THE GLOBAL CONVERGENCE HYPOTHESIS:  
Is Immigration Policy In South Korea Converging Or Diverging With That Of The West?\(^1\)

Background

Recently, scholars have noted the similarities and recognized the convergence of immigration policies in industrialized countries of the West but the scope of analysis has typically excluded South Korea. With its late development, image of ethnic and cultural homogeneity, history of isolation, and resistance to immigration, there were few indications that it would be a migrant destination country before the 1990s. By the mid-1990s however, its economic rise was accompanied by a rapid increase in the number of both short and long-term migrants. By 2011, its foreign resident population reached 1.4 million or 3 percent of the total population, significantly lower than those of migrant receiving countries in the West but a substantial number given its history of ethnic and cultural homogeneity and very short history of migration.

South Korea’s economic rise, coupled with demographic and economic pressures and the forces of globalization, compel it to embrace migration to ensure its survival and sustain growth. With a rapidly aging population, very low birth rates, and a skewed sex-birth ratio that leads to marriage squeeze, it has few other options. In a span of only two decades, it has become an migrant receiving country. The rapid rise in the number of migrants has given rise to various economic, political, and socio-cultural issues and compelled the government to adopt various policies and controls meant to manage immigration and its implications adjusting them several times to cope with changing external and internal circumstances. The ‘Nationality Act’, ‘Immigration Control Act,’ ‘Multicultural Families Support Act,’ and the ‘Framework Act on Treatment of Foreigners’ comprise the core of immigration policy in South Korea. In 2008, it adopted a selective immigration policy which only opens to certain types of migrants (e.g., investors, skilled professionals, marriage migrants, co-ethnics) while imposing heavy restrictions and controls on others (e.g., labor migrants), an approach similar to that of some industrialized Western countries.

This paper surveys immigration trends and policies in South Korea and assesses whether they are unique, as some Korean officials and scholars appear to believe, or following the trends and converging with those of immigrant receiving industrialized countries in the West. This paper explores the possibility that despite its own distinct history and particularities and its insistence on having its own unique ‘Korean take’ on immigration, immigration trends and policies in in
the country converges with that of immigrant receiving Western countries as suggested by the global convergence hypothesis. It also assesses whether its selective immigration policy which only opens to certain types of migrants (e.g., investors, skilled professionals, marriage migrants, co-ethnics) while imposing heavy restrictions and controls on others (e.g., labor migrants) is likely to succeed given the internal and external forces that drive migration.

**Description of the Topic**

This paper will primarily focus on immigration trends and immigration policies in South Korea as it compares with global trends and policies, especially in developed countries in the West with longer histories of migration (e.g., Australia, Canada, Germany, etc.). *Immigration policies*, as used in this paper, are comprised of *immigration control* and *immigrant integration* policies. *Immigration control policies* encompass those governing illegal immigration, political asylum/refugees, family reunification, and legal labor immigration (Givens and Leudtke 2005). *Immigrant integration policies* on the other hand deal with citizenship and (anti-)discrimination. The authors will compare and contrast the general immigration trends and policies in South Korea to the trends these countries and determine whether there is indeed convergence as suggested by the global convergence hypothesis and the factors that explain them.

**Research Objectives**

This paper will determine whether immigration trends and immigration policies in South Korea is converging with that of the Western industrialized countries with longer histories of immigration (e.g., Australia, Canada, Germany, etc.) as suggested by some scholars in the global convergence hypothesis. Specific questions to be answered by this paper include the following:

1. Are *immigration control* policies in South Korea converging or diverging with that of Western industrialized countries of immigration?
2. Are *immigrant integration* policies in South Korea converging or diverging with that of Western industrialized countries of immigration?
3. What are the possible factors that account for the convergence or divergence between South Korea’s immigration policies and that of the industrialized Western democracies?
Theoretical Focus

The paper will focus on theories of migration, particularly whose associating it with demographic and economic transitions and the hypothesis suggesting convergence of global migration policies. It tests the *convergence hypothesis* which claims that labor-importing countries are growing more and more similar in: 1) the immigration control policies adopted by their governments; 2) integration policies which facilitate integration and provide immigrants with political, economic, and social; 3) public attitudes towards immigrants and immigration policy (Cornelius and Tsuda, 2007). By comparing and contrasting South Korea’s immigration trends and policies with the observed trends in industrial democracies in the West, the authors will provide a brief assessment on whether the trends are converging with the West and whether new region-specific or country specific paradigms and approaches are warranted.

This paper will also utilize the recent explanations for the convergence of immigration policies among industrialized democracies. According to Meyers (2002), *global economic cycles*, produced by international economic interdependence, and, to a lesser extent, *shared migratory pressures*, are the most important reason for the similarities among immigration control policies. Cornelius and Tsuda (2007) outlines several explanations for convergence of immigration policies among industrialized democracies as: *parallel path development, policy emulation, regional integration, global events and geopolitics, and public opinion*. Both will be examined in light of South Korea’s experience and comprehensive immigration policies in this paper.

Data and Research Methods

The authors will use a comparative policy approach focusing on the macro-level features of immigration policies. The paper will rely on archival information from both official government documents and secondary sources including researches on the topic. Official Korean government migration statistics published by the Korea National Statistics Office (KNSO), the Ministry of Justice (MOJ), and related statistics from the Ministry of Employment and Labor (MOEL) will be used. Also, statistics from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the International Migration - United Nations Statistics Division, and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) will be utilized. The authors will also utilize archival information from government websites and recently published research on global and country specific migration trends, issues, and policies. Especial attention will be given to studies that

**Expected Findings**

Despite the unique history, economic, political, and socio-cultural characteristics of South Korea, its very short history of migration which is just a few decades compared to the West’s centuries of experience, and the insistence of some Korean officials and scholars on its own unique ‘Korean approach’ to migration, the authors expect to find plenty of important similarities between the South Korean immigration trends and policies and those of industrialized Western countries and that the global trends are in fact converging in some ways but that there are also substantial differences in their characteristics.

This is because despite being a relative late bloomer in economic development and in terms of migration, South Korea has similar institutions and is undergoing a similar, if more rapid, economic and demographic transition process as that of developed countries in the West and is being subjected to the same forces of globalization that could influence immigration policy. Nevertheless, differences in experiences, ethno-national narratives, and regional context might also produce substantial differences in policies. The authors hope to find empirical evidence that can support (or refute) this argument and find and establish in what ways trends are converging and/or diverging. Based on these findings, they will come up with several policy recommendations on how the Korean government should proceed with its immigration project.

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1 References:

