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Adjusting to Slow Times and Happiness: *South Koreans in Malaysia*

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Abstract

South Korean migration to Malaysia is a relatively new phenomenon that began in the new millennium. By 2019, approximately 20,861 Koreans were residing in Malaysia under various types of visas: work, study, and under the Malaysia My Second Home (MM2H) program. This paper examines Korean attitudes and adjustment to Malaysian temporality (after accounting for their reasons for emigration) to make causal connections between developmentalist modernity, hypercelerity (extreme speed) and the lack of happiness that drive them to search for better opportunities in the Global South. Coming from a culture of hypercelerity and expected efficiency and immediacy, Koreans have to acclimatize to a culture of slowness. Drawing from a broad span of respondents interviewed between late 2014 to 2021, that includes university students, education migrants (parents), working expatriates, retirees and those on business visas from ages 16 up to their 60s, I argue that Koreans are filled with ambivalence regarding slow time. Such ambivalence is shaped by factors such as age, occupation, circumstance and context, their life course, and extent of openness to cultural difference (cosmopolitanism). This essay focuses on the challenges Koreans face and the strategies they deploy while negotiating the slower temporality of living in the Global South.

Keywords: Korean migrants, Malaysia, slow time, happiness, migrant temporality, *ppalli-ppalli*

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Introduction

South Korean migration to Malaysia began in the late 1990s and early millennium, prompted by the IMF neoliberal pressures that affected middle- to lower-middle-class-Koreans after the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis. According to the Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, in 2019, 20,861 Koreans were domiciled in Malaysia before the COVID-19 pandemic diminished these numbers by half. They are in Malaysia for work, education, business,[1] or retirement under the Malaysia My Second Home (MM2H) scheme. Additionally, "English fever," competitiveness in the Korean education system and the increasing desire to globalize by seeking an English-, or in some cases, Chinese-language education (J. Kim 2010) make migrating to the Global South, where savings can be stretched, an attractive prospect (Park and Bae 2015; Kim and Thang 2016). Government policies to increase bilateral trade, allowing for flexible transnational labor and foreign investment, favorable migration policies, and intra-Asian connectivity (increasing and diversifying travel routes and regional city-to-city flights) also aid Korean migration to Southeast Asia. Kuala Lumpur is only an hour behind Seoul and a mere six-hour flight away, making Malaysia conveniently proximate geographically, temporally, and, with some nuances as I will show later, culturally.[2] Other attractive features include the reasonable cost of living, the mild tropical weather that allows for outdoor golf year-round, friendly people, and a laidback peaceful atmosphere (Wong and Musa 2014; 2015). More specifically, the wide usage of English and Malaysia's multi-ethnic population provide a veneer of cosmopolitanism in line with their aspirations to be cosmopolitan and global. Also, the Malaysia My Second Home (MM2H) visa encourages property investment, where foreigners are allowed to buy property in their own name, unlike the situation in Thailand and Indonesia. Lastly, some Korean migrants I

1. By work I mean individuals hired by companies to work in Malaysia on an employment pass, while "business" refers to individuals with capital opening their own business in Malaysia. Both require different passes.
2. Mrs. HHL, interview by author, Solaris Mont Kiara, Kuala Lumpur, December 16, 2014.

interviewed perceive there to be less racial discrimination here than in a Western countries and felt comfortable in Malaysia being among other Asians.[3]

Whatever their reason for migrating, the majority of Koreans are impacted by the slower tempo of life in Malaysia. A man giving advice on the Naver community forum to his fellow Koreans thinking of migrating to Malaysia specifically mentions the national characteristic of slowness being one of the many frustrating things to be concerned about:

> The slow culture here can be overwhelming and stressful at first, but after a while, you can get used to it and you will slowly start to accommodate their lifestyle without realizing it. This is where you will find relaxation and happiness. The leisure and happiness that we could not find in the fast-paced Korean lifestyle ironically can come from this slow-paced culture that we start off being frustrated with.[4]

This paper investigates South Korean migrants' temporal adaptation and strategies to survive in Malaysia as narrated in interviews with the informants. It illustrates the interplay of modernity, temporality, and emotion/affect in the situation of Korean migrants to Malaysia. Specifically, I argue that developmentalist ideas about time discipline, and the Korean habitual expectation of efficiency and speed in doing things makes it difficult to adjust to slower local rhythms, even as a laidback or relaxed pace is something they seek as an alternative to the stressful life in Korea. Overall, an ambivalence characterizes their experience of Malaysian temporality.

Temporal adaptation is a component that many migration studies have not fully explored, even though migration studies scholars have begun to broach temporality more broadly (Griffiths et al. 2013; Mavroudi et al.

3. Florence, interview by author, Skype, September 4, 2017; Mrs. L., interview by author, Ampang, Kuala Lumpur, May 21, 2019. For the reasons Koreans select Malaysia for migration, see Are you ready café manager, "For those who are thinking of immigrating to Malaysia," MyMalaysia, Naver Café, January 22, 2013, https://cafe.naver.com/mymalaysia/38519 (accessed February 8, 2022). I thank Miran Shin for her translation.
4. Posted on My Malaysia, Naver Café, January 22, 2013, https://cafe.naver.com/mymalaysia/38519 (accessed February 8, 2022).

2017), exploring the experience of international students and migrants undergoing multiple times simultaneously (Collins and Shubin 2017) or emphasizing temporal constraints of the visa (Robertson 2014). South to North (Cwerner 2001) and rural-to-urban (Elchardus et al. 1987) migration studies do note migrant temporal adjustment. Cwerner's 2001 study (based on fieldwork done in the 1990s) briefly mentions middle-class Brazilians in London having to adhere to expectations of punctuality to assimilate to the host society. But adjusting to slow time specifically is mentioned only in passing in North-to-South migration literature (Akesson 2011; Dastane and Willis Lee 2016; Dixon et al. 2006, 54, 59; Hastarini 2014) and literature on Korean migrant entrepreneurial businesses (Abd Hamid et al. 2019; Abd Hamid and Everett 2021). Thus, an examination of Korean migrants' attitudes towards time, and their temporal habits that clash with those of the host society in the Global South is somewhat overdue (Elchardus et al. 1987, 139; as cited in Cwerner [2001, 7]). Often, references in lifestyle migration literature to a slower tempo in the Global South are accompanied with positive emotions: "relaxing," "laidback," and "peaceful" (Benson and O'Reilly 2009, 612; Howard 2008, 158; Wong and Musa 2014, 149; Shakuto 2017, 164). Usually, the locals' friendliness and openness to foreigners are mentioned together with the relaxing ambience. Similarly, some circular diasporic Korean migrants in Latin America return to Argentina from the US partly because they "[miss] the sense of camaraderie and warmth that colored everyday interactions among Argentinians": one man noted that while he may not be doing well economically in Argentina, at least he still had "time and money to share." He said such collegiality and compassion were missing among Americans, including Korean Americans, who were "*ch'isahada*" (mean or not generous) (Park 2014, 506).

Engaging with literature on the sociology of time, Cwerner formulated concepts about "the times of migration," such as *strange, heteronomous* and *asynchronous*, to describe the practical and symbolic levels of immigrant adjustment to the host society; and as ambivalence sets in, *remembered, collage* and *liminal* times to express immigrant feelings for their original identity (Cwerner 2001, 18–19). Lastly, Cwerner poses *nomadic* and *diasporic* times of migration as two types of long-term temporal outlook as

migrants either move on or return or build a diasporic community where they are. In the transnational millennium where Korean pop culture and food have gone global and become ubiquitous and popular in the region, and when travel between Malaysia and Korea is enabled by the short distance and budget airlines, and families, friends, and businesses connect through KakaoTalk and Naver, Cwerner's second set of times is less pertinent than this paper's focus on *strange* (when Koreans encounter the alien and incomprehensible host culture) and *heteronomous time* (e.g. when they are not in control of their own time as it is controlled by immigration through the uncertainty of visa and social pass renewals). Coming from a technologically advanced capitalist economy, Koreans carry "temporal baggage" (Cwerner 2001) of "the culture of immediacy" (Tomlinson 2007, 89), or what is uniquely known as the *ppalli-ppalli* (hurry-hurry) syndrome (Chung 2003, 178). "*Temporal* baggage compris[es] codes, symbols and dispositions that cover a whole range of elements, from the pace and sequencing of various modalities of social interaction to the broad temporal organisation of social life" (Cwerner 2001, 19). This is reflected in the incompatibility between Korean corporate culture and Malaysian corporate culture (Dastane and Willis Lee 2016),[5] or work habits where Koreans wanting to finish a job quickly will work overtime unlike their Malaysian colleagues.[6]

More recent studies on migrant temporalities have centered on how the passing of time is perceived by those on the move: for failed asylum seekers, it is sticky, suspended, frenzied, or ruptured (Griffiths 2014); for international students who experience "being on the move," time is not a linear sequence that measures and regulates life but multiple, "with different senses of future, present and past [that] co-exist and interact simultaneously," and that can change one's established plans for the future (Mavroudi et al. 2017, 3). This

5. The authors interviewed 46 Korean expatriates employed in Malaysia-based Korean subsidiaries. They found that career dissatisfaction stemmed from the companies' inability to fully carry out the Confucian pillars of Korean corporate culture due to Malaysian workers' resistance. This led to social disharmony with the Korean workers who then opt to return early to Korea.

6. KJ, interview by author, Mont Kiara, Kuala Lumpur, May 29, 2019.

complicates the model of humans as "simply at an end-state and moving from one stage of life to another" and instead poses individuals as beings who are constantly changing," particularly when they migrate (Collins and Shubin 2017, 21). For student-workers and tourist-workers in Australia, Robertson shows how temporal constraints based on the temporariness of visas is a way for the state to discipline and control their status but also an instrument of identity construction on the part of the migrants themselves (Robertson 2014; 2016).

But in this paper, much of the discourse of temporalities with regard to Koreans in Malaysia are not just tied to their visa status, which limits their time here and shapes how they see their future plans, but also have to do with their perceptual experience with slowness that is part of everyday rhythms in a developing country. Perhaps studies on temporal adaptation have been neglected on the assumption that human resilience dictates that adjustment will take place in a matter of time; or that other factors such as health and access to medical care, racism, community support, government policies, etc. require more urgent attention. However, my focus on Korean migrant temporal adaptation that draws more from studies on the sociology of time and intercultural communications is important in capturing how time—its constitutive power to shape social behavior and plans (Kang 2018)—is experienced at an everyday level by migrants; or to consider "power-chronography," where time is "lived experience, always political and produced at the intersection of a range of social differences and institutions, and of which the clock is only one chronometer" (Sharma 2014, 15). Its findings may question the hegemonic conceptualization of linear time as the only (and correct) way of structuring societies, thereby offering alternative temporal conceptualizations that mitigate stress.

Time is cultural and these differences are most noticeable between northern and southern cultures/nationalities (Levine 1997). Robert Levine, a social psychologist who studied the pace of life, concluded from his experiments that people move faster in places "with vital economies, a high degree of industrialization, larger populations, cooler climates, and a cultural orientation toward individualism" (1997, 9). Developed cultures (like Korea) adhere to clock-time and equate time with money and productivity. This

model of time is linear and can be broken down into measurable units that divide, order, circumscribe, and schedule our lives and activities over our life course. Thus, differences in pacing and attitudes towards punctuality confront expatriates from developed nations when they migrate to the developing world (Dastane and Willis Lee 2016; Lahrichi 2016; Levine 1997). Levine explains that this lack of priority for timeliness is due to a different concept of time ('event time'), where event or activities take precedence over temporal limitations. Simply put, an event will take as much or as little time as needed and cannot be rushed to accommodate clock-time or the notion of time as money. Similarly, social psychologist Geert Hofstede's (2001) Uncertainty Avoidance Index indicates how some cultures have a higher tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity compared to others that are more rule-bound and inflexible. These differences in cultural dimensions certainly manifest for Koreans in Malaysia.

Other theorists complicate the universalism of the "time of modernity" being characterized by speed and simultaneity by citing "the times *in* modernity." Keightley notes that both need to be conceived as "mutually constitutive" (2012, 9). Thus, the multiple ways that time is lived today need not be *ppalli-ppalli,* regimented by clock-time, or be universal, as it depends on the social context and individual relations. While globalization and rapid advancements in technology in the 21st century leading to time-space compression have established a monochronic cultural understanding as the global standard, with speed and spatial flows dominating expectations, geographers acknowledge uneven chronotopes of modernity and development. This unevenness is always relative to each other (hence the 'power' in power chronography) rather than remaining as static unchanging planes between nations and/or cultures as they modernize.

First, a brief word about methodology. My data derives from a larger project that included hour-long semi-structured interviews with fifty Koreans concentrated in the Greater Klang Valley around Kuala Lumpur and the sleepy beachside town of Kota Kinabalu, in Sabah, East Malaysia between 2014 to 2021. This is supplemented with news articles about Koreans living in Malaysia and Korea. I began interviewing students in my university and Korean restaurant operators, then, through snowball

sampling, included students' parents and larger contacts in the community. Some are quite random through my own networks. Participants aged between 16 and 65 were asked to narrate their migration experience: prior knowledge about Malaysia before moving, reasons for migration, settlement, issues and feelings about adaptation, duration of stay, and future plans. Teenagers below 18 were interviewed simultaneously with their parents or an older sibling. Findings from the 2014–2015 interviews suggested that cultural differences in temporal attitudes was a common factor. Thus, later interviews shifted to focus on questions about happiness and *ppalli-ppalli,* such as the case studies here. The interview format provided some respondents an opportunity to reflect on their identity as Koreans in encountering new situations and people; yet with the understanding that this identity is not essentialist but open to transformation in their worlding (Collins 2018). Suffice it to say that attitudes towards slowness were heterogenous and depended on age and profession as well as context. Due to the random and small sampling, the views expressed here are in no way representative of the whole Korean population in Malaysia. In fact, several respondents are outliers who mix more with Malaysians while the "typical Korean" (represented by the *gireogi*/goose mother[7]) tend not to mix.

The next section discusses Korean attitudes towards developmentalism by way of explaining why Koreans might find it hard to adapt to Malaysia, and then show Koreans' responses and what resources are needed in order for them to adapt to their north-to-south inter-Asian migration.

Korean Attitudes about Developmentalism

Power chronography is evident in Korean attitudes towards developing nations. The average relative back in Korea regards moving to a developing nation (*hujinguk*, a backward country) in Southeast Asia as a step down the

7. "Goose mothers" refers to Korean women who accompany their children to a foreign country for their education while their husbands continue to work in Korea.

social and temporal hierarchy (a sign of downward mobility).[8] The region is often associated with low GDP, unhygienic conditions, risk and insensibility to safety, incapacity and irresponsibility, corruption, disorder, poverty, nonsense, and inefficiency (J. Kim 2018). This is especially crucial for Koreans, as according to Kim Jongtae, the national obsession is for Korea to be a *seonjinguk* (an advanced or fully developed country). A *seonjinguk* is defined as a country that is progressive and developed in the fields of the economy, politics, and culture, that is technologically advanced, efficient, productive, and corruption-free. Following stage theory "which transforms spatial differences into a temporal hierarchy" (J. Kim 2018, 22), Korea sees itself as almost a *seonjinguk* but not quite when it compares itself (and it does so constantly) to Western countries and Japan, which it emulates (J. Kim 2018). At the same time, Koreans regard Malaysia as temporally behind on this hierarchy, as still a *hujinguk*. This colors the perception of Koreans in Korea about Malaysia until they come to Kuala Lumpur to visit their relatives and discover that Malaysians don't live "in the jungle" and are not backward, as my subjects tell me with slight embarrassment.

Citing Tikhonov, Kim Jongtae reminds us that stage theory is underscored by social Darwinism as the processes of social evolution are often depicted as a succession of distinct stages moving from primitivism, savagery, and barbarism to civilization; such ideas "influenced Korean thinkers who justified their pursuit of national power and survival, and of 'civilization', [and] the 'fittest status'" (J. Kim 2018, 33). Social Darwinism requires competition in order to distinguish between winners and losers, and a spirit of competition might partially explain why Koreans have the longest working hours among OECD countries (Tudor 2012, 310). Working hard and being *lazy* or *slow* are perceivably cultural national traits and temporalities that can map onto an ethnic and international hierarchy. This then allows Koreans to feel superior to darker-skinned Southeast Asians—Malays, Indians, Filipinos (D. Kim 2016)—but not Chinese, whom they regard as their cultural equals due to the shared ideology of Confucianism, and who may also provide business competition for them (Abd Hamid et al.

8. See interviews with TB (2015), WY (2014) and Young Jae (2017).

2019).

Modernity entails not only the kinds of industrial and technological advancements and economic growth that have propelled South Korea from poverty after the Korean War into becoming the eighth wealthiest country in the world. Modernity is also associated with expectations of first-world rapidity or "celerity" (Chung 2003) and efficiency: of what two Korean men I interviewed described as having good "infra" (fastest Wi-Fi/broadband speed in the world, being able to access services and information at a tap, a swipe or a quick scroll on one's smartphone). In comparison to Korea, Malaysia has bad "infra." They further elucidated that in Malaysia there was no mobile app for locating restaurants and food delivery; public transportation was bad due to poor urban planning; and most of all, services were poor and slow.[9] When asked what they found difficult to adapt to in their migration, one Korean just said flat out, "the waiting."[10]

Used to an Enlightenment positivist rationalist attitude towards time, introduced by the Japanese via the modern railway system and clocks in Korea at the turn of the 20th century (Choe Kyujin 2008 in Maliangkay 2020), my informants observed that Malaysians had a problem with punctuality. Malaysian colleagues' lax timekeeping was a source of resentment for Korean expatriates, especially since they were not penalized for it (Dastane and Willis Lee 2016, 39). In fact, many Korean businesses I interviewed expressed frustration with delivery persons not being on time. The Malaysian common expression, "On the way," meant to reassure was instead a source of further aggravation due to its unclear and imprecise nature with regards to duration and detail. Observing punctuality is but one manifestation of the rationalist attitude towards time, for underlying punctuality is the idea that time is a precious good that should not be wasted, that time should be spent productively and that individual productivity enacted through time can eventually result in collective

9. Pro golfer, interview by author, Solaris Mont Kiara, Kuala Lumpur, November 27, 2014; Eddie, interview by author, Solaris Mont Kiara, Kuala Lumpur, November 27, 2014. Things have progressed since then with several food delivery apps becoming highly popular during the COVID-19 lockdowns.
10. TB, interview by author, Kota Kinabalu, August 15, 2015.

national good. Ironically, modern systems of timekeeping and punctuality were introduced to Korea by the Japanese at the early part of the turn of the 20th century to discipline the "natives" who were portrayed as "lacking in diligence and interest in progress" and to bring them up to speed with global time (Maliangkay 2020). For Koreans, by the 1920s, "[p]unctuality became associated with modernity, with social mobility, and successful business practice" (Maliangkay 2020, 11). In the second half of the 20th century, Koreans I interviewed point to their country's rapid economic success, its rise from the ashes of the Korean War to being an OECD nation in 1996, as a testament to this belief and practice.

Koreans are so accustomed to a culture of celerity that *ppalli-ppalli* has become a national trait about doing things quickly. Not merely a value, *ppalli-ppalli* is "a constituent modality of operation" (Chung 2003, 70). Jae A. Chung defines the *ppalli-ppalli* syndrome as "the problem with celerity" and sees celerity (or rapidity) as a specific Korean cultural tempo that "has a thick social imaginary particular to the narrative of Korea's history and modernity" (2003, 4). In Korea's recent history of rapid economic growth, *ppalli-ppalli* was popularized during the Park Chung-hee era in building the national economy (Chung 2003; Maliangkay 2020) in order for Korea to become a *seonjinguk*. In the more recent past, *ppalli-ppalli* is fostered by digitalization, globalization and time-space compression, resulting in expectations of instantaneity and celerity. Chung, for example, discusses the interconnectedness of celerity as a Korean cultural tempo with the venture capital and venture market that emerged after the financial crisis of 1997 to 2002 to argue that *ppalli-ppalli* and celerity reflected an anxiety to keep up with globalization and to be coeval with the West by adopting capitalist neoliberal economic reforms.

More importantly, Chung tells us that "[t]he time of *ppalli-ppalli* reveals an anxiety about the [sic] permanence; the temporal horizon of a future is unstable and contingent. The form of its structural organization is not, in fact, cyclic, calendrical, or even abstract; it is organized around a more impermanent set of a future horizon" (Chung 2003, 74). In other words, the future horizon is one that keeps shifting, and the ideal national or social subjectivity is constantly in a process of becoming; never stabilized or fixed.

At this juncture I want to make the linkage between temporality and emotion: the unsecured and unstable future causes present anxiety, which then sees Koreans trying even harder to secure a future of happiness (defined as economic stability and social prestige or success). But in the race to attain future happiness (for their families and children), much has to be sacrificed in the present: parents work until late at night to pay for their children's education, children who slave away at *hagwon*s (private academies) until midnight hardly see their fathers (a trope that emerges from my interviews with Korean students about the fate they escaped[11]); Korea has the highest teenage suicide among OECD countries, and stress is high due to the competition to get into good schools and universities (Tudor 2012). Moreover, bleak job prospects after graduation, and soaring home prices (S. Kim 2021) suggest ample reasons for a desire to leave, driving young Korean graduates to look for opportunities abroad, including permanent residence.[12] Thus, although not their expressed reasons for migration, Koreans who move away from Korea are leaving behind stress, "socio-economic polarization, egoism, material fetishism, success-ism, a lacking leisureliness, high suicide rate, and low happiness," characteristics attributed to the nationalist obsession with developmentalism (J. Kim 2018, 196).

Worabael (워라밸) and *Sohwakhaeng* (소확행): Work-life Balance and Small but Certain Happiness

Competition, *ppalli-ppalli* culture and high levels of stress have spurred a backlash. This is evident in the discursive shifts "from hypergrowth

11. Florence, interview by author, Skype, September 4, 2017; David Lee, interview by author, Skype, September 5, 2017.
12. "Koreans Are Leaving Korea," *Korea Times*, January 19, 2016, http://www.koreatimesus.com/koreans-are-leaving-korea/ (accessed February 26, 2022). Indeed, a middle-class man who could not afford to buy an apartment says, "I don't think I have a future now and even feel sometimes I don't want to carry on anymore …Seriously, I wish my children could just grow up and live in another country" (S. Kim 2021).

functionality to quality of life" (Tudor 2012, 216), and to achieving happiness. In the same vein, several popular and academic books on Korea end by discussing the unhappiness of South Koreans. In *Because I Hate Korea*, a bestseller by journalist Jang Kang Myoung (2015), the twenty-something protagonist whose life goal is to migrate to Australia concludes that most Koreans saved and stored their happiness too much for the future while she needed a balance between cash flow happiness and asset happiness. Daniel Tudor in *Korea: The Impossible Country* (2012) also ends his book by asking the question of whether Korea is able to achieve its third miracle (of climbing up the Global Happiness Index)—the first miracle being economic and the second, democratic (with the overthrow of the military dictatorship in 1987). So popular is the discourse of happiness in Korea that the former president, Park Gyeun-hye, ran on a campaign promise to increase happiness for all Koreans. Her "Government 3.0" plan showed an official acknowledgement that happiness was lacking in the nation and needed to be addressed. Her successor President Moon even made a visit to Bhutan, touted as the "World's Happiest Nation," to discover how to formulate policies that contribute to Koreans' overall happiness.

In the search for happiness, Kim Jongtae envisions an alternative modernity that redefines being an advanced nation not only by its wealth but also by progress in improving the quality of life, including more leisure time. For him, a true *seonjinguk* "at this historical point may be a country that can warmly care about people, things and values that have been marginalized thus far amidst developmental obsession with the growth of nation and capital. Thus, it is a country where humanity is full, leisureliness is widespread, and people are living satisfied with their own lifestyles…" (J. Kim 2018, 196). Some of these ideas are gradually making an impact on officials. The Moon government introduced a series of labor reform policies, acts and amendments to address concerns about work-life imbalance, though early results are negligible. Meanwhile on the ground, *worabael*—a portmanteau of the English words "work-life balance"[13]—reflects a changing

13. Deepest thanks to Kyounghee Moon for bringing this word to my attention during the discussion after the panel presentation, "The Lives of Korean migrants" at the Asian

mindset among predominantly 20-to-30-something Koreans in Korea with regards to the need to succeed (via intense competition) in a highly competitive and stressful society. This changing mindset shifts the priorities from a valuing of the collective (national) and following social rules of conformity (peer pressure) to incorporating notions of individual happiness. In mid-2018, the Korean word, *sohwakhaeng* (소확행), to mean "small but certain happiness" was reported as an online trend as young Koreans, giving up on achieving the conventional dreams of marriage, job and economic stability, and housing ownership, directed their happiness at small daily rituals that are less costly (Chingu 2018). For those who can afford it, happiness may lie over the ocean.

Coping With "The Slow Thing"

This section includes interviews with several students; Mrs L, a retiree and former Korean language teacher; Mrs. H, a retiree who plays golf and gives Korean students French lessons; Young Jae, an academic married to a Malaysian; Ji Yeon, a former flight attendant turned YouTuber who has a Malaysian spouse; and a Korean-American businessman. These characters are cosmopolitan in that they socialize with non-Koreans or have an open attitude towards cultural difference due to their life experience. However, attitudes towards slowness also depend on age, where one is in one's life course, context (whether work or leisure), and one's occupation and its attendant frequency of encounters with slowness.

For example, students who had migrated to Malaysia as young as 6 were more adaptable than adults and were too young to conceive of slowness. But as high school or university students reflecting on their time in Malaysia, they were grateful for their relaxed schedules and education in comparison to relatives and friends in Korea: "I feel that studying in Malaysia has made me who I am now. About that part I have no regrets. Actually, I wouldn't really want, if I get married and have kids someday, I

Studies Association of Australia conference at Sydney University, July 4, 2018.

wouldn't want them to grow up in Korea. Stress and the whole society, the social atmosphere."[14] That said, teenagers growing up in relatively less developed East Malaysian towns such as Kuching during the early 2000s or Kota Kinabalu in 2015 found life to be boring as there were not as many attractions like theme parks, concerts, and hang out places for young people.[15] Seventeen-year-old HYB explained that "food there, buying some clothes—shopping things … everything is convenient in Korea, facilities, public transport, is easier for teenagers. KK is not suitable for teenagers, there are limited things to do and enjoy." As he also had relatives in Korea, he found it "more comfortable and convenient to live there."[16] Ambivalence is present because while he acknowledged that a quiet town like KK allowed him to focus on his studies without distractions, he also couldn't wait to leave. After university he hoped to make Korea his work-base as an airline steward.

Korean retirees in their sixties however value a leisurely slow-paced lifestyle after decades in a stressful career or raising children. Longtime resident Mrs. L, whose adult sons had been schooled in Malaysia, said with age she had become more relaxed. She preferred Malaysian customer service because she deemed Korean customer service where "they are trained to serve customers at their best" to be "emotional labor." Thus "she would rather get spilled coffee on the saucer, something unimaginable in Korea, because it shows they are not stressed."[17]

Contexts whereby Koreans experience slowness include government processes, banking, and when obtaining licenses and permits (Abd Hamid et al. 2019). These anxious instances put them in *heteronomous* times (Cwerner 2001), when they have no control over when they would get their travel documents back, or how long before they could obtain a license to operate their business legally (Abd Hamid et al. 2019). Notwithstanding Mrs. L's tolerant disposition about café service, which could be attributed to

14. David Lee, interview by author, Skype, September 5, 2017.
15. WY, interview by author, Skype, November 7, 2014; HYB, interview by author, Kota Kinabalu, August 20, 2015.
16. HYB, interview by author, Kota Kinabalu, August 20, 2015.
17. Mrs. L, interview by author, Ampang, Kuala Lumpur, May 21, 2019.

her 25-year-long stay, she too expressed frustration with the inconvenience of visa processing,[18] a common complaint among expatriate retirees as noted by Wong and Musa (2015). Likewise thirty-year old Ji Yeon explained her frustration with "the slow thing": visa processing took many months of going back and forth whereas "in Korea, everything you can do just [by] desktop."[19] Perhaps implicitly the technological immediacy and expediency that she is accustomed to back in Korea relies on trust and public confidence in abstract ideals like "the banking system" or "the nation," which subsumes and subordinates personal relationships and individuals, whereas conceivably, Malaysians, having little faith in their institutions and systems (Toh 2017),[20] prefer face-to-face transactions where they can develop rapport with and hold accountable the physical person that they see and know by name, whose body language they can read (Fusion n.d.). Ji Yeon admitted that the reason she was aggravated by slowness was precisely because her Korean experience taught her how fast it could be to expedite paperwork. "You know? How useless thing it is what I'm doing in Malaysia, why I feel frustrated. But my husband is okay. He's like, 'Welcome to Malaysia.'" Clearly having a supportive and good-humored local spouse helped to alleviate the stress. Ji Yeon then touched on Korea's exceptional hypercelerity by saying that in her travels in Europe, she had the sense that despite being "developed countr[ies]" they were not as fast as Korea: "I think just Korean people are crazy, like too fast. Rushing. I think that's why Korea is too fast, maybe. But maybe Malaysia is also okay."[21] Her perception of Europe being slower than Korea critiques Levine's simplistic idea of temporal differences between fully industrialized and developing nations.

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18. Mrs. L did not understand the rationale behind annual renewal of student visas.
19. I interpret "by desktop" to mean contacting someone through technological means: online, by email, chat bots, phone, that can be done at the desk instead of face-to-face meetings which require travel time (see Dastane and Willis [Lee 2016, 40]); and also Paul, interview by author, Kuala Lumpur, January 8, 2019.
20. The Edelman Trust Barometer, which measures trust across four institutions—government, business, media and NGOs—varies from year to year. Toh's article is referenced as its explanation for why trust is lacking still pertains despite the change of governments.
21. Ji Yeon, interview by author, Microsoft Teams, March 9, 2021.

Unlike Ji Yeon, Young Jae, a 39-year-old male academic, noted how in the initial years he kept losing his temper at the sheer inefficiencies of everyday life. He was more impatient and had to restrain himself from imposing what he thought was reasonable and correct on the Malaysian way of doing certain things. He believed that humans were fully formed by the time they reach adulthood and at the age of 35 upon his landing, did not expect to be changed. Instead, even though he "wanted to adapt very well to Malaysia" perhaps he regarded the process to be a layering of new experiences that would not pose an existential challenge to his identity. Hence, up to his third year and even at the time of the interview (his fifth year) he found it difficult: "Day by day, year by year, I realized there are many differences." And because he could not change Malaysia, he reasoned, he had to change who he was. Thus, his strategy in dealing with slowness was a mind shift. Often, slowing down affords time for self-reflection and even raises existential questions. Young Jae, when asked what he would miss if he were to return to Korea, said he would miss the time that he could waste in Malaysia: "I think I'm going to miss it. … For me this is very meaningful, because in Korea if you waste your time, it means that you have to feel guilty." He was lying in bed beside his Chinese Malaysian wife that morning before the interview staring out at the passing rain clouds: "I told myself maybe, I cannot have time to see the sky at 8 am in the morning, in Korea. In Korea, morning is rushing time. Not only on the public road, but even in the house. Because anyhow, you need to reach your company by 9." He went on to describe how being in Malaysia made him feel: "But usually every morning when I wake up, I feel so relaxed. I'm not rushing. And I can come back to my home at any time if I want to if I don't have class."[22]

His narrative above wrestles time away from the nation and the company to reposition it as individualistic and tied to personal happiness, one which merited salary sacrifice as he was quick to point out. But the payoff meant that slowness "sharpen[s] the resolution of our present experience of being-in-the-world rather than allowing the speed and flux of life to carry us away" (Tomlinson 2007, 152). Hence, living in Malaysia

22. Young Jae, interview by author, Skype, July 7, 2017.

allows some Koreans to drop out of a competitive society and to experience time for its own sake, and in the present: Young Jae lying in bed at 8 am, having a relaxed schedule as an academic in Malaysia compared to his career in the IT industry back in Korea, without the rushed perfection of *ppalli-ppalli*[23] or the constant measuring of time as productivity (and experiencing guilt for not using time to labor), or the need to enact the future.

Slowness is acceptable in a leisure context. For example, "with golf, all you get is time"[24] and the chance to de-stress and go at an unhurried pace. But on busy days on Malaysian golf courses, 57-year-old Mrs. H explained that she may not get to start on time for her booking because the people ahead of her haven't finished. Yet she is ambivalent about time discipline. While recognizing punctuality as a form of social courtesy that also benefits economic productivity, in this case she appreciates Malaysian rubber time, which is kinder on beginner players and those who take their time. This is because in Korea, golfers who slow down others have their names called out via loudspeaker. They are then essentially shamed into hurrying up and moving on.[25]

The workplace can also bring Koreans into encounter with Malaysians and others, thereby shaping and complicating attitudes towards time. At the local public university where Mrs. L taught, time was strictly regulated through timetables, deadlines, and penalties. But for the local, mostly Malay administrative staff there, Mrs. L perceived the system of hour-long breakfasts after clocking in (as opposed to corporate breakfast meetings) and going home early during the fasting month as a form of in-built work balance. In Korean corporate and business culture, the Malaysian leisurely attitude towards time can be a source of tension or frustration.[26] Dastane

23. That said, the *ppalli-ppalli* attitude was blamed for neglecting public safety with regards to the Sewol ferry disaster.
24. Todd Rhinehart, Vice President of PGA Tour and Executive Director of CIMB Classic, interviewed by Daryl Ong, on Nightshift S2 E44: CIMB Classic 2018, BFM 89.9. The Business Radio Station, October 6, 2018, https://www.bfm.my/podcast/night-shift/bar-none/bn-cimb-classic-2018.
25. Mrs. H, interview by author, Great Eastern Mall, Ampang, Kuala Lumpur, May 24, 2019.
26. KJ, interview by author, Mont Kiara, Kuala Lumpur, May 29, 2019.

and Willis Lee's Korean expats who cut short their assignment in Malaysia partially reflect an inability to accept Malaysia's routine multicultural accommodation of the Muslim majority at the workplace; for them such cultural differences clash with the Korean habit of time productivity (2016).[27] Their rigid unitemporality is unable to include multitemporalities or heterogeneous rhythms that are an accepted norm of a multicultural society like Malaysia. That the expats also express their perception of Malaysian corporate culture as causing chaos and disharmony to the Confucian and authoritarian framework of Korean corporate culture reinforces the idea that unity and harmony can only emerge from ethnic homogeneity.

Lastly, profession and life course dictate how one treats time and happiness. For Korean-American businessman Paul, the need to enact the future is something that was central at that time and place of his life during the interview in January 2019: "Happiness is setting and achieving goals." These included family, work, and spirituality, in that order. An ambitious go-getter, he saw the potential for his KL-based Korean cosmetics company to expand in Southeast Asia. Paul had chosen Malaysia four years prior to the interview precisely because he deemed it a modern and technologically advanced place to grow his business: English-speaking, multicultural, urban, and geographically strategic. For him, "living in Malaysia is all about the future." But his Malaysian staff didn't seem to agree: "In my weekly meeting notes for my staff, I write 'SENSE OF URGENCY,' like, this is what we do in our job, this is our future. The harder I work, the more rewards I get that the future is very, very important." For Malaysians "to work at the world's pace, you need to speed things up a little bit." As a businessman Paul had economic targets to achieve and was constantly projecting into the future. Business dealings in which local speed is not commensurate with global celerity make Malaysia less competitive and could spell possibly negative outcomes for the national economy as foreign companies may leave and shift to other countries that will give them a competitive edge.

27. Frequent prayer breaks and having to accommodate a halal diet (no pork, no alcohol) were cited as a source of frustration.

However, despite being speed-motivated for work, Paul also did not condemn slowness as he too related it to happiness. "Malaysians seem happier," whereas:

> People living in Korea, they're not happy. They don't look happy. Now statistically, I was thinking where does Korea come in? Korea is the top 5 in the world for alcoholism, suicide, divorce; really, it's true. Why? Because everything is *ppalli-ppalli*; "oh, I got no time, no."
>
> And what is true happiness? […] Is it drinking every night till 3 in the morning and going back to work at 7? Or is it just living like the Malaysian people and… "It's okay *lah*, no problem!" Huh? What is happiness?[28]

Paul's rhetorical questions insinuate that long work hours and stress lead to high divorce rates and coping mechanisms like alcoholism (Singh 2017). When I raised the point that some respondents found it strange to even talk about happiness,[29] Paul explained that Koreans do think about happiness but define it differently, "Success is happiness. Success as in terms of a promotion, finances, things like that." In other words, happiness is defined as material achievement, what Kim Jongtae calls "successism," which may be accompanied by luxury product consumption or "material fetishism" to mark status (J. Kim 2018, 196). Bauman describes the consumerist syndrome as valuing novelty over lastingness and being "*all about speed, excess and waste*" (2005, 84, emphasis in original). Longer term migrants, being away from the social pressure to conform to an environment where binge drinking and conspicuous consumption are the norm, express relief living in Malaysia. Ji Yeon who worked for an airline company for three years before the COVID-19 layoffs, stopped purchasing handbags she could hardly afford as her Malaysian friends thought it was a waste of money. She

28. Paul, interview by author, Kuala Lumpur, January 8, 2019.

29. "Koreans never satisfied. Even when everything is okay, we basically looking for improvement, how can we be better… usually [here we are] happier than in Korea but still… Koreans don't ever say 'I'm happy.' Never" (Mr. P, interview by author, Taman Desa, Kuala Lumpur, December 19, 2017).

was attracted to her boyfriend (now husband) because as a Muslim, he did not drink alcohol or frequent karaoke bars.[30]

But perhaps if happiness is defined subjectively as life satisfaction, can conditions be fostered to produce less stress and more happiness? As a start, a slower pace instead of *ppalli-ppalli*, prioritizing time with the family instead of at work, and achieving work-life balance seem to be some of the conditions. Weighing up the frustrations and joy of migrating to Malaysia, Ji Yeon said: "Even though everything is slow here I am very satisfied." This was because her quality of life was good here compared to in Korea. "Everyone here is so chilled so I also, compared to last time, I became very chilled." She further added that Malaysians prioritized family whereas in Korea "everything is work. It's very difficult to see parents. Because they are working too hard, you know, that kind of thing. And I also have to work very hard. Like when I think back when I was in Korea, I was all like competition and work. I always studied—that kind of thing right. Here I don't have that kind of stress. I'm happy with my RM2000 salary [starts laughing]. I can survive!"[31]

Finally, returning to Mrs. L, I asked her what she thought about *sohwakhaeng* and whether she was happy. The interpreter explained that "the reason the family decided to live in Malaysia is because they can find that small but certain happiness around them, every day. […] Malaysia seems like it can provide [them] with the small happiness that they want and that they can easily find around here. And so that's why that kind of small happiness like dot-to-dot happiness continues until now for 25 years when she's living here." Mrs. L finds *sohwakhaeng* in her everyday surroundings in Ampang, a relatively green residential area about 15 minutes' drive from the city center where the first wave of Koreans settled among Malaysians and other expats of varying nationalities in the 1990s. She liked that she could live close to the modern city (KLCC, skyscrapers) and yet come home

30. Ji Yeon, interview by author, Microsoft Teams, March 9, 2021.

31. Ji Yeon, interview by author, Microsoft Teams, March 9, 2021. RM2000 (USD477) excludes her husband's income and for a young married childless couple of a two-income household, is sufficient for now but would not be enough to give her children international schooling when the time comes.

within a few minutes to a green suburb where

> …from time to time there were fireflies that came to her house. Compared to Korea where people live in grey boxes, this is green and nice […] That's the reason she decided to stay on in Ampang rather than moving to Mont Kiara [a newer Korean-dominated suburb further away of mostly high rises]—she can sit at a kopitiam [open-air coffee shop] here … and watch people, for RM2. … She goes to kopitiam very often with her husband. They go there to taste *teh tarik* [pulled tea], very cheap, *teh si* [milk tea], see neighbors. Currently it's Ramadan and around 5 pm they go and buy fried noodle, nasi lemak, fish … in Solaris and Mont Kiara she would have problems with parking, be surrounded by Koreans.[32]

This scenario of everyday happiness is reliant on a modest lifestyle that is the strategy of some long-staying affluent Korean migrants who are integrated into everyday Malaysian lifestyle and culture: finding little pleasures in drinking two ringgit (USD 0.50) local tea or coffee at a Chinese coffee shop instead of at Starbucks and buying food from the Malay outdoor bazaar which some Koreans would regard as unhygienic. One might argue that financially, gender and age-wise, she is well-placed to enjoy small but certain happiness. But it is also attitude that allows the migrant on visa time to mark the small present moments rather than look anxiously towards the uncertain future for happiness. Taking up her analogy of "dot-to-dot happiness," if *sohwakhaeng* were small beads on a string, perhaps having these beads as close to each other as possible is all one can hope for in life.

Conclusion

To conclude, this paper has mostly dealt with two definitions of time that affect the South Korean migrant's happiness in Malaysia: a slower pace of life, and the lack of punctuality. Both these national temporal habits affect Korean migrants in complex, sometimes contradictory ways as they balance

32. Mrs L, interview by author, Ampang, Kuala Lumpur, May 21, 2019.

their decision to migrate to a slower place in search of happiness with a desire for the speed of modernity: for example, many who choose to settle in the sleepy seaside town of Kota Kinabalu had grown up in urban cities and sought a quieter, more laidback place. However, one man joked that the internet speed was so slow that "that's why [he] quit porno!"[33] Daily slowness is discernible in having to wait for long at the airport baggage carousel, or for a bus that seldom arrives on time. It is acceptable on tourist or leisure time but not on work time. Young Koreans who spent their lives studying and living in Malaysia unexposed to Korean time and efficiency complain less about Malaysian temporality and only on occasion note boredom as a feature. Meanwhile their parents and other adults struggle with "the problem of celerity" and its affective and bodily impact in adapting to cultural and national differences. Strategies for coping with the lack of punctuality and Malaysian rubber time, or the time-consuming inefficiencies of government services include adjusting one's mindset to be more tolerant, calling on reserves of patience, and acknowledgement of having to adapt to the host society and culture since one had chosen one's migration destination.[34] Accepting the host society's strangeness serves one's mental well-being better though it requires making constant adjustments and mental shifts. Adaptation also came easier for those who were already cosmopolitan (open to accepting different cultures[35]), better integrated and localized, who had a predisposition and desire for slowness. For others, since "[migration] involves a process of becoming and of becoming other through circulation" (Collins and Shubin 2017, 29), encountering difference also en-worlds or cosmopolitanizes the Korean mobile subject, so that they could articulate their self-transformation from past to present.

What the narratives of ambivalence towards timekeeping and slowness above highlight is that Koreans do not reject speed in itself but its excess (hyper celerity) in economic development that hinged on the abandonment

33. TB, interview by author, Kota Kinabalu, August 15, 2015.

34. Mrs. L, interview by author, Ampang, Kuala Lumpur, May 21, 2019.

35. For example, Mrs. H, having lived in Japan, Dubai, Sri Lanka, and Indonesia previously, found Dubai to be slower than Malaysia (Mrs. H, interview by author, Great Eastern Mall, Ampang, Kuala Lumpur, May 24, 2019).

of family time, the reduction of leisure time, and a disregard for human(e) temporality. Speed, after all, has positive connotations too of vitality and dynamism (Tomlinson 2007). Within Malaysian modernity, they expect the speed of efficiency (in services, delivery) nor are they against competition as they recognize its inherent value for individual and social improvement. They understand the necessity of speed depending on circumstance and place, and reiterate the necessity to adjust to multitemporalities, depending on the social circumstances of their daily lives, whether in Malaysia or back in Seoul. Korean emigration in the millennium signals the unsustainable push for national growth that confronts any advanced capitalist economies in global times, one that necessitates and asks for a socially durable temporality and pace of life to be sacrificed. In that way, the temporal adjustment they must make may be a universal lesson about the rejection of a vicious kind of capitalism, or at best, a story about human survival in migratory times.

The slow time of a developing nation, whether beneficial for de-stressing, or aggravating for those naturalized by *ppalli-ppalli* rhythms, is undoubtedly merely one among numerous other factors that figure into whether Koreans stay in the Global South host country. Low living costs, affordable medical care, job opportunities, wanting to be with family, community (offered by the expatriate community or church), the end of one's temporary sojourn and the fulfilment of work and education goals are all critical and have been noted by migration studies scholars. Equally important are government policies. In September 2021, the Malaysian government announced new criteria that would be detrimental to the MM2H program, requiring three to five times higher capital and a reduction of the visa duration from ten to five years.[36] These conditions are vastly unattractive compared to retirement migration schemes in the Philippines and Thailand. It would certainly affect the comfortable temporality of

36. The revised terms and requirements effective from October 2021 include an increase in the minimum monthly income (derived from offshore sources) from RM10,000 to RM40,000, a minimum fixed deposit of RM1million instead of RM150,000 or 300,000, a minimum liquidity requirement of RM1.5million (300% increase), a yearly visa fee of RM500 instead of RM90, and a reduction of the visa duration from ten to five years.

Koreans currently on the program, and discourage future nationals from coming. There is much more work to be done to theorize the kinds of time and timespaces that shape these transnational Korean migrants' lives, their desires, and possible future transnational mobilities where Malaysia is but one node. It is hoped that this preliminary paper on Korean migrant times in Malaysia marks the beginning.

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