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Retiring immigrants: Korean seniors' lives after migration to Canada

Canada is widely recognized for its ethnic diversity and formal state support for a policy of multiculturalism. Often characterized as a country of immigrants, 19.8 per cent of the population was born outside of Canada in 2006, a slight increase since the prior census in 2001. Although much has been written about the difficulties, disadvantages and barriers faced by immigrants, less attention has been paid to how the life stage at time of migration shapes integration, particularly for immigrant seniors and those in their 40s and 50s.

According to the 2006 census, approximately 11 per cent of landed immigrants in Canada were age 55 or older, and 17 per cent were between 40 and 50 years of age. These figures were 16 and 45 per cent, respectively, among Koreans in Canada, indicating that a substantial proportion of Canada's current Korean population are in later life. Hidden in these statistics is the large number of immigrants who arrived with school-aged children.

Factors that shape later life migration to Canada from South Korea:

- Economic conditions, and labour and retirement policies and practices in South Korea that encourage early retirement or withdrawal from the labour force. The thought of retiring while still in one's 40s or 50s with children still in school is unsettling. Immigration becomes a viable and attractive option for people migrating "before they get fired..."
- Important social and cultural changes including those that directly impacted families with children such as the introduction of English language education in elementary schools in 1997, and the changing social perceptions of fatherhood from breadwinners to caregivers. It is interesting to note that many Korean immigrants arrived with school-aged children. Thus they tend to be of an older age than other immigrants.
- Although the percentage of Koreans migrating to Canada at age 55 or older tends to be less than those of other groups, the migration patterns of seniors are structured in similar ways. The particular sociocultural changes that directly affect Korean seniors include the decline of three generation households, the devaluing of old age, a younger retirement age leading to a longer period of dependency, and a social welfare state that exacerbates inequalities among seniors despite its expansion. Many seniors in South Korea suffer emotional and financial strain and insecurity due to these conditions.

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- Korean permanent migrants' reasons for migrating to Canada include their children's education and a better future for their family. In contrast, the oldest Korean immigrants are, like other migrating seniors, primarily motivated to be near their family members.

The 2006 census analysis in the study examined three age-at-migration groups among Korean immigrant seniors aged 55 years and older: those who migrated younger than 40 years of age; those who migrated at age 40 to 54 years; those who migrated at age 55 years or older. The analysis showed that age at migration among seniors is an important factor in shaping social and economic integration in Canada, especially concerning issues of legal citizenship, linguistic isolation, living arrangements, home ownership, poverty, reliance on government assistance, and the availability of private sources of income. Although the age-at-migration patterns cannot be distinguished from the length of time spent in Canada, the results show that those who arrived at older ages were clearly disadvantaged across all of the stated dimensions. Despite these results, we know that immigrant seniors offer much-needed social, emotional and financial support to their adult children.

Seniors in Canada are a heterogeneous group and the life course perspective tells us that their present circumstances should be viewed in light of personal trajectories and key moments such as migration. Korean immigrants have tended to come to Canada later in life and with children as a result of Korea's educational system and retirement policies. Consequently, they are generally older than other immigrant groups and this shapes their patterns of integration.

This Asia Research Brief is drawn from Chapter 9 (p.131-145) of Thomas R. Klassen and Yunjeong Yang's edited collection, *Korea's Retirement Predicament: The Ageing Tiger*, published in 2014 by Routledge.