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## RECONSTRUCTION OF THE LIVES OF KOREANS IN BULGARIA: BIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVES OF MIGRATION AND SETTLEMENT

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This study aims to explore the socio-cultural adaptation process and strategies, including the motives for migration and settlement patterns of Korean immigrants in Bulgaria, through a life history approach and narrative inquiry. Data were collected through fieldwork and participant observation, beginning in 2020, focusing on community members who arrived during the early stages of the formation of the Korean community in Bulgaria between 1990 and the early 2000s. This study is based on in-depth interviews with 20 Korean adults who had lived in Bulgaria for decades, from various walks of life, who could present different motives for migrating to Bulgaria and the settlement processes characteristic of Korean immigrants in the country. The collected data were analysed by dividing them into thematic categories and by comparing them based on the life stories.

The analysis results allowed for the classification of the migration motives and settlement patterns of Koreans in Bulgaria into four major narratives: (i) migration and settlement driven by a strong desire for higher education; (ii) migration and settlement using social networks through family and relatives, forming transnational families; (iii) migration and settlement through religious activities; and (iv) migration and settlement driven by a strong desire for economic success and a higher social position.

This study provides insights into the first-generation Korean diaspora in Bulgaria and their migration narratives and contributes to the understanding of the core frameworks and migration patterns that form the Korean community in the country. It broadens the horizon for follow-up research on the next generation of Korean immigrants in Bulgaria.

*Keywords:* Koreans in Bulgaria, Korean Migration, International Migration, Migration Drivers, Lifestyle Migration, Life History, Narrative Life History

# РЕКОНСТРУКЦИЯ НА ЖИВОТА НА КОРЕЙЦИТЕ В БЪЛГАРИЯ: БИОГРАФИЧНИ РАЗКАЗИ ЗА МИГРАЦИЯТА И ЗАСЕЛВАНЕТО

*ДЖУНГМИН ХЕО*

Настоящото изследване има за цел да проследи процеса и стратегиите за социокултурна адаптация на корейските имигранти в България, включително мотивите им за миграция и моделите на заселване, като използва методите на житейските истории и наративното проучване. Данните са събрани чрез теренни проучвания и включено наблюдение, започнали през 2020 г., като фокусът е поставен върху членове на общността, пристигнали в ранните етапи на формирането на корейската общност в България – между 1990 г. и началото на XXI век. Изследването се основава на дълбочинни интервюта с 20 респонденти от корейски произход на зряла възраст, живеещи в България от десетилетия и принадлежащи към различни социални слоеве, които разкриват разнообразни мотиви за миграция и процеси на заселване, характерни за корейските имигранти в страната. Събраните данни са анализирани, като са разделени на тематични категории и са съпоставени с оглед на житейските истории.

Резултатите от анализа дават възможност за класифициране на мотивите за миграция и моделите на заселване на корейците в България в четири основни категории: (i) миграция и заселване, мотивирани от стремежа към висше образование; (ii) миграция и заселване чрез социални мрежи от близки и роднини, формиращи транснационални семейства; (iii) миграция и заселване вследствие на религиозни дейности; и (iv) миграция и заселване, мотивирани от стремежа към икономически успех и по-високо социално положение.

Изследването предоставя сведения за първото поколение представители на корейската диаспора в България и техните разкази за миграцията им, като по този начин допринася за разбирането на основните рамки и миграционни модели, формиращи корейската общност в страната. То разкрива перспективи за бъдещи изследвания на следващото поколение корейски имигранти в България.

*Ключови думи:* корейци в България, корейска миграция, международна миграция, миграционни стимули, миграционен лайфстайл, житейска история, наративна житейска история

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Since the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Republic of Bulgaria and the Republic of Korea in 1990, a small but notable community of Koreans has emerged in Bulgaria, a non-traditional destination for East Asian migrants. This paper seeks to understand this unique diaspora by asking: What motivates Koreans to migrate to Bulgaria, and how do these initial motivations shape their subsequent settlement patterns and daily life practices? To address this question, we will first examine the long-term residents of the Korean community in Bulgaria and explore how they have adapted to Bulgarian society through their occupations and economic activities. By identifying their consumption patterns and daily practices, we can assess the extent to which they are integrated into their country of residence.

The various occupations among resident Koreans in Bulgaria can be categorised into three main groups: 1) educators; 2) individual entrepreneurs; and 3) Protestant

missionaries. By examining these groups, this study shows that each cohort's original impetus for choosing Bulgaria—whether for educational opportunities, economic advancement, or religious mission—profoundly shapes their specific settlement pathways, strategies for economic survival, and distinct forms of engagement with both Bulgarian society and the wider Korean community.

This discussion will provide an important indicator of how Koreans in Bulgaria have adapted to local culture and society, and how deeply they are integrated into mainstream society. Through in-depth interviews and participant observation, I examined their lives in various ways, providing a bottom-up perspective on the character and identity of this emerging *Hanin* community.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. METHODOLOGY AND FRAMEWORK

### 2.1. Designing Interviews and the Relationship between Researcher and Participant

This research is based on five years of participant observation and information gathered through both formal and informal interactions with members of the Korean community in Bulgaria. Since 2020, my active involvement in various organisations has allowed me to build close relationships and gain valuable insights from a diverse range of Koreans—from those in leadership positions to members of international couples and young people who are less active in the community. For this study, I conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews primarily with long-term residents of Sofia representing different fields, such as education, private business, and religion. To ensure participants' comfort, interviews were held in their homes or in nearby cafés and conducted in Korean, as many interviewees are monolingual. Each interview, lasting one to two hours, covered three main themes: 1) life and motivations before migrating to Bulgaria; 2) the migration process itself, including the influence of organisations and chain migration patterns; and 3) integration into the Bulgarian community, livelihoods, economic activities, and job search strategies. Follow-up interviews were conducted as needed to clarify the information obtained in the initial sessions.

### 2.2. Migrant Narrative

A life history narrative approach was used to interpret the interview data. Life history research is a qualitative research method, most famously exemplified by Thomas and Znaniecki's *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, which examined the peasantry and lives of Polish immigrants in the United States. Since then,

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<sup>1</sup> The term Hanin (한인) is used throughout this paper to denote a specific ethnic identity (Korean). The Hanin community, therefore, refers to a community based on this shared ethnicity.

it has become an established method for exploring migration experiences, making it particularly suitable for studying the lives of Korean immigrants in Bulgaria. By reconstructing the life stories of migrants from various occupational groups, we can examine relationships between individuals and the role of the community in the migration process. As Bathmaker and Harnett (2010) emphasise in *Exploring Learning, Identity and Power through Life History and Narrative Research*, this approach is also effective for investigating the relationship between individual identity and power. Ultimately, life history research aims to provide profound insights into the complexity of human experiences and social issues, often shedding light on systemic inequities and fostering a deeper public understanding (Landford and Herrera, 2025).

To understand the Hanin in Bulgaria, I conducted participant observations in various organisations, as well as during different activities and meetings attended by members of the community. In addition to the interviews, data were collected through personal interactions and conversations. Once collected, the data were documented, analysed, and interpreted. Furthermore, this study aims to understand the individual experiences of Korean immigrants in Bulgaria across different domains. To this end, I will employ five conceptual frameworks to analyse several key factors, including the level and manner of their local social adaptation, their socioeconomic status, their ethnic identity, and their ethnic relations (see Figure 1).

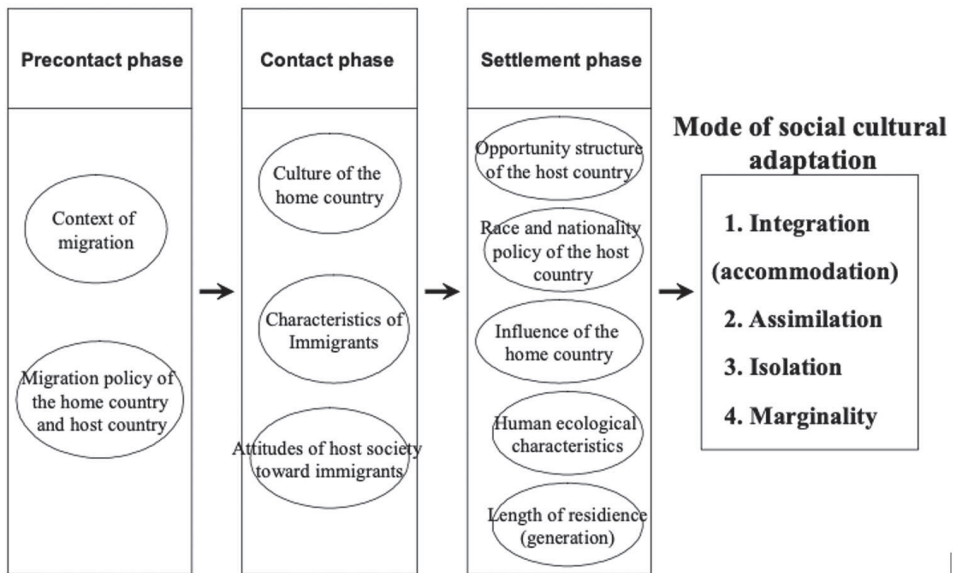


Fig. 1. Yoon's Model of Social-Cultural Adaptation of Overseas Koreans (Yoon, 2006)

The five frameworks are the following: immigration background (timing and mode of immigration), immigrant characteristics (individual and collective), eco-

logical factors (size of immigrants, degree of spatial concentration), host country reception conditions (political economy, immigration and ethnic policies, social ideology), and relations with the home country (level and mode of exchange).

### **3. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW: LIFESTYLE MIGRATION FROM KOREA'S 'RISK SOCIETY'**

This study examines the dynamics of the Korean community in Bulgaria and proposes an integrated theoretical framework centred on the concept of lifestyle migration (Benson and O'Reilly, 2009). Unlike traditional labour migration models, this approach posits that relatively affluent individuals move not purely for economic reasons but in a deliberate pursuit for a perceived better quality of life. This framework enables the exploration of three critical dimensions of the Korean experience in Bulgaria: 1) the push factors within contemporary Korean society that motivate this search for an alternative life; 2) the transnational elements of their settlement process, which keep them connected to their home country even as they forge new lives; and 3) the varied socioeconomic pathways they follow in Bulgaria, understood through the lens of segmented assimilation (Portes and Zhou, 1993). Together, these concepts provide a multi-layered understanding of this emerging migration phenomenon.

#### **3.1. The Core Driver of Migration: Seeking a Better Life**

The primary driver for Korean migration to Bulgaria can be understood as a form of lifestyle migration, defined as the movement of 'relatively affluent individuals of all ages [...] to places that [...] signify, for the migrant, a better quality of life' (Benson and O'Reilly, 2009: 621). While many existing studies have used the concept of lifestyle migration to discuss the movement of people from developing countries to Europe or North America for economic reasons in search of a better quality of life, migration driven by non-economic motivations has also begun to attract scholarly attention. (Hayes, 2015; Janoschka and Haas, 2013). Over time, the concept has expanded to encompass practices that go beyond the mere physical relocation from one place to another, redefining the migrant's way of life itself. As seen in the case of young Japanese adults (Park, 2023) who leave their country in search of a better quality of life and relief from compulsive social and structural pressures, this phenomenon is approached less from the perspective of consumption and more as a matter of personal choice.

To understand why Koreans choose to leave their country, we must first examine the society that compels them to do so. Contemporary South Korea is often described as a nation of 'compressed modernity' and a 'risk society.' Having undergone rapid economic and political development within just a few decades, South

Korea is marked by intense competition, social pressure, and a pervasive sense of insecurity. This environment is further exacerbated by a deeply entrenched hierarchical social structure and a militaristic culture rooted in its recent authoritarian past (from the 1960s to the 1980s).

These structural pressures are reinforced by strong cultural norms. According to Hofstede (1980), South Korea is a highly collectivistic society where a ‘welfare’ mentality prevails. While beneficial for national development, collectivism can also give rise to social problems such as intense pressure to conform to a narrow definition of success and the social marginalisation of those who deviate. As Markus and Kitayama (1991) observe in a similar context, the society is dominated by the logic of the Japanese saying, ‘the nail that stands out gets pounded down.’ Such pressures are compounded by systemic nepotism and favouritism, where personal connections often outweigh merit, creating a ‘glass ceiling effect’ for those outside elite networks and fostering ongoing conflicts within communities, both domestically and abroad (Chae, 2017; Jeong, 2017). For many, this combination of fierce competition, social rigidity, and systemic unfairness generates a frustrating and psychologically taxing environment, motivating them to seek a more stable and individualistic life abroad—with Europe often perceived as an attractive destination.

### **3.2. Transnationalism**

To understand the dynamics of contemporary migrant communities such as the Koreans in Bulgaria, a theoretical lens that moves beyond traditional paradigms of assimilation and integration is required. A transnational approach offers such a framework, conceptualising migration as the construction of ‘social field’ that links societies of origin and settlement (Apitzsch and Siouti, 2015). This perspective allows for a more nuanced analysis of cross-border practices, viewing them as potential resources rather than obstacles.

This approach is particularly suitable for analysing the Korean community in Bulgaria, which largely consists of individuals and families who maintain deep, ongoing connections with Korea even after establishing new lives in Bulgaria. While transnationalism provides the macro-level framework for understanding these cross-border social fields, the biographical method serves as a powerful tool for examining how these large-scale processes are experienced, navigated, and shaped at the individual level. This combined perspective highlights migrants as proactive agents who not only navigate existing structures but also possess the capacity to ‘mitigate’ and reshape them (Wang and Zhang, 2024).

To analyse these dynamics, I adopt the specific social relationships approach proposed by Kim (2014), which distinguishes between hierarchical relationships (based on gender and status), relationships of intimacy, and transnational networks that connect individuals across borders. This multifaceted framework is essential

for understanding how a small community like the Koreans in Bulgaria sustains itself through the continuous flow of human and material resources, such as funding for missionary work or chain migration through kinship.

### **3.3. Segmented Assimilation Theory in the Korean Context in Bulgaria**

The psychological perspective of Berry's (1992) social assimilation model has traditionally been used to examine immigrants' adaptation to local societies. This framework classifies immigrants into four types—assimilation, separation, integration, and marginalisation—based on the extent to which they adopt the values and culture of their host country and the extent to which they maintain those of their country of origin.

The theory of segmented assimilation proposed by Portes and Zhou (1993) approaches immigrants' adaptation to local society from a socioeconomic perspective grounded in diverse life experiences. It emphasises that differences in socioeconomic conditions and status—such as racial differences and quality of education—can influence outcomes of social adaptation (Piedra and Engstrom, 2009). This model identifies three distinct pathways of assimilation: upward assimilation, downward assimilation, and selective acculturation. The latter, a selective and strategic type of adaptation, is particularly common among second-generation Koreans (Xie and Greenman, 2005). Given that Koreans in Bulgaria are non-European immigrants with a strong sense of community, this model is especially well-suited for analysing their varied life experiences and for determining how their initial motivations and settlement strategies—whether educational, entrepreneurial, or religious—shape their ultimate position within Bulgarian society.

## **4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

The results of in-depth interviews with Koreans in Bulgaria indicate that their migration is best understood as a form of lifestyle migration. Their narratives reveal that the Korean community is driven not by simple economic necessity but by a deliberate search for an alternative way of life, distinct from the high-pressure environment of their home country. Their migration motivations and settlement patterns demonstrate how the desire to escape Korea's 'risk society' shapes their transnational lives and the diverse trajectories of their integration—or segmented integration—into Bulgarian society.

### **4.1. Migration Drivers: Low Cost of Living and a Leisurely Lifestyle**

The decision to move to Bulgaria in pursuit of a better, more leisurely quality of life—the core characteristic of lifestyle migration—is clearly evident in this study. The affordability of the host country was a major factor, offering possibilities that

would not have been feasible in Korea. Several participants highlighted the economic accessibility of education as an important reason for choosing Bulgaria:

I started studying music when I joined the military band while serving in Seoul. I became interested in music and enrolled in the music department of a Christian university in Korea. During my college vacation, I looked for a place to study abroad and went to Germany for a short period in 1996; however, I found the cost of living to be high at the time. [...] After that, I could not continue my studies in Germany for a long time and visited Bulgaria in 1997, staying there for about 50 days. At the time, private lesson fees in Korea were 110 dollars per hour, but in Bulgaria, they were only 2 dollars per hour, which was extremely affordable, yet I could receive a high-quality education. I was greatly attracted by the low cost of living and moved to Bulgaria in the following year. (K, 50s, Missionary)

I had studied in the UK, so I considered immigrating there or to another English-speaking country. However, at the time, I was young, did not have much savings, and did not have a professional career or social status, so it was not easy to immigrate to an English-speaking country. However, like many Koreans who once had the American Dream, I thought I needed to go abroad to be successful in my career. I thought that Koreans who lived better and economically prospered than Bulgaria could come here and start something new or challenge themselves in a new business, so I decided to immigrate to Bulgaria. Coincidentally, my older brother was already living in Bulgaria, so I thought I could count on his help in settling down. Additionally, Bulgaria's low cost of living was another factor that influenced my decision to immigrate. (P, 40s, Korean language instructor)

These narratives clearly show that the decision-making process was not driven by remittances or escaping poverty but by the pursuit of an alternative lifestyle and the desire to maximise life satisfaction.

Among the interviewees, those who chose Bulgaria as a destination pointed out that the relatively low cost of living and the high level of life satisfaction were key reasons for their migration. The opportunity to engage in various cultural activities—such as music, painting, and sports—which were not economically feasible in their home country, was a major attraction. Activities like golf, typically enjoyed only by the middle-to-upper class in Korea, as well as owning luxury cars and real estate, have become attainable parts of their lifestyle. Additionally, participants also highlighted the ability to travel freely within Europe at a relatively low cost and to live a more leisurely life. This opportunity to 'start something new' and achieve a higher social and cultural status reflects what Benson and O'Reilly describe as a 'better quality of life,' functioning as a pull factor.

While it is important to emphasise that not all Koreans in Bulgaria live in this way, most participants expressed a high level of satisfaction with the fact that they could enjoy things in Bulgaria that would have been too expensive for them in Korea.

## 4.2. Dissatisfaction with South Korean Society: Academic Elitism, Credentialism, Hierarchical and Competitive Social Structures

The decision to seek this lifestyle is motivated by the *push factors* of Korea's hyper-competitive and hierarchical society, which several participants described as suffocating. This corresponds directly with the notion of Korea as a 'risk society' discussed earlier.

I felt dissatisfied with the relationships between juniors and seniors in high school, between teachers and students, between people of different ages, and with a society that divides people based on economic status. I felt that if I continued to live in Korea and went to college, I would feel suffocated and something terrible would happen to me. So, I chose to immigrate. (J, 20s, International student)

This desire to escape social pressures extends to future generations—a common concern among migrant parents. P did not want her child to experience the same academic pressures she had endured, while L emphasised the advantages of a less demanding work culture and a society that is more accepting of diversity:

I did not want my child to experience the academically driven society that I had gone through. I thought that if we lived in Europe, my child would not have to spend all day studying like students in Korea. I wanted my child to grow up in Europe, where she could have many experiences and find things to love. (P, 40s, Korean language teacher)

Korean society does not accept diversity. That's why I have never wanted to live in Korea. I grew up hearing things like, 'You are Korean,' or 'You must do this because you are a man,' so I have wanted to live abroad for a long time. (L, 40s, Korean language teacher)

My husband was in the shipbuilding business, but after the Sewol ferry disaster in South Korea, his business completely collapsed. After being unemployed for eight months, we decided that I should find new opportunities overseas, so we decided to immigrate to Bulgaria. (P, 40s, Korean language teacher)

Even if I have to make some sacrifices while living abroad, I want to raise my children overseas, so they don't have to live a stressful life in Korea. If you agree with this way of thinking, I recommend immigrating to Bulgaria. Considering the various costs of studying abroad, Bulgaria is a good choice. (L, 40s, Korean language teacher)

In Korea, having a heavy workload is considered normal, but if I were to work at the same level here, I could handle far more than most people. I find the significantly lighter workload here appealing. (L, 40s, Korean language teacher)

These sentiments are a direct reflection of the social pressures produced by Korea's 'compressed modernity' and collectivist values. The rejection of rigid hierarchies, credentialism, and lack of diversity clearly illustrates *the push factors* outlined in the theoretical framework. The participants are not merely moving to Bulgaria; they are moving away from a specific set of social conditions that they find untenable and intolerable.

### 4.3. Arrival—First Impression and Finding Life in Bulgaria

Early migrants who came during the post-socialist transition in the 1990s recalled a society that, while economically challenged, was warm and welcoming.

The Bulgarian people were very nice and helpful to us. Back then, if you wanted to buy bread or eggs, you had to wait in line for an hour, but our landlord's grandparents would buy bread in the morning and always bring some for us. And whenever we visited their home, they would give us homemade pickles or jars of paprika, so that we would never leave empty-handed. (K, 60s, Professor)

K moved to Bulgaria in 1990, and she recalled the difficulties of living in the country—necessities were scarce, so she and staff from the Korean Embassy in Sofia were forced to travel to Greece to buy groceries. Since there were fewer international students compared to today, the embassy provided them with some supplies. K described Bulgaria at the time as politically and socially strained, and before her move, she had known very little about the country. Initially, she felt uncomfortable living there because she could not speak the language, yet she recalled Bulgarians as friendly toward foreigners. In those early days, the Korean community was very small—about 20-30 people, mostly international students, expatriates, and embassy staff. Given their small numbers in a country that felt both geographically and psychologically distant from home, they formed a tightly knit group, welcoming newcomers and helping each other adapt to the new society and culture. This supportive environment played a crucial role in sustaining long-term settlement.

The regime change made people very uneasy, and inflation was so bad that the government constantly raised the prices of things and food. In Sofia, there was nothing. When I returned to Bulgaria in 1992 after giving birth in Korea, my parents regularly sent me Korean food, diapers, and baby food by ship. (K, 60s, Professor)

When I first came to Bulgaria in 1995, there was no proper infrastructure. The roads were poorly maintained, and I remember everyone looking gloomy. But when I returned in 2002, the environment was much cleaner and better organised, which made me feel a little more comfortable. (P, 50s, Businessman)

In 2002, I met an elderly Bulgarian woman at church. At that time, I did not know a single word of Bulgarian. But I'll never forget how hard she tried to understand what my husband and I were saying. (W, 50s, Missionary and Korean language teacher)

I first visited Bulgaria in 2012. When I met my wife and started dating, my first impression was that the country was gloomy and still bore traces of communism. Even on the plane, a Bulgarian man who had lived in New York for a long time expressed many concerns to me. For example, he warned me not to leave my phone on the table or wear an expensive watch. However, since he had left Bulgaria when he was young and had lived abroad for many years, I assumed he was speaking from his memories, so I did not take it too seriously. Still, the image of Bulgaria that he described has stayed with me. (L, 40s, Korean language teacher)

According to Koreans who moved to Bulgaria within the last five years, the most striking observation was that the first generation of Koreans seemed deeply entrenched in the Korean community, making it difficult for newcomers to find meaningful opportunities in the country. They emphasised that this pattern was visible across all sectors, including education, business, and religious organisations.

This final point highlights a crucial aspect of the lifestyle migration narrative. Migrants may successfully escape the macro-level pressures of Korea's 'risk society,' yet they often recreate similar social dynamics within their own diasporic community. This reflects the persistence of cultural values such as nepotism and favouritism, as discussed by Chae (2017) and Jeong (2017). Consequently, the dream of a purely individualistic life in Bulgaria is mediated by the realities of the small, tight-knit ethnic community they join, creating a tension between the ideal of the new life and its practical realisation.

Another prominent pattern, particularly among first-generation migrants who settled in the 1990s, was migration facilitated through transnational family and kinship networks. At the time, Bulgaria was still unfamiliar to Koreans, and as a minority group within the host society, they faced language barriers and a lack of background knowledge about the local community, making it difficult to settle without ethnic or family connections. As a result, they preferred to live in areas with other Koreans. This pattern is also evident in the case of the first Korean restaurant in the 1990s, situated near the former office of the South Korean embassy. However, it persists among more recent immigrants as well. They often begin their lives in Bulgaria by finding housing near other members of their church or by renting a room in the home of a long-established Korean.

#### **4.4. Settlement Pathways: The Role of Transnational Networks**

Another notable finding is that almost all Koreans utilised transnational networks for settlement. These networks—based on family, marriage, education, or religion—provide crucial social support, channelling human and material resources across borders. They serve as a guide for navigating a new country, and their structure directly shapes migrants' integration trajectories, reflecting the different paths of segmented assimilation. Analysing these pathways reveals how different forms of social capital lead to varied settlement experiences and outcomes, which

can be understood through the lens of segmented assimilation. In the case of early entrepreneurs, one migrated to Bulgaria through family and kinship networks. This is a clear example of chain migration, driven by both economic hardship in Korea and the pull of family abroad:

The main reason I decided to immigrate to Bulgaria was that my brothers had already settled there. My eldest brother moved in 1990, my second brother in 1998, and I followed in 2002 [...] The business I was running in Korea was struggling due to intense competition, and the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis made things even harder. That's when I decided I needed to go abroad to find new opportunities. I had considered moving to the United States, but my brother in Bulgaria suggested that I immigrate together with my wife and work together, so I decided to come here. (P, 50s, Businessman)

My husband moved to Bulgaria to expand his business. Since our children were still young, I couldn't bear the thought of leaving them alone in Korea, so I decided that we all move here. (Y, 50s, Korean language teacher)

The second pathway is through marriage migration, which creates an immediate and intimate connection to the host society. L's reason for moving to Bulgaria was straightforward:

Personally, I never wanted to live in Korea. That's why I finished college in the US. I ended up coming to Bulgaria because I got married, and my wife is Bulgarian, so I thought it would be okay to live here. (L, 40s, Korean language teacher)

A third settlement pathway operates through religious networks that transcend family ties and are based on shared faith. In this pathway, churches act as mediating agents between Korea and Bulgaria, providing comprehensive support to newcomers. The experiences of K and W illustrate this dynamic:

My father is a pastor in Korea. He came to Bulgaria in 1996 for missionary work, so it was not a strange country to me. I was eligible for a religious visa, but I stayed on an NGO visa. The organisation that sent me to Korea provides me with living expenses and financial support. (K, 50s, Missionary)

As a foreigner, I had difficulty communicating with locals when I first came to Bulgaria, but people from a local church connected to a Korean church helped me with everything—from interpreting to obtaining a missionary visa and finding a place to live. (W, 50s, Missionary and Korean language teacher)

This pattern is a case of adaptation to the local environment through assistance from a religion-based network. Within the larger framework of Evangelical Christianity, churches serve as mediating agents between Korea and Bulgaria. Through these social networks, material and human resources flow, including requests for workers from Korea, monthly salaries for religious activities, and financial support

from Korea for religious and cultural activities in Bulgaria. In addition, churches and religious communities play a mediating role in helping Korean immigrants adapt to their new environment, assisting with visa applications, housing, and employment.

I wanted to continue living in Korea, but when I met my husband, who is a missionary and a pastor, I realised for the first time that life as a missionary meant going abroad rather than staying in Korea. [...] I believed that the land where God was calling me to go was the country I needed to immigrate to. Initially, I planned to go to Nepal, but because of the political instability and risks involved, those around me discouraged me. During that time, missionaries from a Korean church in Romania requested that we move to Bulgaria, as there was no church affiliated with our denomination there, so we ended up coming to Bulgaria. (W, 50s, Missionary and Korean language teacher)

In Bulgaria, I found areas where I could be of help. I decided to settle here because I believed I could establish a church or missionary centre based on my religious beliefs to assist the Roma people and other socially vulnerable groups. Ultimately, the reason I decided to move is what is referred to in religious terms as a ‘calling.’ (K, 50s, Missionary)

The last settlement pathway for the Korean community in Bulgaria is rooted in education. The first wave of settlement began in September 1990, led by three students pursuing higher education. This small pioneering group formed a close-knit community out of necessity, creating a supportive environment that was crucial for long-term settlement.

At the beginning, there were many international students like me. Usually, the whole family would immigrate to Bulgaria. I think there were about ten families here, and there were quite a few kids at first. But then there was no foreign direct investment from Korea, so almost all of them left Bulgaria. Now, we have a lot of missionaries. (K, 60s, Professor)

For many who followed this path, the motivation was a direct reaction against the Korean educational system, seeking the intellectual freedom they perceived in Europe. As J, a recent graduate from Sofia University, explained:

Education in Korea is carried out through one-way communication between teachers and students, while education in Bulgaria seems to be freer. University classes are usually discussion-based, where students are free to express their opinions. I have just graduated from university, and I would like to continue studying in Bulgaria. (J, 20s, International student)

For many, the decision to immigrate was driven by a desire to escape the constraints of the Korean educational system, a sentiment clearly expressed by the interviewees.

These four pathways show the flow of information, resources, and people across borders, facilitated by social networks, as described by Seol (2000). Furthermore, the entry points heavily influence migrants' path of assimilation. A marriage migrant like L may integrate more quickly into mainstream Bulgarian society, while a businessman like P, who relies on family networks, might operate within a more ethnic-focused economic sphere. Missionaries like K and W, supported by a Korean church and serving a specific community, exemplify selective acculturation in Portes and Zhou's (1993) model. They are economically supported and socially embedded within a strong co-ethnic and religious community, allowing them to thrive without fully assimilating into the host society. Finally, while the channels for migration varied, all the Korean immigrants interviewed shared an overarching motivation. Regardless of their occupation, age, or gender, their settlement patterns revealed a shared drive: to move abroad in search of new opportunities, build a new life, and pursue economic success and higher social status.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This study employed biographical narratives and life history methodology to examine the migration experiences and settlement patterns of Korean immigrants in Bulgaria, revealing distinct pathways that characterise this diaspora community. Through in-depth interviews with members of the community who arrived during the formative period starting in 1990, this research uncovered the complex motivations and adaptive strategies that have shaped Korean residents in Bulgaria. The analysis demonstrates that Korean migration to Bulgaria cannot be understood through a single theoretical lens but represents a multifaceted phenomenon driven by diverse personal, familial, educational, and religious motivations. Four primary settlement pathways were identified: educational pursuits, transnational networks, religious activities, and socioeconomic advancement.

This study argued that Korean migration to Bulgaria is best understood as a form of lifestyle migration, driven by a desire to escape the social pressures of South Korea's 'risk society.' The findings show that the pursuit of a better quality of life is not a uniform process. Instead, migrants navigate their new lives through distinct settlement pathways, primarily facilitated by educational, kinship, and religious transnational networks. These pathways, in turn, shape their potential for socioeconomic integration, a process that can be effectively analysed through the lens of segmented assimilation. Consequently, the community is not a monolith but a complex tapestry of individuals and groups whose initial motivations profoundly shape their ongoing lives in Bulgaria.

This study makes an important empirical contribution by addressing a notable gap in migration studies, particularly Korean migration globally. Moreover, it offers a theoretical contribution by applying lifestyle migration theory to the case of Koreans in Bulgaria, revealing how diasporic communities can replicate the social

hierarchies and exclusionary dynamics that migrants sought to escape. In doing so, it provides a grounded counter-narrative to overly romanticised notions of expatriate life.

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