

A Case Study on Work Experience of Korean Professional Migrants in Singapore*

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I. Introduction: Studying Korean Professional Migrants in Singapore

Professional or highly skilled migrants in the contemporary world tend to be seen as flexible and mobile (Colic-Peisker 2010; Meier 2016; Moore 2016). They are often seen as the human equivalent of transnational corporations or global capital as they often work in global cities alongside financial or IT experts or as transferees sent from headquarters to satellite locations. Recent resurgence of academic interest on migrant professionals doubly parallels the increasing trend of global connectedness within contemporary capitalism and thereby renders visible the mobility of international migrants ranging in skill levels. Professional migrants' presence in the world economy is not new. For example, early literature on the expatriate community (e.g. Cohen 1977) was mainly focused on expatriate professionals from developed countries working in

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postcolonial developing countries. However, until recently, work experience of professional migrants was seldom examined, partly because they were seen as elite professionals spared from the hardships experienced by their less skilled counterparts. Recent academic attention in the social sciences has been paid on their work and life experiences that play a big role in shaping their identity as transnational elite migrants (e.g. Moore 2016 and Cranston 2016). Some of these recent studies problematize what was presumed to be 'flexible' and 'mobile' characteristics of professional migrants (e.g. Lin 2012).

Despite burgeoning research on professional migrants in global academia and the increasing prominence of Korean professional migrants overseas, Korean professional migrants have received little academic attention thus far. Even without accurate statistics, we can consider several proxies that point to their significant presence. For instance, in 2014, 10,730 Korean companies were listed in a directory published by Korea Trade-Investment Promotion Agency (KOTRA 2014: 11). Out of this number, 894 Korean companies had sent between 6 - 10 employees for their overseas offices while 611 had sent more than 10 employees abroad. Considering that, dozens of thousands of Korean professionals are estimated to be working abroad at their overseas branches as intracompany transferees. Additionally, many Korean professionals are working overseas at non-Korean international companies and organizations, not listed in the directory or captured by Korean government's data. In this regard, another useful indirect indicator is the number of school-aged children who leave Korea because of their parents' work overseas: over 7,000

students reported leaving Korea almost every year since 2002 – the figure peaked in 2007 with 9,855 students and the latest figure was 7,092, reported in 2014 (Korean Ministry of Education various years). Thus Korean professional migrants constitute a large percentage of the total number Korean sojourners estimated to be over 1.5 million (Kim 2011). Despite such significant presence, Korean professional migrants have received little academic attention. Therefore, we have little knowledge about the migrant life experiences of Korean professionals who commonly work as transferees in managerial or engineering positions at Korean companies or work for international companies overseas.

This paper takes as case study the lived experiences among Korean professional migrants in Singapore, and seeks to address the following: What are the work experiences of Korean professional migrants? Are there identifiable patterns and/or types among professional migrants? To this aim, this paper will provide thick descriptions on the work and family issues of professional migrants supported by the work that came from an in-depth interview-based case study of 26 professional Korean couples in Singapore. The sample included not only company-transferees (predominantly working for Korean companies as managers) but also globally recruited professionals (predominantly working for non-Korean international companies as consultants, managers and engineers). A majority of Koreans in Singapore are professional sojourner migrants. According to the 2014 KOTRA directory, Singapore was listed as one of top 10 countries with the highest number of Korean companies – with 172 Korean companies based there.

A notable feature of Korean community in Singapore is the relative homogeneity of their occupational and educational background: the highly educated and professionals make up majority of the Korean population in Singapore. This distinguishes Singapore from other locales such as the United States or Southeast Asia, where there is greater variance in educational and professional backgrounds. In 2016, the Korean Embassy in Singapore estimates 25,000 Korean residents, housing one of the largest Korean expatriate communities in Southeast Asia. About 3,300 of them hold Singapore citizenship or permanent residency (hereafter, PR) and the other 20,300 are estimated to be sojourners who stay more than 6 months (Korean Embassy 2016).

The next section will review contemporary academic literature on professional migrants. The following section will elaborate on how I collected data and will provide context for this specific case study on Singapore. From there, I will focus on the work and family experiences of three distinct Korean professional migrants from my research, thereafter concluding with a final discussion of the findings and contributions to this study.

II. Literature Review: From Monochromic Experiences of Expatriates to Diverse Experiences of Professionals

Despite increasing academic interest surrounding the professional and transnational elite migrant population, research over the past

several decades has largely been confined to Western expatriates or intracompany transferees within the context of business and management studies. This section will provide an overview of the development on its literature.

The earliest research on professional migrants focused on expatriate communities and subsequent “brain drain” impact on sending countries. Studies on ‘expatriate communities’ (e.g. Cohen 1977) mainly served to survey the collective division and separation experienced by expatriates from the locals in host societies, especially in the context of post-colonial developing or non-Western societies (Meier 2016). This continued to be the mainstream perspective of research on professional migrants until recently. Targeting in particular managers or company transferees predominantly of Western origins, such research examined social interaction among Western expatriate groups, which were often confined to co-ethnic and international expatriates. This was reaffirmed by the tendency among expatriates who eventually returned to their countries of origin soon after their overseas assignments. Whereas literature on expatriate communities focused on professional migrants from developed countries, the brain drain theory focused on the permanent emigration of highly educated professionals from developing countries who were then educated in the developed countries. Brain drain literature provided social and economic implications on the part of the sending countries, which were often viewed as net costs for developing origin countries. These two approaches however provided little insight on the actual experiences of professional migrants, in that their scope lay largely beyond the realms of their workplace and family.

Rapid internationalization and globalization of corporate firms prompted incumbent human resource development to shed light on the work and cultural adjustment experiences of professional migrants. Many multinational corporations and organizations strategically sent employees abroad as intracompany transferees, working with locally hired employees at their overseas branches. They sought to identify the challenges for expatriate professionals and their family members living and working abroad and provide support at the organizational level, as many transferees made early return from their overseas assignments (Black et. al. 1991). Intracompany transferees (largely consisting of junior and senior managers) and their families have reported to experience challenges adjusting to foreign settings and overcoming cross-cultural differences. This line of research has been long developed in management studies, and also holds true for Korean companies today (e.g. Oh and Lee 2015). Shen and Han's study (2012) of Korean expatriates in China indicated that families placed higher importance on children's academic adjustment over their own professional adjustment. These studies on Korean expatriates, however, provide little insight for the actual conditions and nature of work as experienced by the population.

More recently, sociologists and anthropologies have suggested greater diversity among migrant professionals in their motivations and experiences, which reflects the changing demographics and other backgrounds of expatriate professionals. For example, Thang et al.'s study (2002) shows a rising number of female Japanese migrant professionals paralleling the high presence of male Japanese intracompany employees in Singapore. For the female population,

they were often motivated to migrate in order to live far from Japanese society while working in niche labor market, utilizing their Japanese linguistic capabilities in Singapore and actively engage with the Singapore locals.

The revival of research on professional migrants broadened its scope from focusing primarily on immigrants and migrant workers to include elite and white-collar professionals. In order to foreground the work experience of said population, recent studies have employed comparative case studies to illustrate the diversity of such among elite professional migrants. Some cases examined two or more different ethnic groups, while others compared two groups of a single ethnic/nationality living in two different countries in order to understand differing migration experiences. For example, Harvey's study on the British and Indian scientists (2011) employed in American pharmaceutical and biotechnology sectors showed that both groups had different motivations for migrating. British scientists were motivated mainly by professional opportunities whereas Indian scientists were mainly motivated by educational opportunities. Plüss's study on ethnic Chinese (but from diverse countries such as Singapore, China and Indonesia) professional migrants in New York City (2013) illustrates how professional migrants convert their cultural and social capitals, a key factor for migrants to advance in their careers abroad. Other scholars conducted a comparative study of a single ethnic group working at different countries. In an ethnographic case study of Taiwanese professional migrants based in London and Toronto, Moore (2016) suggested that even when elite professional migrants work in similar global cities, they form different identities

and manage different strategies for their global mobility and lives abroad. In a similar vein, Meier's study on German financial managers based in London and Singapore (2016) regard their host countries differently based on geographic locale: London was seen as a center while Singapore an outpost. These recent findings suggest that we should pay attention to how professionals regard their overseas work and family life as well as possible differences among occupational groups.

Two notable studies have been conducted on families of Korean professionals based in Singapore. Kim's study on wives of Korean expatriates working in Singapore (2011) examined the issues surrounding work and family balance by these sojourner Korean females. Many of such Korean female spouses were termed 'trailing wives' who simply followed their husbands to their overseas assignments. Other wives sought to pursue separate part-time or full-time careers in Singapore, after giving up their own careers in Korea. For the few who were 'leading' migrants, their decision to work was often made in conjunction with their spouses, for the sake of their children's development and/or the prospect of a 'glass ceiling.' Many Korean female professionals, who got their new jobs in Singapore, chose to pursue their career at non-Korean, international multinational corporations (hereafter MNCs) or nongovernmental organizations (hereafter NGO), which demonstrated more favorable, family-friendly policies and practices than Korean MNC's. Kim's work (2011) may suggest that we may have to pay attention on the different practices of MNCs to fully understand lived experiences of work-and-family issues on Korean professional migrants in Singapore.

In another work, Kim (2012) examined intergenerational relationships between Korean adult professional migrants living in Singapore and their elderly parents in Korea. He argued that these first-generation migrant couples, negotiated their familial obligations based on Korean cultural norms and provided support to their elderly parents by 'doing family' at a distance (Finch 2007). The challenges involved in family are especially amplified in the immigration context of Singapore, where family reunification migration schemes are much less favorable in comparison to the United States. Thus these migrant couples had to devise alternate forms of providing support to their elderly parents. While this work acknowledges the myriad concerns around work and family that Korean professional migrants in Singapore face, it lacks the details around the actual work experience of the incumbent population.

The studies reviewed so far suggest useful foci for this study. The first is whether two main categories of professional migrants, namely, managerial professionals and scientist/engineer professionals, have similar or different work and life experiences or not. Second, whether intracompany transferees—mostly working for Korean companies—and globally recruited professionals—mostly working for non-Korean international companies—demonstrate similarities or differences. After introducing the methodology and data, the rest of this paper will examine these two points closely in discussing the work and family issues of professional migrants.

III. Methods, Data and Singapore Context

1. Methods and Data

The applied qualitative method (Guest et al. 2012) was chosen for this paper, given the exploratory nature of the study and paucity of existing research on the topic. This particular qualitative method emphasizes the practical usefulness of combining several qualitative methods. In-depth interview data collected from the two-stage fieldwork conducted in Singapore provides the most important data for analysis. Data was collected until I reached the saturation point (Birks and Mills 2011; Creswell 2007). Maximum variation method was also used to ensure diversity among the represented cases. Cross-checking and interim analysis of the collected cases were also conducted during the data collection and early analysis stage. Emerging themes were captured and modified by repeatedly reading the transcripts during the analysis.

The two stages of fieldwork consisted of the original fieldwork and the re-visit. The first fieldwork was conducted between April 2006 and September 2007 for about seventeen months. During this period, twenty-six professional couples (i.e. 52 adults) were interviewed. They were recruited through various entry-points such as Korean religious organizations (several Protestant churches, a Catholic church and a Buddhist temple), alumni associations of Korean universities in Singapore, Korean business organizations and the Korean Association in Singapore. Snowballing method was also used. Informal observation as a Sunday school teacher at a Korean church

provided glimpses of everyday lives of professional migrant families. The second fieldwork was conducted in March 2015, with the aim of preparing a fully-fledged follow-up study in the near future after an interval of nearly ten years between the initial fieldwork. For the second fieldwork, five couples of the first-stage research participants were interviewed.

A typical interview lasted between one to two hours. Interviews with male spouses were primarily conducted at their offices during weekdays or their homes during weekends, whereas interviews with their wives were typically conducted at their homes or nearby cafés. After briefing the interview, each participant was given a consent form and a basic demographic questionnaire. All the formal interviews at the first stage fieldwork were digitally recorded and fully transcribed. In addition to the recorded interviews, I also collected published documents such as magazines of the Singapore Korean Association and other Korean news magazines.

A qualitative researcher may utilize his or her own expertise and experience as an important research tool (Kim and Okazaki 2014: 247-283). I previously lived in Singapore as a graduate student for about three years before the first fieldwork, gaining some knowledge on Korean community and Singapore society. I had previously lived in other countries such as USA, UK, and Indonesia for over the span of 15 years, conducting research on various types of transnational migrants and observing immigrant communities. Several short visits to Singapore were also made between 2011 and 2016, accumulating knowledge on changing landscape of the growing Korean community in Singapore.

The majority of the professional migrant couples were in their 30s and 40s at the first stages of the interviews (refer to Table 1), which may reflect the age patterns of Korean professional expatriates at the time of research. Almost all professional migrants held degrees at the university or graduate level. Also, their educational background and average household income indicates their status can be identified as middle class and/or professionals; their average household income was 11,240 Singapore Dollars (SGD), which is significantly higher than the average monthly income in both Korea and Singapore. All of them held either a permanent residency status or a long-term employment pass (work permit equivalent for highly skilled/income professional workers in Singapore).

2. Singapore As Case Study: Favorable Policies and City-Nation for Professional Migrants

There are several reasons why Singapore is an ideal place for researching Korean professional migrants. Firstly, Singapore possesses a significant number of professional Koreans—both intracompany transferees of Korean companies and globally recruited professionals of Singaporean and international companies. In 2016, the Korean Embassy in Singapore estimates 25,000 Korean residents. Working adults and their family members constitute the majority, while international students from Korea are also significant among them (Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2015: 99). This feature is largely due to the Singapore government's immigration policies that attract highly educated and skilled professional migrants, meanwhile

controlling the influx of less educated and less skilled migrant workers. Singapore's immigration policies over the last few decades have been characterized by 'bifurcated' labor policies (Yeoh 2006), which essentially filter workers considered to be 'less skilled.' Additionally, Singapore's 'foreign talent policy' (Yeoh and Lam 2016) attracts highly educated and/or professional migrants to come to work and settle in Singapore from all around the world, Singapore government strictly control less skilled workers from developing world. The immigration policies enforced by the government accounts for the relative homogeneity within the Korean expat community.

For expatriates, Singapore is generally seen as a good place to pursue a career as well as maintain a family life. A report by the global financial firm HSBC, which annually publishes a survey on expatriates, ranked Singapore as the best destination for expatriates out of a list of 190 countries (HSBC 2016). According to the survey, 62% of respondents in Singapore agreed that Singapore is a good place to advance their careers, compared with 43% globally and 42% in the Asia region (HSBC 2016: 10). Singapore is also viewed as a good place for family by expatriates: 75% of respondents rated the quality of education as being higher than in their home country.

Relatedly, Singapore has had a high presence of middle class Korean educational migrant families since the early 2000s. Quality English education at public, private and international schools, as well as additional foreign language education (including Mandarin Chinese language) at primary and secondary schools attracted many Korean families that desired cosmopolitan and comfortable lifestyles (Kim 2010; Kim 2015). Contrary to the separation that characterizes

'*kirogi*' families, the prospect of maintaining a nuclear household seems to attract lots of migrant families to Singapore.

IV. Working as Professionals in Singapore

1. Business as Usual: The Work of Korean MNC Professionals

This section examines work experiences of Korean professionals who worked for Korean multinational corporations (hereafter referred to as Korean MNCs or KMNCs) as company transferees. The analysis of data has demonstrated that professionals are busier than they reported to be back at headquarters in Korea. Contrary to commonly held opinions among Koreans that working abroad is generally beneficial to the family, almost all the Korean MNC employees (both current and former) claimed that they were as busy as - if not busier - than before.

Firstly, a number of KMNC professionals, particularly those in high managerial positions, claimed that their work abroad was more stressful. Mr. O, who is a director of a trading company for a conglomerate in Korea, comments on the differences:

The density and quality [of work] are different [for overseas posts].
(Q: What do you mean by that?) In Korea, the responsibility [and roles] are shared with other colleagues and distributed. Sometimes we do work alone there too, but here, most of time, I have to judge

[the situation] and decide what to do alone. That's different. ...
As I need to cover wider tasks and have to take [sole] responsibility [for that], which may be good for my personal development in my career ... at the same time, I get a lot of 'pressure' and I get stressed. (Case O)

According to Mr. O's wife, her husband came home between 9:30 and 10 pm on average. For the past two months (prior to the interview), he went to the office every weekend and even during public holidays. He also went on overseas business trips about six times a year. In contrast, he managed to come home around 9 pm and did not go to the office during the weekends whilst he was in Korea.

Mr. G, another high-level manager (at the executive level of *sangmu*) at one of the Korean electronic MNCs had a similarly busy work schedule. Mr. G originally sent to the sales division of the company's regional business and was later switched to the marketing division Singapore. His case shows how the intensity of work schedules are dependent upon the tasks and responsibilities of the post. According to Mr. G's wife:

In the past, he managed sales in the Singapore market. Back then, his business travel was not extensive. Since last year, as he has been managing marketing for both the Singapore market and other Southeast Asian markets, his business trips have become so extensive. He spends about half the month every month for overseas business trips. (Mrs. G)

The question arises: why were they so busy? Frequent overseas

business trips were only one aspect of the busy schedule that most of the KMNC professionals led. The surrounding Korean corporate culture at play added to the heavy workload. It was often the case that professionals had to receive their colleagues from Korea who came to Singapore for business meetings – a unique culture of corporate life that had been retained by Korean MNCs (and not necessarily by IMNCs), this accounted for an even busier work life as they had to receive and entertain colleagues, leaving them to work overtime to keep up. As Mr. G explains:

If there is a guest, I need to have dinner with the person and sometimes drink together afterward. Then, I come back home around midnight. ... If there isn't, sometimes I can come around 7 pm. But I tend to have guests more often than not, which make me work overtime on those days that I do not have guests, as I have to work on many things, which were delayed because of the guests. There isn't a fixed time for me to leave the office, it can be 9, 10 or 11 pm. ... I am able to come home early (i.e. around 7 pm), maybe about once every two weeks?

A senior-middle manager (*chagang*) of the same KMNC, Mr. Q, experienced a similar busy work schedule. His comparison of work life in both Singapore and Korea resonates with the accounts of both senior level managers mentioned above:

The intensity of work may be a little greater at headquarters than it is here. However, when I compare whether I can have my own time after work hours, here it is tougher than at headquarters, as I have guests from headquarters and business meetings with buyers in Singapore. At headquarters, I can manage to control my

out-of-office-hours if I finish my tasks which are more clearly defined. Here, I cannot do that even if I finish my own tasks, as I have to dine with others, which delays my leave, and I need to attend to the guests over the weekends as well.

A similar middle-level manager of another electronic KMNC explains why he can come home “early” once or twice a month only:

We need to view it holistically. As in many other [Korean] companies, those who are deployed abroad are not many [in comparison with the number needed for the tasks], ... Also there are many things that headquarters ask us to do. (Mr. R)

Mr. R, who was managing an operation, only went on overseas business trips once or twice a month. In comparison with his work in Korea, he feels it is busier here. When he was in Korea, he could leave the office around 7 or 8 pm - which meant leaving the office “early”. He rarely worked during the weekends in Korea but he does so abroad:

I think all the *jujaewon* (intracompany transferee or expatriates) think that the fact that they are deployed abroad is a sign of recognition by the company. ... However, I get more stressed, as my task is to do with sales abroad, than I used to have at the headquarters. ... Sometimes I felt that I had better quit my position here to return [to Korea], though I feel better these days. (Mr. R)

In summary, many Korean MNC professionals were working under the ‘transplanted’ organizational culture (Befu 2001) that had been observed back at home. Combined with the expatriate context, the

group seemed to have as busy as, if not busier, work schedules in Singapore.

2. Less Secure but More at Ease: The Work of International MNC Professionals

Through fieldwork in Singapore, I was able to encounter many Korean professionals working at international MNCs (hereafter IMNC), mostly as consultants or engineers. Their daily work experiences were often in stark contrast to their Korean MNC counterparts. There were also notable differences between managers, consultants and engineers, especially among the IMNC professionals. Job security and career mobility of IMNC professionals were other significant points of distinctions. Each of these will be examined in depth when I elaborate upon the daily work-and-family issues concerning IMNC professionals.

Mr. S, an IT consultant at an American MNC's Singapore office, reported spending about 200 days a year or at least half the year on overseas business trips, which involve training or consulting clients for two or three weeks at a time. Such frequent travel arrangements are common especially in professions based on consulting, as documented by other studies (Amit 2002). If we add up the number of days that my interviewees have spent abroad, Mr. S has spent the most time. However, he is an exceptional case among IMNC professionals. In fact, the duration and frequency of business overseas travel depended much more the type of specialization the actual posts entailed.

Overall, Korean professionals at IMNCs are seen to experience more favorable work-and-family conditions. For instance, they were more likely to lead balanced work and family lives than their KMNC counterparts in terms of daily and weekly work schedules. There are several reasons that contribute to this stark divergence between IMNC and KMNC professionals.

There were notable discrepancies in the work and life conditions even among IMNC professionals of differing specialties. I will examine the case of engineers first. In preface, many of the IMNCS that I interviewed were working in research and development sectors at high technology firms, although there were a few others who were accountants and in other managerial positions. A typical example of their work schedule was that of Mr. F, who was an engineer in a semi-conductor firm:

I go for overseas business trips twice or three times a year, each of them may not last for more than one week. I leave home around 6:40 am and come back home around 8 pm. The commuting time takes about one hour.

Though Mr. F's work schedule was less intense compared to what he was used to in Korea as employee in a R&D position at Korean headquarters, he expressed a singular opinion not shared by the other KMNC professionals about the setbacks of working abroad:

I know I am benefitting from working here as my post has many benefits for my family, such as children's educational subsidies.
... However, I have a very low sense of accomplishment. It is

because the company needed me and invited me with the money (and the benefits). Therefore, [it seems that] they do not consider things like my future [professional] development.

The IMNC professionals' work seemed to be more "functionally scripted" (Ono 2007). Also importantly, in contrast to KMNC professionals, who tend to view their post as a sign of recognition by their companies (as was the case of Mr. R and many others), only few IMNC professional shared this opinion.

Secondly, IMNC professionals had a work schedule much closer to the standard 'nine-to-five' and was more task/project-oriented. We can see this by looking at a high-level manager's work schedule. For example, Mr. Z, a senior-level manager in finance at an IMNC, was transferred from Seoul to Singapore two years ago to join a one-and-a-half year global project for the company. His work schedule was the closest to the standard 'nine to five': he left home around 7.30 am to get to work by 8.30 am, and left his office at around 5.30 pm and got home by 7 pm. His previous work schedule in Korea was also similarly punctual. As he was one of the top-level officers, and did not enjoy social gatherings during out-of-office-hours, he managed to opt out of them. His rank was at the executive-level in Korea but his position here was not necessarily as high in the hierarchy because the undertaking was functionally defined:

I feel less of a burden from my work here than before, as my task is ... a supportive one. That means there is less stress in the work. ... There is some stress that comes from the work itself but

it is less so as I have less responsibility here.

Other IMNC professionals' experiences echo that of Mr. Z. As the cases above illustrate, most of my IMNC professional interviewees were working a less intensive work schedule than their KMNC counterparts in Singapore.

Another factor to consider is the different career paths that the IMNC professionals had been assigned or cultivated during their employment. One can identify two types of career paths for IMNC interviewees in Singapore. Some came to Singapore via intrafirm transfers, whereas many others - particularly engineers or IT professionals - took up their current positions by applying to a new company through the employment agencies or through a referral from a friend or acquaintance working in the same field. This is in contrast with the KMNC professionals who were almost all intra-firm transferees.

Another key factor that distinguishes IMNC professionals relates to job insecurity. Almost all the IMNC employees commented on the insecurity and instability of their employment as well as the employment practices of their companies, as their work's defining features (Amit 2002; Ono 2007). This seems to play a very important factor in influencing their current work and their future mobility, far more so than their KMNC counterparts. Mr. U elaborates:

The future is very uncertain. That makes me think that I should look for more certain - my own - work but pursuing that goal is also uncertain, so I stick to the current work... If I had continued with my work in Korea, the social connections or networks ...

might be beneficial, but here things are not like that. My boss changes often. There is uncertainty about the future. I do not know whether I will go to another company tomorrow. There is uncertainty like that.

Unlike Mr. U, almost none of the KMNC professionals expressed a sense of job insecurity about their current positions, though they expressed concern about their long-term future, when they would get to be in their late 40s or 50s – another worry commonly experienced by Korean professionals. It was more than an issue of job insecurity. Mrs. S expressed a similar view with regards to the situation of her husband, as well as her knowledge of job insecurity and instability for the professional employees of IMNC:

You never know when you are going to be laid off. If you are laid off, there isn't a single penny. The salary is much better and there are good things. But in Korea, there is a lump sum severance payment [when you are laid off] and it is harder to lay people off. ... My husband once told me that one colleague with whom he had lunch yesterday disappeared today. Those who are younger may get another job, but it is more difficult for those in their late 40s or older. [The companies here] can lay people off without any consideration. They can do so after hiring them for two months and if they are not satisfied with them. It can be an indelible stain on one's career. ... We know one senior person whom my husband worked with at an [American MNC] before, who was well known in the IT area. They scouted him to work with them but laid him off after a few months. *We saw him 'float' for a few years after that. We are in such a state of insecurity.* (emphasis mine)

Considering the job insecurity that surrounded the family, it was

easily understandable why Mrs. S's husband said that he did not "know for sure, as [his] current life (work) is like *that of a dayfly*" (emphasis mine) when asked about his plans for his future career.

Furthermore, job insecurity led these IMNC professionals to take a different approach towards work, leading to several implications. Firstly, job insecurity at a company was one of the most important reasons why almost all the professional IMNC interviewees applied for Permanent Residency (known as "PR") in Singapore. This was not the case for KMNCs. In asking the interviewees how they got their PR status and their attitudes about their future careers, Mr. F explained his case as follows:

I got PR, not because I wanted to stay here for long, but because I did not like it here and I wanted to leave here soon. ... PR is a visa, allowing me to stay. As I wanted to leave here soon, I wanted to have such visa [when I could get it].

Having PR status was an important and necessary safeguard for professional workers in Singapore. It was also related to the Singapore government's policies towards foreign workers, which privileged high-skilled professionals (Yeoh 2006). If the employment pass (the 'work permit' for professional workers) or the work pass (the 'work permit' for less skilled workers) expires - which happens if one is laid off - the individual (and the family members under the same permit) must leave the country within fourteen days. This officially leaves only fourteen days for laid-off workers to find new jobs in Singapore in order to maintain residency. Almost all the PR holders in my sample, who were currently working for IMNCs, cited

this as one of the reasons why they applied for and received PR.

Secondly, another implication of relative job insecurity and the human resource practices at IMNCs caused many professionals to seriously, if not constantly, look for alternative job opportunities in other companies within Singapore or elsewhere. This was particularly the case for those whose benefit packages were less favorable than the others. For example, Mr. K, who was working for a European MNC as an IT worker at the time, explains his current plans:

At first when I came here, I was thinking of Singapore as a springboard for landing in another country, such as Australia or the USA. I visited the USA a few times and I did not like it much. Later, I thought of going to Australia. ... Since I have been staying [in Singapore], I like it more and sometimes I feel like staying here like a nearby neighbourhood. I feel less like going to another country [these days], but I still think of going to Australia as an option and I am thinking of moving to another company, if I can get better benefits. (Mr. K)

Mr. K did not receive any housing and educational benefits from the company, although his base salary was comparable to that of other IMNC professionals. Also, Mr. K knew of many other Korean professionals who were offered much better benefit packages. Similar cases like that of Mr. K in my sample included other professional workers who were hired with a so-called 'local package' by International MNCs as well as those who were working similarly with a 'local package' who were hired by Korean small and medium-sized firms.

For example, Mr. C, who was working for a Korean medium-sized construction company, joined the firm as a local contract manager

after initially working at another company in Singapore. His work schedule and the stability of his employment resembled that of KMNCs rather than that of other IMNCs. He explained his work as follows:

Other Korean colleagues are intrafirm transferees from Korea. As they get additional bonuses and benefits from working abroad, which can make it double the base salary ... those who are below my position can get paid more than what I get, as their salaries are doubled but mine is not. ... I cannot see the faces of my children on weekday nights. My children leave home by 6:30 am and I get back home around 11 pm or midnight for five or six days a week. ... Even though I am an office manager, as other construction engineers and technicians have only two days of holidays a month ... I go to the office even at weekends and I leave the office early, since I should consider them. (Mr. C)

In summary, the work patterns of IMNC professionals possess some distinctive features, which differ from that of their KMNC counterparts. This variation was not solely due to personal specialties or skills but also evident in the companies' employment practices. This in itself provided an important basis for their family life after office hours. Additionally, job insecurity and the volatile nature of their status of employment, heavily influenced their work experience.

3. Choice for the Longer-Term Future: The Self-Employed and Entrepreneurs

A number of KMNC or IMNC professionals based in Singapore,

who had changed careers to become either self-employed businessmen or entrepreneurs, showed consensus in the imbalance between work and family life in their former careers. After spending years working for companies, many chose to embark on their own entrepreneurial pursuits or in a few cases, became self-employed small businessmen. This comprised a significant portion of Korean professionals in Singapore. In this section, I will identify two subgroups within this population, one of which I will call ‘global middlemen’ who utilized their position and prior experience as a liaison between Korean MNCs and business opportunities in Singapore (see below). They constituted a small yet significant minority in my sample.

Becoming self-employed or an independent entrepreneur as a migrant was seen as a way of securing a livelihood while being in more control of one’s working conditions. However, this endeavor also meant being exposed to a whole different set of work-related concerns. One difficulty was meeting the challenges involved in their own business. Mr. Y, who used to work as a semi-conductor engineer for European MNCs later opened his own business to market its own semi-conductors in Singapore and China, told me:

We have difficult times for business. That’s the most difficult thing. ... When I was working for the company, there wasn’t such a thing, as we got our salary monthly. When I began the business, the timing was so bad. I almost went into bankruptcy. ... That happened, but I had to prioritise paying the salaries of my employees. ... When my wife did not understand this well, it was very difficult. (Mr. Y)

There were some self-employed professionals who changed their careers after working at KMNCs. In operating their own businesses, such professionals were able to cultivate transnational connections and expertise through the experience endowed by prior careers, which tended to be in the same line of industry that they worked in. This seems to be different from immigrant minorities who focused on gaining opportunities within their co-ethnic communities or in the niche economy of the host society (Heisler 2008). Such cases can be observed among the Korean community in the USA (Jang 2015) or in Argentina (Kim 2014). Many of the subjects who used to work for KMNCs subsequently continued to work in the same line of industry as Mr. I did. Mr. W was a wholesale distributor of electronic products, not only in Singapore but also in a few other Asian as well as African countries that currently did not have such wholesalers, for the company that he used to work. Another example, Mr. P, a civil engineer who used to work for a construction KMNC, ran a similar business.

These two cases (Mr. W and Mr. P) illustrate how Korean professional migrants become what I may call 'global middlemen' who utilize their professional niche. This niche has been partly created by the globalization of Korean business organizations as well as by global firms aiming for the Korean markets that have based their regional headquarters in Singapore; this in turn increases their business opportunities in Singapore, as Singapore is a regional hub for many MNCs (Yeoh and Lam 2016). Both Mr. W and Mr. P maintained favorable relationships with their former colleagues, and as a result, they benefitted from their previous work experience and

social networks. Their former KMNCs may simultaneously benefit from these 'spin-off' former employees who may become helpful contacts and resources for the company's business. This may be a reason why these entrepreneurs and their former employers had favorable relationships, which otherwise could be hostile if they were seen as potential 'competitors'. This meant that their prior experience and personal expertise could be utilized for their work, working as a professional even after a career change. This differs from the 'mismatch' observed in other ethnic minority groups with high educational achievement, who often experience downward social mobility as migrants or Korean self-employed entrepreneurs in other immigrant states (Min 1990; Min 2001; Park 1997) and therefore work as ethnic minority middlemen in the host society (Yoon 1997). Their prolonged employment status as a professional immigrant also had favorable implications to their families, providing them with more family time.

Mr. P is another typical case of an individual who has changed careers from KMNCs to owning their own business in the same line of industry. He told me what a difference it was for him to have 'spare time' to tend to the needs of his family after his career change:

When I worked for a KMNC here, I couldn't take time off to help my family even if things happened. ... For example, going to kindergarten or school for parents' interviews was not an acceptable excuse then at the company. That was the Korean corporate culture then. ... My wife did not expect me to do that and I could not do that either. Since I have started my own business, when I am asked by my wife for something, I can say,

'I can pick you up' or take them somewhere they need to go. (Mr. P)

Another identifiable group among the self-employed and entrepreneurs is comprised of individuals who changed their careers from professional work to being self-employed in a new line of business. They seemed to share more similarities with other immigrant Koreans elsewhere in a sense that their livelihood depended more upon their diligence and the status of the economy (Min 2001). The I family, who ran Korean restaurants, is one such example. Unlike entrepreneurs who continued office-based professional businesses, such households were especially subject to working extra hours even if their businesses were prosperous:

My current work (as a self-employed person) requires long hours' work and it is tough. I leave home by 8:20 am to get to work by 9. I can take some rest in the meantime, but the business is over at 10 pm. So if I clean up and keep things in order, then I can leave around 10:40 and get home around 11 pm. ... At first it was so difficult as we had lots of things to cover. Now it is well established and there are a number of employees. ... We arranged to have our house near the main shop on purpose so as to be able to see our child whenever we wanted during the break time. (Mrs. I)

What the wife found different from the previous years living with her husband, who used to work for a KMNC, had to do with their inability to spend time with their family. She added that "people may think that we can close the shops early so as to spend time with our

family. But ... If we think of the effect of doing that on our business, we cannot do that easily.” (Mrs. I). There were two other families among the interview pool who were currently running or had previously run their own restaurants. Whereas Mrs. I managed to spend some time with her younger child by taking residence nearby, Mrs. N found it was still difficult for her to “manage” her child, who was in the middle school when she was running her restaurant until a few years ago.

In summary, many former KMNC professionals made career changes in order to start businesses of their own, forming a distinguishable group among the Korean professional communities in Singapore. One can identify two types of career paths among them. The first type are the self-employed entrepreneurs that ran businesses directly related to their prior work—whom I call ‘global middlemen.’ They were able to carve out more time and flexibility in their work-family balance, although this meant exposure to the challenges that are involved in being self-employed. The other type consists of those who ran a business which was not related to their prior work experience, and seemed to live a similar life of self-employed Korean first generational immigrants elsewhere in terms of their high work hours and work-family arrangements.

V. Conclusion

The fieldwork and research have led me to conclude that Korean professional migrants in Singapore can be categorized into three

different groups, whose daily work and life experiences were very distinct from one another: Korean MNC professionals, International MNC professionals and former -MNC professional entrepreneurs. Firstly, one such division corresponded to the type of company they worked at. Whether they were Korean MNCs or International MNCs influenced the specialization or the line of work that these professional workers were involved in. Most of the posts at KMNCs were managerial or related to marketing, whereas many of the IMNC professionals held engineering or skill-based posts (i.e. accountants, IT consultants and R&D professionals). This reflects how Korean professionals are transferred or hired overseas. This had various implications for their work schedules and in the (im)balance between work and family life, even though other factors also influenced the way that they worked. The companies they worked for also help articulate the distinctions among the various degrees of insecurity and instability that professional migrants face. Secondly, age and life course was seen as another important determinant in the migrants' career and family-related affairs. Individuals who were in their 40s or older, often with children at higher levels of schooling, constituted the majority of Korean professional migrants both in this study and in the Korean community in Singapore. This is aligned with other research done on Korean professionals (Kim 2012; Shen and Han 2012).

In terms of work schedules and job security, most professional workers expressed having intense and heavily imbalanced work schedules. There were variations in the level of intensity depending on the type of profession, which this study has identified. For

instance, work schedules of Korean professionals were affected not only by the MNCs' countries of 'origin' (Ono 2007), but also the specialization acquired by these professional migrants (Amit 2002). This is because they were subject to different sets of corporate cultures and employment practices depending on their place of work (Moore 2016; Meier 2016). Entrepreneurs and self-employed individuals likewise were subject, challenges that are involved in running their own businesses. As such, KMNC and IMNC professionals remain distinguished in both the quality of work and the culture around it – which is most clearly demonstrated by their sense of job security and loyalty to their companies.

Secondly, the self-employed and entrepreneurs who changed their career after working at multinational corporations as professionals underwent their own set of challenges as a result. Only the entrepreneurs, who started their own business in the same line of industry that they used to work in, had relatively more leisure and flexibility that would prove more favorable for their families. They were able to maintain their professional work status by realizing their business, utilizing prior social networks and Korean niche markets afforded by globalization. The other type that set out to wholly different careers encountered less favorable work schedules – being more busy or comparably so when they used to be at their former jobs in Singapore. They shared similar characteristics with Korean first generation immigrants as far as their working conditions (Jang 2015; Kim 2014) or with ethnic minorities in immigrant states wherein the first generation often experienced downward social mobility or a mismatch between their educational attainment and job

status (Cooke 2007).

The result shown so far also suggest that the Korean community in Singapore, largely comprised of the professional middle class, are in a dynamic process of becoming a transnational community, especially when we focus on those who have changed their career from working at multinational companies to become entrepreneurs, as well as those who are working as global middlemen. Despite continued interest around professional migrant communities (Ben-Ari 2002; Fechter 2007; Scott 2006) or transnational entrepreneurs (Portes, Haller and Guarnizo 2002), career change of professional migrants has not been considered in our understanding transnational migration or transnational community yet. The Korean community in Singapore was initially formed as a small community of professional expatriates, it seems to be evolving into a more diverse transnational community, with an increase of those who are running their own entrepreneurial businesses using their own specialties, expertise and experience. Their Korean ethnicity also helps to carve out a unique ethno-linguistic and niche opportunities in the global city of Singapore, as they were able to play the role of global middlemen for global corporations both in Singapore and in Korea and Southeast Asia. I call for further research on this subfields of transnational community formation, as well as Korean professional migrants' work and family experiences in different life course to advance our understanding on the issue, which is increasingly more important migrant group in contemporary world.

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A Case Study on Work Experience of Korean Professional Migrants in Singapore 359

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<Appendix> Characteristics of Interviewees

	Case	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M
Husband	Age	34	41	38	50	39	44	42	46	50	48	39	52	41
	Edu	Univ	Univ	Univ	Post	Post	Univ	Post	Univ	Univ	High	Univ	Univ	Post
	Work	IMC	IMC	KSME	INGO	**	IMC	KMC	KSME	Self*	Self*	IMC	Self*	IMC
Wife	Age	29	41	38	46	37	43	39	44	47	44	36	50	41
	Edu	Poly	Post	Univ	Post	Univ	univ	Univ	High	Univ	Univ	Post	Univ	Post
	Work	IMC	IMC	IMC	INGO	IMNG	PT	No	KSME	Self	self	PT	PT	PT
Years	in.SG	7	4.25	7.5	7	0.9	3	4	14	13	16	3.5	11	6
	Mar.-.	5	15	13	21	12	17	11	12	20	14	8	23	6
Children(No.)		1	2	2	3	2	3	2	1	2	2	2	2	1
Income*		9000	20000	5750	4000	14000	9500	10000	5000	10000	15000	7500	20000	12500
	Case	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M
Husband	Age	49	43	41	42	40	37	40	40	49	46	52	52	47
	Edu	Univ	Univ	Univ	Univ	Univ	Univ	Post	Post	Univ	Univ	Univ	Univ	Univ
	Work	Self*	KMC	Self*	KMC	KMC	IMC	INGO	IMNG	Self*	Self*	Self*	Self*	IMC
Wife	Age	53	39	39	38	39	37	35	40	45	42	48	50	42
	Edu	Post	Univ	Univ	Univ	Univ	Univ	Univ	Univ	Post	Univ	Univ	Univ	Univ
	Work	PT	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	PT
Years	in.SG	4	2	10	1.5	3	6	2.5	5	8	12	12	14.5	1
	Mar.-.	18	14	14	14	14	12	12	11	18	16	24	20	15
Children(No.)		1	3	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
Income		4000	10000	7000	7000	10000	15000	4000	10000	25000	30000	13000	7000	12000

Note 1: KSME refers to Korean small-and-medium size enterprise, Self refers to self-employed entrepreneur and PT refers to part-time worker. High refers to high school graduate, Poly refers to polytechnic (a two-year college equivalent) graduate, and Post refers to graduate school degree holder.

Note 2: * Cases I, L, P, V, W and X used to work in Korean/International MNC in Singapore and currently run their own business.

Note 3: Age and other indicators are as of the first interview.

Note 4: Monthly household income is based on Singapore dollars.

<Abstract>

A Case Study on Work Experience of Korean Professional Migrants in Singapore

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This paper takes as case study the lived experiences among Korean professional migrants in Singapore. Professional or highly skilled migrants in the contemporary world tend to be seen as flexible and mobile. Studies on professional migrants including expatriate professionals are one of continuously studied topics. However, studies on 'expatriate communities' mainly served to survey cultural adjustment issues or the collective division and separation experienced by Western expatriates from the locals in host societies, often tend to neglect work experiences. In this context, this study seeks to address the following questions: What are the work experiences of Korean professional migrants? Are there identifiable patterns and/or types among professional migrants? To this aim, this paper will provide lived work experiences of Korean married male professional migrants from an in-depth interview-based case study of 26 professional Korean couples in Singapore.

Results suggest the following. There were three identifiable types

of Korean professionals, who have distinctive features in their work experiences. First, many Korean MNC professionals seemed to have as busy as, if not busier, work schedules under the transplanted organizational culture of Korean companies and comprehensive tasks. However, they work with pride as their overseas posts is seen as a sign of recognition by their companies and with job security. Second, Korean professionals at international MNCs are working with more family-friendly work arrangement and their tasks were more functionally scripted. However, because of job insecurity and instability of their employment, they often consider global mobility for their career path. Third, there were two subtypes of Korean entrepreneurs in Singapore. The first type are the self-employed entrepreneurs that ran businesses directly related to their prior work – whom I call ‘global middlemen.’ They were able to carve out more time and flexibility in their work-family balance. The other type consists of those who ran a business which was not related to their prior work experience, and seemed to live a similar life of self-employed Korean first generational immigrants elsewhere in the West.

Key Words: Transnational Migration, Work Experience, Expatriate, Professional Migrant, Singapore, Korean Community

<국문초록>

싱가포르 한국인 전문직 이주자의 일 경험 사례 연구

김 지 훈

본 연구는 싱가포르에 거주하는 한국인 고학력 전문직 이주자의 일 경험을 살펴보는 질적 연구이다. 초국적/다국적 기업에서 일하는 고학력 전문직 이주자들은 유연하고(flexible) 유동적인 (mobile) 것으로 비추어진다. 주재원을 포함한 전문직 이주자에 대한 연구는 지속적으로 연구 되어 온 주제 중 하나지만, 그간 주재원 연구는 서구 출신의 주재원들이 개발도상국이나 다른 문화권 국가에서 근무할 때의 문화 적응의 어려움이나 현지인과의 제한적이고 배제적인 사회 관계에 초점을 맞추고 일 경험 자체는 주목하지 않는 경향이 있다. 이러한 맥락에서 본 연구는 다음과 같은 연구 질문을 제기한다. 전문직 이주자로서 외국에서 일하는 경험은 어떠한가? 한국인 전문직 이주자를 구분할 수 있는 유형과 유형별 특징은 무엇인가? 한국계 대기업 주재원, 다국적 기업 종사자, 그리고 한국 대기업 및 다국적 기업 근무 경력이 있는 사업가 등 총 26쌍의 부부에 대한 심층면접 자료에 근거하여, 한국인 기혼 남성 이주자의 일 경험의 실재를 탐색적으로 파악하였다.

연구결과는 다음과 같다. 한국인 전문직 이주자들은 세 유형으로 구분할 수 있고, 각각 일 경험에 두드러진 특징이 있었다. 첫째, 한국

계 대기업 주재원은 한국식 조직 문화와 주재원으로서의 업무의 포괄성 등으로 인해 본국 보다 더 바쁜 일과 속에서 일 중심으로 살지만, 주재원 경력이 기업 내에서 인정받는 지위가 주는 자부심과 상대적 고용안정성 속에서 일한다. 둘째, 다국적 기업 종사자들의 경우 상대적으로 더 가족 친화적인 일상적 근무 여건, 업무 중심의 일과 속에서 일하지만, 고용 불안정성과 이로 인한 글로벌한 이동 가능성을 늘 열어두는 삶을 사는 것이 특징적이다. 셋째, 사업가들의 경우 세부적으로 두 집단을 구분할 수 있다. 한국과 다국적 기업 경력과 전문성을 활용하는 사업가의 경우 ‘글로벌 중개자(global middlemen)’로서 이들은 보다 가족친화적인 여건 속에서 일하지만, 자영업 종사자의 경우 서구의 한국인 이민 1세대 자영업자와 유사한 경험을 갖고 있음을 파악할 수 있었다.

주제어: 초국적 이주, 일 경험, 주재원, 전문직 이주자, 싱가포르, 한인 사회