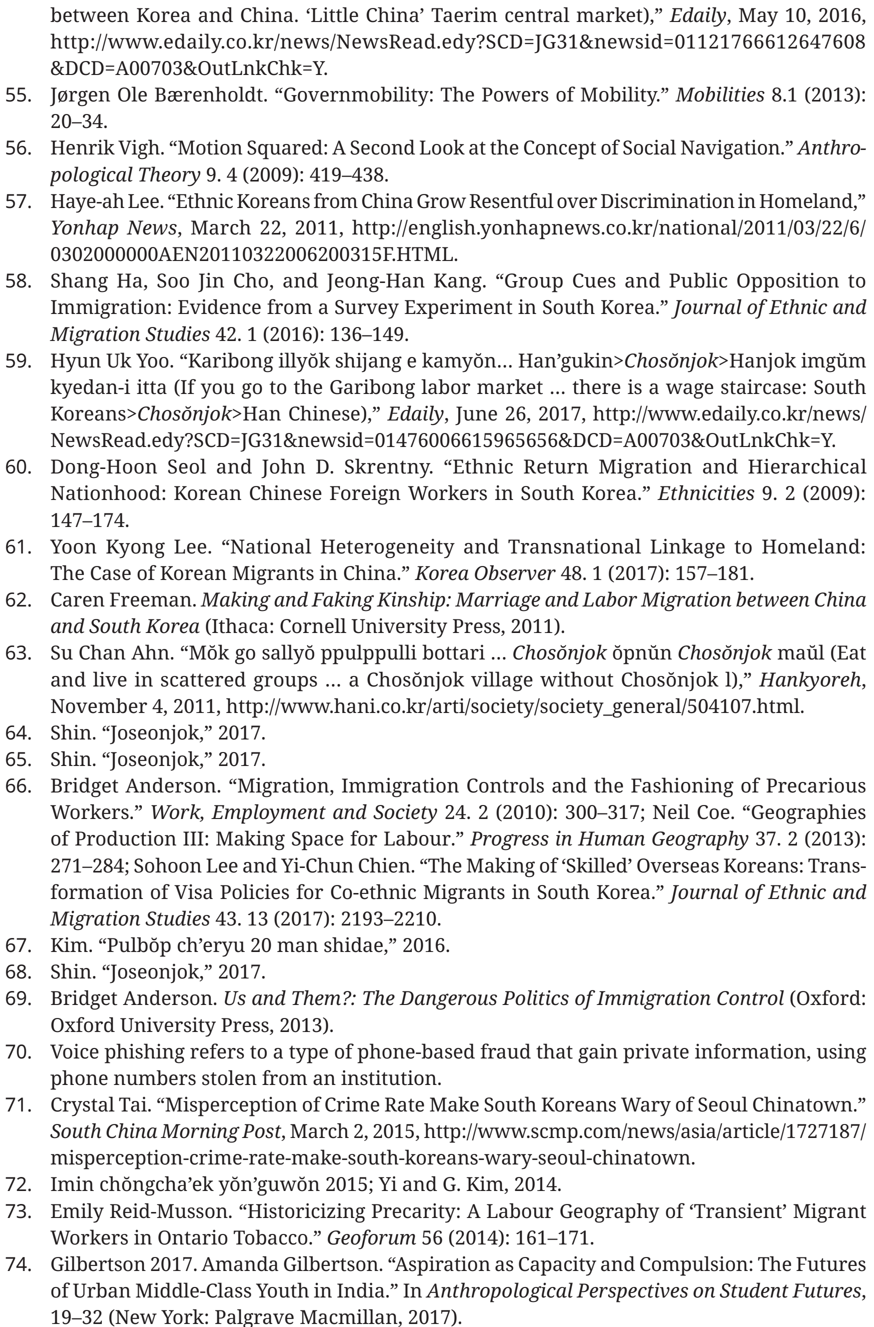

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