



Migrant Conversions: Transforming Connections Between Peru and South Korea

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Migrant Conversions is a rich ethnography of Peruvian migrants in South Korea and the transnational connections they forge both in South Korea and Peru. Anthropologist Erica Vogel uses remarkably compelling storytelling to bring out the complexity of migrant lives across borders. While the book addresses the precarity of their lives due to their undocumented legal status, *Migrant Conversions* highlights the desires and aspirations of migrants for economic mobility and religious piety, and their pursuit of meaningful lives. Within the substantive volume of literature on migration in South Korea, *Migrant Conversions* is unique because of its in-depth attention to migrant-sending communities in Peru and the transnational connections they build through their migrant journeys and after their return. This multi-sited ethnography is thus a valuable contribution to current scholarship, given its vivid narration of migrant agency and meaning-making amidst our global era. Migration from Peru to South Korea may seem like a marginal case in

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terms of both scale and significance, both for Peru as a sending country (where more desirable migrant destinations are the US, Spain, and Japan, and more common destinations are other Latin American countries) and for South Korea as a receiving country (where most migrants come from other Asian countries). Yet, Vogel uses this marginality in creative ways. For instance, she deftly situates this unique migrant pathway in the global landscape. For many Peruvian migrants in this book, their arrival in South Korea was rather accidental and out of convenience since it was one of the few countries that had a visa-waiver agreement with Peru. As with many other migrant workers, Peruvians began arriving in South Korea in the mid-1990s via tourist visas, overstaying to work in factories or other informal jobs like selling accessories on the streets. The number of Peruvian migrants in South Korea, while sizeable compared to other Latin American countries, is rather small, peaking at just over 4,000 Peruvians in the country in the early 2000s (p. 5). In 2003, when South Korea implemented a formal program for temporary labor migration—the Employment Permit System—Peru was not among the list of migrant-sending countries who could receive a work visa. Without access to legal status, Peruvian migrants in South Korea continue to work as undocumented migrants. Deportation can abruptly uproot their lives at any time. They are thus constantly living as if “the end” is near, according to a pastor of a Peruvian migrant church who pronounces that the Peruvian migration to South Korea is over. Against this backdrop unfold the lives of migrants in search of meaning and purpose, and Vogel delves into their journey as a representation of our human condition characterized by precarity and global mobility.

Transnational migration is a deeply transformative experience for the migrants, and Vogel uses “conversions” as a heuristic device to show the multiple layers of such transformations. Conversions here goes beyond the common usage of religious conversion, although the exceptional passion that those Peruvian migrants who converted from Catholicism to evangelical Protestantism (‘Cristianos’) in South Korea upon encounters with South Korean missionaries and churches stands out and permeates every aspect of their lives. In each of the substantive chapters, Vogel takes up

these three dimensions of migrant conversions—monetary, religious, and cosmopolitan—to show how their migrations and subject-making intersect. Vogel effectively demonstrates how their religious conversion—both for Catholic migrants who renew their faith in South Korea as well as those who convert to Protestantism—needs to be understood as an integral part of their lives as a whole, such as compensating for the unstable and declining economic value of their earnings in Korean currency that is bound to the fluctuating “conversion” rates to the US dollar during the financial crisis, transforming their accidental arrival in South Korea into a pre-destined fate from God. Churches also become major sites where migrant workers can assume legitimate positions and even leadership roles, sitting together with diplomats and professionals as equals, thus becoming “cosmopolitan leaders rather than as economic migrants” (p. 86). Their religious conversion in this way is deeply entrenched in their deeper longing for upwardly mobile lives with the resources that the missionaries provide, such as English-language schools for their children and the opportunity to receive overseas missionary training themselves. Furthermore, migrants also engage in cosmopolitan conversions of their own selves beyond the church, by exploring South Korea’s tourist sites and engaging in international marriages.

A unique strength of *Migrant Conversions* is its ability to offer in-depth portrayals of the transformation migrant-sending communities experience from within, especially family members who receive remittances from migrant workers and who take the responsibility of managing sustainable post-migration lives through the latter’s support. These families play a significant role in converting the money sent by migrant workers into capital, upon which the success or failure of migration itself depends. Vogel brings to the fore the power dynamic between the migrants and their family members that is often neglected in the literature. It is indeed rare to find an ethnography that does justice to the migrant-sending communities and how they relate to migrants during and after their migration journeys. In Vogel’s superb storytelling, the interpersonal dynamics among the families and the material transformation of the neighborhood (Norte Chico) come to life for the reader—a brewing contention over the morality of serving alcohol

between Catholic families and a migrant returnee who converted to evangelical Christianity, the new houses and small stores that are being built with remittances, or new kitchen appliances that arrive as gifts but that may not be of practical use to the family members. In these mundane domestic sites, the reader is able to see how financial uncertainty from turbulent global economy plays out, and how the impact of inter-state politics—such as South Korea’s decision to exclude Peru from the official list of migrant-sending countries for its Employment Permit System—is viscerally felt. And it is in these rich and concrete stories that Vogel’s ethnographic skills shine through.

Migrant Conversions is a book that will be of interest to scholars of migration, religion, and transnationalism, in humanities and social sciences. This book enriches the field of Korean studies, putting Peruvian migrants and their lifeworlds front and center. It urges Korean studies scholars to approach the study of contemporary Korea from a different vantage point, asking how a study of urban space like Seoul and transnational spaces like Dongducheon have been transformed and affected by Peruvian migrants. How would Korean society be envisioned differently if we took into account the migrants who, despite the legal exclusion and the pronouncement that “their time is over,” continue to make their presence known and meaningful in churches, factories, streets, and neighborhoods? How would we look at South Korea’s international relations and politics differently, if we paid attention to the unexpected connections between South Korea and Peru forged and transformed by the migrants? Bringing these questions to the fore, *Migrant Conversions* offers an important challenge to Korean studies as well as to any scholar interested in transnational spaces, mobility, and self-making.