

NEAT Working Group on Labour Migration

Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

5-6 December 2007

**Returnees from Immigrant Work in Korea:
Vietnamese Immigrant Workers' Case**

by

Prof Suhong Chae
Chonbuk National University
Republic of Korea

Returnees from Immigrant Work in Korea : Vietnamese immigrant workers' case

Suhong Chae

Professor, Chonbuk National University, Korea

1. Introduction

The increasing attention of immigrant labor in East Asia is deeply associated with rapid development of regional cooperation among East Asian countries, which is symbolized by the pursuit of 'East Asian Community (EAC).' East Asian countries that pursued economic development individually based on the perspective of developmental state began to realize the necessity of regional economic block and regional cooperation after the Asian financial crisis in the late 1990s (Whang 2006:9-24).

The financial crisis made a devastating chain influence on the countries such as Korea, Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia, which confirmed the interdependence of the countries in the region and the need of collective responses to the neo-liberal order dominating world economy. As a result, there have been various levels of meetings and projects for enhancing political, economic, social, and cultural cooperation in the region since 1997. In the context, keen attention is drawn to the issue of immigrant labor that is deeply associated with economic interests, security, and cultural politics in the region.

This paper attempts to interpret the implication of immigrant labor to the regional cooperation in East Asia from an anthropological perspective. In other words, this paper examines immigrant workers' social cultural experiences in both immigrated and home countries and consequently explores their consciousness against or for states, capitals, and people with different nationality. I expect that the socio-cultural interpretation of immigrant workers' transnational experiences and consequent political consciousness provides us an implication for the meaning and future of regional cooperation in East Asia.

For the purpose, this paper deals with the case of Vietnamese returnees who did immigrant labor in Korea in the past and live in Ho Chi Minh(HCM) now.¹ In concrete, this paper first explores Vietnamese immigrant workers' life in Korea. In particular, it examines the political economic conditions under which undocumented Vietnamese workers are produced and their social cultural experiences as undocumented workers in Korea. Second, this paper explores returnees' life at home. In particular, it examines the political economic conditions under which returnees make a living and their social cultural experiences and practices as a returnee at home. Finally, this paper discusses returnees' political consciousness derived from their transnational experiences and its implication for the regional cooperation in East Asia.

¹ From now on, I will call the Vietnamese returnees from the immigrant work in Korea just as returnees in abbreviation.

2. Political economic reproduction of undocumented immigrant workers.

Majority of Vietnamese immigrant workers in Korea live as an undocumented worker sometime during their stay in Korea, which is the case for most of the returnees who I interviewed in HCM. Statistics prove that considerable number of immigrant workers in Korea choose to be undocumented workers during the term of a contract. As of March 2006, foreigners in Korea were around 800,000. Among them, registered foreigners who stayed more than 90 days were 530,000 and undocumented foreigners were at least 100,000 (Vietnamesenews.com 2006.3.31). Around 16 percent of long stay workers were undocumented in March 2006.

<Table 2: Undocumented workers in Korea>

Years	Mar.2002	Feb.2003	Dec.2003	Jan.2004	Dec.2004	June.2005
Numbers	266,000	288,000	97,000	137,000	188,000	197,000

Source: Korea International Foundation 2005:16

Ratio of Southeast Asian among undocumented foreigners in Korea is relatively high since majority of them are immigrant workers. Vietnamese are unexceptional. As of March 2006, approximately 43,000 Vietnamese stayed in Korea and 12,000 (27 percent) were undocumented. The Vietnamese workers who migrated into Korea under industrial trainee system were more inclined to be undocumented ones. At the same period, Vietnamese industrial trainees were around 7,600 and 2,500(32 percent) had illegal visa status (Vietnamesenews.com 2006.3.31). One third of Vietnamese industrial trainees choose to be undocumented workers during the term of a contract and others also have great potential to be ones sometime in the future.

The trend is a great headache for Korean government. Even though they consider the increase of undocumented workers a serious problem, there is no excellent solution to stop it since it is a complicated matter related to human rights, the balance of supply and demand of low waged labor, diplomacy, and national security. The Korean government would argue that they have maintained three basic principles for immigrant workers such as guarantee of human right, supply management of labor market, and prohibition of naturalization, which are obviously not only abstract but also logically incompatible each other. Under the circumstances, the only plausible countermeasures of Korean government have been frequent and extemporaneous change of labor import system.

The most noticeable turn in Korean government's policy on labor import is that Industrial Trainee System (ITS) introduced in 1993 has been replaced by Work-Permit System (for foreign workers) (WPS) since 2004. Under ITS, private organizations were charged of importing and exporting workers. On Korean side, a private organization called 'Korean Federation of Small and Medium Business (Kbiz.)' monopolized the business that imported foreign workers and allocated them into private companies. As a partner, private headhunter companies in foreign countries selected and exported workers to Korea. As a result of transactions between private organizations, there have been many problems such as corruption, worker's desertion, violation of labor codes and so on.

In comparison, the import and export of workers are directly managed by related governments under WPS. When foreign workers arrive in Korea, Korean department of labor allocates them to the factories that submitted application forms.

The Korean government also takes charge of supervising immigrant workers' visa status and working conditions. Many human rights groups in Korea who cried for the introduction of WPS expect the epoch-making decrease of corruption and labor problems and more systemic management of foreign labors.

<Table 3: Industrial Trainee System and Work-Permit System>

	Work-Permit System	Industrial Trainees System
Legal Years of Stay	3 yrs of formal work	Training 1yr+ formal work 2 yrs.
Management Agency	Governments	Private Organization (Kbiz)
Allocation Process	Employers select	Private agent(Kbiz) allocates
Rights	Equal to Korean Workers' rights	Only a part of the Labor Standard Act in Korea
Collateral Conditions	One month of efforts to employ Koreans	None

Sources: Korean Department of Labor(recited from Joongang Daily News Oct. 13. 2004)

As the human rights groups in Korea argue, WPS is actually progressive in several Under WPS, foreign workers become less vulnerable to the control of corrupted personnel on Korean side at least. The foreign workers can now claim rights stipulated by Korean Labor Standard Act. The procedures for immigrant work are much simplified. However, it is still dubious that WPS can radically improve the human rights of immigrant workers and decrease the number of undocumented workers as the Korean government and the human rights groups expect. The kernel of WPS is that it makes the procedures of labor import transparent and at the

same time reinforces legal controls and sanctions to the immigrant workers who violate the term of a contract. As a result, WPS allows both states and managements to surveil immigrant workers more easily and strictly, which might incur much intensified labor control to the workers.

Above all, it is naïve to expect that WPS decreases the number of undocumented workers, which is the case at least for the Vietnamese immigration workers in Korea. The reason is that the reinforcement of transparency and control can not be a fundamental solution for the reproduction of undocumented Vietnamese workers. The root cause of the reproduction is based on the fact that legal work in Korea is not rewarding. Legal work only allows them small amount of money that is left after paying back their debts expended for the procedures of immigrant work. It is not realistic to expect that the Vietnamese immigrant workers would return home with the small amount of money after enduring hard work for several years in a foreign country.

<Table4: Labor Import systems and the salary of Vietnamese immigrant workers>

	Industrial Trainees System	Work-Permit System
Periods	1993-2006	Oct. 2004. -Currently
Numbers	25,000-27,000 (persons)	15,000(persons)
Average Income	around 700 USD a month	700-1,000 USD a month

Sources: summarization from Vietnamese daily newspapers

Vietnamese workers had to expend from 4,500 to 6,000 USD to go to Korea under Industrial Trainee System that had existed until the end of 2006. Even though the expense included 2,000 USD of deposit, few hesitated to be an undocumented worker because of it. If the workers needed to forge some documents, they had to spend additional money of 1,000-2,000 USD.

After the introduction of WPS, total expense that the Vietnamese immigrant workers spend for official procedures is decreasing to 3,000-4,000 USD. However, it is not a secret anymore that they still need to spend more money than the official fees. The workers confess that they spend extra money for an express charge, overcoming bureaucratic huddles, and passing Korean language tests. In addition, extra expenses that the workers do not estimate are usually generated. For example, some workers argued that they were unduly enforced to pay money even to the security guard of the Korean embassy or consulate general in Vietnam to get visa.

The Vietnamese immigrant workers begin with the minimum wage and gradually get a monthly salary between 700 and 1,000 USD so that it takes quite a time to clear the debts of 6,000-7,000 USD that they owed. Returnees recalled that they would liquidate their debts 6 months before finishing their official contract. As a matter of course, if they work 12 hours a day including overtime work to the weekends, the workers can get around 1,000 USD a month and payback their debts within a year. However, it is not easy to endure such a hard work over the long haul. Under the circumstances, the workers cannot but to "escape" from the legal workplace and become an undocumented worker to earn the aimed amount of

money. The workers believe that they deserve not tens of thousands dollars after two or three hard working years and cannot go back home with several thousand dollars.

Under the circumstances, “wiser” workers abscond from a legally authorized workplace as early as possible, if it is necessary to do so sometime in the future anyway. In fact, the sooner they escape, the more they can earn money. The reason is that the wage is higher in illegal market in which immigrant workers can negotiate it with employers. According to the returnees I interviewed, the workers can get the monthly salary of 1,000 - 1,600 USD in the factories that illegally hire immigrant workers. In illegal labor market, higher risk follows; immigrant workers can suffer from overdue wage and employer’s harsh treatment. Instead, they can freely choose and move workplace there until they find a suitable job in the illegal labor market. Most of the workers would pull up stakes several times in illegal labor market, then cast anchor finally in a small factory that maintains a paternalistic management style, and start to save aimed amount of money.

The political economic conditions mentioned so far altogether keep producing and reproducing undocumented Vietnamese workers in Korea. They are a product of complex factors such as high procedural expenses associated with corruption in their home country, low wage system of legal immigrant labor market in Korea, 3 years of limited contract term, relatively higher wage system of illegal labor market in Korea and so on. It is obvious that WPS enhances transparency of labor immigrant procedures and thereby reduces at least formal cost that the immigrant workers have to shoulder. However, the Vietnamese workers still have to

pay other kinds of informal costs for the procedures at home on the one hand and Korean labor intensive industries would not pay more wages easily to them on the other. Under the conditions, the Vietnamese immigrant workers cannot but decide to enter into relatively well-paying illegal labor market to pay debts and have compensation for their hard work and life in Korea.

4. Social and cultural reproduction of undocumented immigrant workers

Majority of Vietnamese immigrant workers in Korea live in Seoul metropolitan area "where more than 65 percent of foreign immigrant workers live together" (Dong-A Daily News 2007.1.30). They form scattered small scale ethnic communities, which is quite a new phenomenon in Korea that has imported foreign labor since the mid-1990s. In Seoul, the most noticeable residential areas for the Vietnamese workers are located near a northeastern industrial complex that is composed of small and medium size factories. Small groups of Vietnamese workers live in the area cheap and convenient for transportation to the industrial complex. In the outskirts of Seoul, more than 2,000 Vietnamese immigrant workers also form small scale residential areas in the cities and counties such as Ma-Suk, An-San, Bu-Cheon, and Ko-Yang (Park, Bae-Kyun 2004).

In this way, the Vietnamese immigrant workers have formed a sort of small scale ghettos. As it is the case in the minority communities around the world, they need to gather together and maintain strong social ties each other to overcome their unfavorable living conditions. As "survival strategies" (R. Rapp 1987; D. Wolf, 1992), the Vietnamese immigrant workers, especially undocumented ones, have compact social networks among relatives, friends, and co-workers. They usually

have informal meetings to exchange information on jobs, residence, and various kinds of problems happened in an alien country.

Undocumented workers have a lot of necessary works that they need to solve informally by the help of social networks developed inside their community. They need the information and cooperation of their relatives and friends to solve difficulties and problems in the contexts of everyday life such as job hunting, remittance, loan, communication with people in Vietnam, and taking care of families at home. Their mutual assistance is also required for their cultural adaptation to Korean society. Most returnees recollected that they could manage life in Korea much easier than they had imagined for the help of the well-developed social networks among the Vietnamese immigrant workers.

Even when the problems they cannot solve within their social networks take place, there are Vietnamese immigrant workers who have connection with or information on Korean civil rights groups or Non-governmental organizations. Especially undocumented Vietnamese workers cannot help asking Korean civil rights groups to give counsel, arbitrate, and fight for them when they have different opinions and serious conflicts with Korean managers on the matters such as salary, working conditions, leave of absence, loss of employment, insurance and industrial accident. Besides, there are some complicated matters in everyday life that they cannot solve for themselves.

As the internal social networks are vital for the life of the Vietnamese workers in Korea, they experience everyday conflicts with fellow-Vietnamese more

than Koreans. Within the Vietnamese immigrant workers' community, someone who provides incorrect information to fellow Vietnamese is seriously accused and various rumors go around to provoke antagonism among them. The conflicts and crimes happened within the Vietnamese immigrant workers' communities create internal distrust and antagonism, which is reflected on the Vietnamese immigrant workers' discourse such as "beware of Vietnamese to live in easy circumstances in Korea." This kind of internal antagonism or distrust is problematic since it distracts the Vietnamese immigrant workers from perceiving various problems and discriminations deeply rooted in Korean culture and society.

Sometimes, the everyday conflicts among the Vietnamese immigrant workers are represented as a social problem beyond their communities. Even though Koreans' unfair treatments to undocumented Vietnamese workers are actually more problematic, Korean media would represent the conflicts between foreigners as a more serious threat to ethnically homogenous Korean society.

The more Vietnamese immigrant workers are undocumented and thereby develop internal social networks, the more their contacts with and experiences on Korean culture and society become superficial. According to returnees' testimony, the (especially undocumented) Vietnamese immigrant workers do not have many opportunities to closely contact Koreans outside workplace. As undocumented workers do in many countries (see P. Kwong 1996), undocumented Vietnamese workers in Korea also do not try to maintain a close relationship with Koreans outside workplace. Insufficient time and money that Vietnamese immigrant workers can enjoy also makes their contact with Koreans superficially.

It is workplace that Vietnamese immigrant workers contact Koreans closely and make conflicts with them in the context of everyday life. They seriously experience Koreans and Korean cultures in the workplace. According to returnees' recollection, the Vietnamese immigrant workers are surprised at competitive labor market, intensity of work, and various ways of controlling work in the small factories where not only Korean owner himself but also one's family members have to work. They also encounter unfamiliar Korean national characters when Korean managers show hot temper in working hours and express warm sympathy for immigrant workers after work all of a sudden. Sometimes, they have extremely negative experiences in the workplace when Korean managers use violence and delay payments intentionally. Even the workers who do not have such a negative experience are usually afraid of Korean managers and cautious not to be victims because they often hear bad cases from fellow immigrant workers. Based on the experiences, direct and indirect, Vietnamese workers produce negative stereotypes of Korean national character mostly in workplace (see Chae 2003: 93-101).

In this way, complex images of Koreans and Korean society are disseminated in the communities of Vietnamese immigrant workers. They believe that Koreans are kind and not discriminative in everyday life and simultaneously aggressive and coercive in workplace. However, most of returnees would recollect that they did not experience special difficulties in Korea derived from Koreans and Korean cultures. This kind of recollection is contrasted with the criticisms that Korean civil rights groups often publicly raise with drastic statistics and cases. The Vietnamese immigrant workers' interpretation is associated with their complex experiences on not only several bad accidents and coercive labor process but also

strict time schedules, social life within their own communities, superficial contact with Koreans on the streets, and so on.

Despite the complex images on Korean culture and society, Vietnamese immigrant workers are afraid of and criticize commonly the problems produced structurally and institutionally. The harshest time that many returnees remembered was when the Korean company they worked went bankrupt. In fact, most of immigrant workers in Korea had difficulty in finding jobs especially around the Asian financial crisis in the late 1990s since many small and medium size companies were bankrupt at that time. In addition, Vietnamese immigrant workers are afraid of periodical changes in immigrant labor policies and express strong antipathy against both Korean and Vietnamese governments. In sum, Vietnamese immigrant workers are very critical on the structural, institutional, and policy-driven problems for which capitalist system and states are responsible, probably more than discriminative practices with ethnic and national characteristics.

5. The political economy of returnees' life

The Vietnamese immigrant workers usually lay up from 3,000-4,000 USD to 7,000-8,000 USD a year in Korea. The differential annual savings result from immigrant status, types of industry, careers, and expenditures. Among around 30 returnees who I met in HCM in early 2007, the person who saved least laid up 12,000 USD for three years only as a lawful industrial trainee. In comparison, there was a man who saved 70,000 USD for eleven years as an undocumented worker. He recalled that he could have saved around 100,000 USD if he had not been swindled 30,000 USD. Considering wage levels in Vietnam, we can say that the returnees laid up

quite an amount of money.

The minimum wage of HCM is 55 USD a month, which was raised recently. In general, factory workers in HCM start from the minimum wage and can get wages increased 7-8 percent annually. The workers in the service sector such as restaurant and café can get around 60-100 USD a month in average. If you return to HCM after working in Korea only as a lawful immigrant worker, you can earn ten years of Vietnamese factory workers' wage in three years. If you work in Korea more than ten years as an undocumented worker, you can save the amount of money that the factory workers in Vietnam have to earn for their lifetime.

Returnees evaluate their assets mostly in terms of real estate they have. Whether or not returnees wisely invested into real estate the money that they earned from immigrant work in Korea mainly decides their wealth. The value of real estate in HCM has rapidly increased since Doi Moi and the returnees who invested saved money into real estate made a fortune to a certain degree. The house at the outer block of HCM that a returnee bought at the price of 7,000 USD is now worth about 50,000 USD. The lands that another returnee purchased at the price of 40,000 USD in 2000 now cost more than twice as much. Among the returnees I interviewed, there was a man who boasted of possessing two houses valued more than 100,000 USD in total.

Compared to the income level of the working class in Vietnam, the values that the returnees acquired from real estate investment are considerable. However it does not mean that they earned enough money to be a higher class or to be quite

well-off for the help of immigrant work since the price of real estate in HCM has been soaring rapidly in general. The houses located at the center of the city are worth of several hundred thousand dollars depending upon size and quality. Nowadays, it is not easy to find houses priced less than 50,000 USD in the city. In addition, there are also many returnees who went to Korea late and invested money into real estate after price already soared enough. There are also some returnees who had to spend all the earned money for families and did not have extra money to invest into real estate. In sum, returnees usually saved big sum of money that ordinary factory workers in Vietnam cannot take possession of in a short period but the money is just enough to buy a house or run a small business in the city.

Market principles introduced by Doi Moi have produced rapid class differentiation in Vietnamese society. Private ownership in business and real estate is not only contributing to rapid economic growth but also increasingly widening gap between the rich and the poor. Under the political economic conditions, it is getting almost impossible for returnees to make a fortune for a lifetime and ascend to higher class by around ten years of immigrant work. In reality, most of returnees have to continue to work for subsistence whether they have real estate or not.

Despite the circumstance, it is noticeable that many returnees are unemployed temporally and periodically. Especially, there are many male returnees whose wives take a role of breadwinner. Their wives work for a company or run a small business such as beauty shop with the money the returnees saved from immigrant work. The unemployed returnees make an excuse that they are too old

to work in a factory and they don't have connection to find a job either since they were away from home for years. However, their excuse is inadequate in that there are many labor intensive factories, both multinational and Vietnamese, that experience labor shortage. As Vietnam joined WTO in the end of 2006, foreign direct investment (FDI) is increasing and many foreign factories move to HCM and other southern regions. As a result, it is getting easier for workers to find a job in the factory.

It seems that many returnees would not work because they are not satisfied with the low wages in Vietnam. They are not adapting well to a new environment where they have to work for a year to earn one month salary in Korea. Not all the returnees are in the state of unemployment, of course. There are also some returnees who work as a factory manager or a skilled worker and get relatively decent wages in comparison with other factory workers. In addition, they cannot but work when they have to support family. For example, unmarried female returnees who are obliged to support their parents and other family members usually continue to work in a factory. However, they also confess that it is painful to accept the reality of extremely low wages. People might say that returnees are spoiled in vanity when they encounter the returnees who cannot accept reality and wander from job to job.

However, it does not seem to be fair that we just blame returnees for their psychological wander and voluntary unemployment. The economic structure of Vietnam is greatly responsible for the returnees' frustration and the discouragement of the will to work. Vietnamese economy has maintained and depended on a low-wage policy for domestic labor market too long. Even though the minimum wage of

big cities such as HCM and Hanoi was recently raised from 40 USD to 55 USD for the first time in six years, the average wage of Vietnamese workers are still lower than even that of Chinese and Indonesian workers(Korean International Labor Foundation 2006:28-30). Besides, despite the raise of the minimum wage, the average income of the workers in labor intensive factories in HCM and its neighboring southern areas has been almost same for 4-5 years. Even though recent raise of the minimum wage is expected to gradually increase Vietnamese workers' average income into 70-100 USD, the long term low-wage policy in Vietnam has discouraged the Vietnamese working class from engaging in labor intensive industrial work. Returnees' voluntary unemployment and psychological wander is deeply associated with the economic situations at home.²

Under the circumstances, most returnees struggle to find a suitable job, feel frustration and experience periodical unemployment. In the process, they actually make a lot of attempts to adapt to new situations at home. Some returnees attempt to run family shops and become self-employed worker with the money that they saved in Korea. Some returnees try to utilize their experiences and connections in Korea and run a business connected to Koreans. The attempts are usually not so successful for the returnees who are low-educated and inexperienced in business as well as having few connections after long absence at home. After failing, they try

² I want to add some explanations not to make misunderstandings of the average income in Vietnam. First, wages in the service sector have been considerably raised in 4-5 years due to the rapid expansion of the sector. The shops in the service sector now pay 1-2 million Dong (66-132 USD, 1 USD=15,000 Dong) monthly to a worker, which was almost half 4-5 years ago. The rate of wage raise is much higher in the companies that hire high-quality human resources. Nowadays, the workers in foreign banks and insurance companies, for example, can get 800-1,000 USD a month in average. Secondly, it is getting harder for labor intensive industries to maintain a low wage system due to the shortage of labor supply.

to work for a factory or a shop in the service sector with patience but it is not so successful either. When every attempt is not so satisfactory, they are eager to go back to Korea. However, most of them found that they are too old to endure intensive immigrant works in Korea. Even if they have a strong will to overcome age handicap, the criminal record that they violated immigration law in Korea becomes a big huddle. Most of all, they are afraid of passing all the bureaucratic procedures at home once again.

6. The social and cultural reproduction of returnees' life

Returnees live in "in-between spaces" (Bhabha 1994). Their behaviors and thoughts are different from what they had before experiencing immigrant work in Korea and also distinguished from those of fellow Vietnamese. Even though they lived in Korea around 10 years, it is hard to say either that they are a part of Korean culture and society.

Most of them are not successfully adapting to the Vietnamese culture and society after 10 years of absence. As many articles on international marriage and foreign spouse in Korea illustrate (see Sooja Lee 2004; H. Y. Lee 2005; H. K. Jeon 2005), returnees construct their subjectivity based on their experiences on cultural hybridity and "becoming Other" at home as well as in Korea. Their subjectivity is being constructed not only based on their transnational experiences but also in newly forming social relations and cultural practices.

Returnees have social networks among themselves. They exchange phone

call frequently one another and have a meeting whenever it is necessary. For the help of the well-developed social networks, I could interview greater number of returnees than I had expected in a relatively short period. In interactions with other returnees, they recall the life in Korea and try to remember and use Koreans. They also tried not to remember bad and discriminative experiences and instead recollected good and nostalgic experiences in Korea that might compensate for their frustrations and mal-adaptations at home.

I was suspicious that they might filter bad memories and garble their memories on purpose because of my Korean nationality. Being conscious of the problem, I usually began my interview with the questions that they could state bad experiences in Korea. For example, I asked the returnees “what was the worst experience for you in Korea?” or “when did you feel Koreans were really bad?” As a result, I could hear various negative stories on Koreans and Korean cultures as well as on their stressful everyday life in Korea resulted from cultural difference. However, interestingly enough, whenever they stated life in Korea negatively, they would make an excuse and added explanations of the reason why those things could happen: This is exactly what Dora (2006) calls as “reflective nostalgia.” They would say, for example, that problems were gradually solved or that they could understand the contexts later.

As two sides of the same token, when they mentioned positive experiences in Korea, the returnees attempted to use Korean vocabularies as a way of emphasizing their arguments and would also compare them with Vietnamese cases. Following their garbled memories, we can get an impression that Korea is an

advanced country basically with clean and convenient public transportations, kind and well-mannered people, beautiful woman and romantic man, and lovely and fun everyday life. The returnees' filtered, garbled and reconstructed recollections can make not only fellow Vietnamese but also Korean intellectuals like me feel embarrassed and perplexed. In Korea, foreign female spouses and immigrant workers are dominantly represented as the repressed, victims of Korean cultures, and potential resisters by media and academics (Lee Hye Young 2005:5-6).

It seems to me that there are notable differences between the Korea they actually experienced and the Korea they recollect after returning home. Returnees' life as a person who lives in "in-between spaces" seems to create such differences. This might be a "politics of nostalgia" (Lavine 2001) – in this case, a kind of reversed nostalgia for a foreign country and the life there – that returnees are engaged in as a way of overcoming their hardships in everyday life at home.

The politics of nostalgia and memory is not the only way that returnees cope with their unfavorable social cultural and political economic conditions at home. As I mentioned already, they seek a way to go back to Korea once more after attempting various solutions for their unsatisfactory situations. There are few returnees who do not consider the possibility of returning to Korea. However, there are only scanty chances that they can go back to Korea legitimately again because of their criminal records in Korea and bureaucratic huddles in Vietnam. To make it worse, some returnees are already older than forty, which is over the age limits for immigrant labor in Korea and others do not have enough money for the procedures of immigrant labor to Korea.

Under the circumstances, some female returnees find a way to be married to Korean man. Among the returnees I met, there are several female returnees who were already married or engaged to a Korean man in Korea. Interestingly enough, some married or engaged female returnees got a verbal or written promise that their husbands allow them to have a job and support their families in Vietnam. Marriage is a way of continuing their immigrant work in Korea for some female returnees (Kim, Huyn Jae 2007; also see Wand and Chang 2002).

As it is not easy to find a way to go back to Korea, some returnees oftentimes attempt to work for Koreans in HCM. It is roughly estimated that 10,000-12,000 Koreans lived in HCM in 2005 (Chae, 2005:120). It is said that Korean residents in HCM are now over 20,000. Since many returnees can speak basic Korean at least, there are some Korean businessmen, mostly small shop owners, who expect returnees to be helpful to communicate with both Korean and Vietnamese customers as well as owners themselves. Some returnees that I interviewed actually had an experience working in the small shops and companies owned by Koreans such as restaurant, trading company, distribution company, tourist company, labor intensive factories and so on.

Unfortunately, most of the returnees are either fired or quit their jobs voluntarily after working several months for Koreans because they usually don't have enough knowledge, experiences, and linguistic capability to accomplish their tasks. As Korean employers and returnees in HCM do not satisfy each other, their sentiments toward each other are not so positive. In particular, returnees have a

great notion that Koreans in HCM are not as good as Koreans in their memory. The Koreans who they contact and make a conflict with in the contexts of everyday are regarded as much worse than the Koreans who they reconstruct in their memories.

The Vietnamese around returnees watch uncomfortably the whole processes associated with both “politics of interests” and “politics of identity” (Lee C. K 1998). They are worried about the returnees who are wandering from job to job and express frustration on Vietnamese society. They are not happy with the fact that the returnees continuously attempt to make a connection with Koreans in vain and just make an unnecessary conflict with Koreans in HCM. Most of all, they feel antipathy toward the returnees who devalue Vietnamese culture and society and overvalue Korean culture and society as if they are not Vietnamese but Korean.

In Vietnam, there are some public discourses that blame Vietnamese girls’ cross-border marriage. In comparison, there are few public discourses that denounce the social and cultural behaviors of returnees who came back from foreign immigrant labor. However, returnees’ friends and family members who maintain close contact with them usually have critical viewpoints of their social and cultural behaviors. At first, when returnees evaluate Koreans and life in Korea positively, their friends and family members recognize it as a production of foreign experiences. Sometimes they even envy returnees’ exotic experiences and their intimate relationship with Koreans. However, it does not take much time to realize that returnees’ nostalgic evaluations of Koreans and life in Korea are not so authentic. By the same token, they soon recognize that the efforts of returnees to maintain close relationship with Koreans are not only unfruitful but also detestable.

In the process, 'socio-cultural distance' between returnees and their close acquaintances is getting wider.

As a way of escaping from their political economic hardship at home, returnees engage in cultural politics to narrow social distance with Koreans. However, contrary to their expectations, the cultural politics they engage in rather alienate themselves not only from Koreans in HCM but also from their close friends and family members. The whole processes are deeply associated with their transnational experiences, 'transnational social practices' (Smith, M. P. 2001:3), and socio-cultural positions in "in-between spaces" (see Walter, Bourgois, and Loinaz 2004).

7. Conclusion

Returnees engage in cultural practices in their changing social relations and as a response to the specific political economic conditions they have in both Korea and Vietnam. Attending to the cultural practices, we can interpret the reasons and processes that returnees have specific sentiments and perspectives on capital, government, and people in each country. The sentiments and perspectives that the people in the middle of human exchanges between countries have are crucial to evaluate East Asian regional cooperation in terms of its real meaning and future.

The case of returnees in this paper shows that immigrant labor is not just an economic activity but also a process to produce people with transnational experiences and living in "in-between spaces." Returnees as a transnational subject interpret their own life and form their political consciousness in the contexts of

everyday life. In other words, we can understand important characteristics of their political consciousness when we attend to the ways that returnees interpret and respond to their own everyday life subjected to specific political economic conditions and social relations.

When Returnees come back home, they find out that they are in significantly different life conditions, which make them wander. There are two conspicuous ways that they respond to overcome their frustrated situations. On the one hand, returnees positively reconstruct their own memories on Korean life to explain their changed life conditions as well as to get comforts. On the other hand, they seek an exit to overcome their hardships by utilizing social relationship and experiences that they acquired from immigrant labor. They try to maintain close relationship with people such as fellow returnees, Koreans in HCM, and friends in Korea who might consider their transnational experiences valuable and provide an alternative to their hard life at home.

Their efforts are not usually successful unfortunately. Despite the returnees' troubled situations, both the Korean and the Vietnamese governments are ignorant to returnees' hardship in life. Both countries are not interested in utilize returnees', in a sense, valuable transnational experiences. They are only interested in managing and controlling migrant labor. Under the circumstances, it is expectable that returnees' resistant consciousness aims to the states that restrict their life with bureaucratic authority. Oftentimes, returnees are more antagonistic to the states that force them to be undocumented workers in a foreign country and maladaptive wanderers at home than capitals that use up their labor to pay money.

By the same token, returnees are critical to nationalistic ideology that states – sometimes civil rights groups too – utilize to control immigrant workers. For example, returnees exactly know that Work-Permit System introduced recently by the Korean government will not achieve its goals as far as the bureaucratic control and corruption of the Vietnamese government continues. They also cast a reasonable doubt that Korean language test included in Work-Permit System is based on the nationalistic idea of Koreans and only makes the procedures of immigrant work more complicated rather than help the communication of foreign workers and Korean managers as it appears. If the Korean government intends to help immigrant workers sincerely, it is better, some returnees argue, to open Korean language classes for immigrant workers in Korea and then provide them opportunities to make use of their Korean language capability at home.

It seems to me that the resistant political consciousness is not derived from the negative interpretation of their immigrant labor and transnational experiences but from immigrant workers' demands for the right to work freely across national boundaries. It is not just capitals but also labor that resist against the huddles to prevent their free movements such as bureaucratic control of states, nationalistic ideology, and cultural discriminations.

The political consciousness that returnees have reveals the problems of regional cooperation pursued by East Asian countries. It implies that human exchanges led by East Asian states and elites are not always consistent with the desires and demands of the working class in the region. Returnees' cultural

practices and related political consciousness show that they are critical of the human exchange and regional cooperation that is state-centered, anti-democratic, and based on authoritative discourses on development. Returnees' such criticism is deeply associated with their demands for "regionalism with human face" (Archarya 2003) that recognizes positive meanings of their transnational experiences.

References

Acharya, Amitav

- 2003 Democratization and the Prospects for Participatory Regionalism in Southeast Asia. Third World Quarterly, Vol. 24/2.

Bhabah, homi k.

- 1994 The Location of Culture. New York: Routledge.

Chae, Suhong

- 2003 Spinning Work and Weaving Life: The politics of production in a capitalistic multinational textile factory in Vietnam. Doctoral Dissertation, Department of Anthropology, CUNY.

- 2004 Socio-economic Differentiation and the Politics of Identity in the Korean Community of the Ho Chi Minh city. Cross –Cultural Studies, Vol. 9/1:103-142

Dora, Veronica Della

- 2006 Rhetoric of Nostalgia: Postcolonial Alexandria between Uncanny Memories and Global Geographies. Cultural Geographies, Vol. 23: 207-238.

Jeon, Hyeong-Kwon

- 2005 Myths of Motherland, Transnational Labor Migrants, and Exit: A Diasporatic Perspectives on the Chinese Koreans. Korean Journal of Northeast Asia, 38: 135-160.

Kim, Hyun Jae

2007 Cross-border marriage between Vietnamese women and Korean men: the Reality and Problems. Korean Journal of East Asian Studies, Vol.52: 219-252.

Korea International Labor Foundation

2005 One Years After Work-Permit System: Policy of Immigrant Labor and Strategies. Seoul: Korea International Labor Foundation Press.

Kwong, Peter

1996 The New Chinatown, New York: Hill and Wang.

Lavine, Amy

2001 The Politics of Nostalgia: Social Memory and National Identity among Diaspora Tibetans in New York City. Illinois: The University of Chicago Press.

Lee, Ching Kwan

1998 Gender and the South China Miracle: Two Worlds of Factory Women. California: University of California Press.

Lee, Hye-Young

2005 Transformation of Married Chosun-Zok (Korean Chinese) Women's Identity in the Experiences of Korean Migration. M.A. Thesis. Ewha Womans University.

Lee, Sooja

2004 Female Migrant Diaspora: International Gender of Labour, Cultural Hybridity, Otherness, and Sexuality. Korean Sociology. Vol. 38/2:189-219.

Park, Bae Kyooun and Jung Keun Hwa

2004 Globalization and the Politics of "Forgetting": A Study on a Foreign Immigrant Community in Wongok-dong, Ansan. Korean Geography of History Vol. 10/4: 800-823.

Rapp, Rayna

1987 Urban Kinship in Cotemporary America: Families, Classes, and Ideology. In L. Mullings, ed. Cities of the United States. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 219-242.

Smith, Michael Peter

2001 Transnational Urbanism: Locating Globalization. Malden: Blackwell Publishers.

Walter, Bourgois, and Loinaz

2004 Masculinity and Undocumented Labor Migration: Injured Latino Day Laborers in San Francisco. Social Science and Medicine, 59: 1159-1168.

Wand, Hong-zen and Chang Shu-Ming

2002 The Commodification of International Marriage: Cross-border Marriage in Taiwan and Viet Nam." International Migration Vol. 40.

Wolf, Diane L.

1992 Factory Daughters: Gender, Household Dynamics and Rural Industrialization in Java. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Whang, In-Won

2006 Expansion of regionalism in Southeast Asia and the perspectives and strategies of ASEAN. A paper presented at a conference co-hosted by the Korean Institute of Southeast Studies and Jaeju University, pp. 29-45.

<Newspapers and Internet sourced data>

Dong-A Daily News 2007.1.30

Joongang Daily News Oct. 13. 2004

Vietnamesenews.com 2006. 3. 31.