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Portrait of Canadians Abroad: South Korea

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South Korea

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Executive Summary

Over the last few decades, South Korea has witnessed major social, economic and political transformations. From democratization to economic modernization, to increasing numbers of resident foreigners, these transformations have reshaped Korean society in important ways, both culturally and economically.

Korea's population is one of the most ethnically and linguistically homogenous in the world. Except for a small Chinese community (about 20,000), virtually all Koreans share a common cultural and linguistic heritage. Its population of foreign nationals (1 million in 2009) is relatively small, comprising less than 2% of the overall population. What is notable about this number is not its size, but that it has tripled from the 330,000 foreigners reported as resident in 1997. Moreover, the number is expected to triple in another 10 years, and grow to account for 6% of South Korea's total population.

Making up a small percentage of this foreigner population are approximately 15,000 resident Canadians living in South Korea. The majority of these Canadians are English teachers and Canadians of Korean origin. A reciprocal agreement signed between Canada and Korea in 1994 to waive visa requirements for nationals from both countries, affords Canadians special status in Korea, where they may stay without a visa for up to six months.

In an effort to combat worsening 'brain drain' caused by emigration, the South Korean government recently announced planned changes to its citizenship policy, to allow dual citizenship. According to official statistics, 170,000 people have given up their Korean citizenship over the last 10 years, while only 50,000 have obtained it. At the same time, Korea is becoming increasingly multicultural, and the new policy is an attempt to enable more foreigners to integrate more fully into Korean society. Above all, the policy aims to remedy the difficult, tedious and cumbersome process of naturalization for foreigners living in Korea. Likewise, it hopes to boost the recruiting efforts of businesses, universities and research institutions, which often face difficulties in recruiting competent and talented foreigners due to citizenship rules.

Interviews with Canadians living in Korea uncovered diverse rationales for emigration, and varying motivations for staying or leaving. Financial and cultural opportunities were the main reasons that Canadians moved to Korea, and various factors such as family ties, lack of confidence in South Korea's educational system and poor health/environmental conditions, were given as reasons Canadians leave Korea.

Portraits of Canadians Abroad:

South Korea

A. Canada’s Presence in South Korea

Contact between Korea and Canada dates back to the 19th century when Canadians were among the first Westerners to arrive on the Korean peninsula, the majority of whom were Christian missionaries. In 1897, Canadian Rev. James Scarth Gale created the Korean-English Dictionary, and published various other works which were among the first and most essential tools for the scholarly study of Korea in the West. Official contact began in 1947 when Canada participated in the United Nations Commission overseeing elections in Korea, with formal recognition of the Republic of Korea in 1949. When war broke out between North Korea and South Korea in 1950, Canada sent 26,971 military personnel to the Korean peninsula as part of a United Nations force, the third largest contingent behind the United States and the United Kingdom.

Estimates of Canadians resident in South Korea *circa* 2007 report 14,879 Canadians living in Korea.

Number/Type of Visas Issued to Canadians in South Korea in Main Visa Categories, Nov. 2007

	Overseas Korean F4	Professional E5	Int’l Student D2	Tourist B2	Business Investment D8	Conversational English E2	Spouse F2-1
Female	2,242	0	25	1,558	6	2,035	78
Male	2,199	43	44	1,700	107	2,835	515
Total	4,441	43	69	3,258	113	4,870	593

GRAND TOTAL: 14,879
 *Female: 6,598, Male: 8,281

Source: International Affairs Division of the Department of Immigration, Ministry of Justice, Republic of Korea (Sept. 2008)

Annually, the number of Canadians visiting South Korea has been steadily increasing, with nearly 50,000 Canadians visiting in 2007.

The majority of Canadians who are resident in South Korea are English teachers. Official numbers report 4,870 Canadians hold E2 visas as conversational English teachers. However, the actual number of Canadians living and working in Korea as English teachers is much higher. There are two reasons for this. First, Canadians enjoy special visa privileges in that they are not required to obtain visas for stays of up to six months. This enables Canadians to enter, leave, and re-enter, without applying for an official work permit or visa. Second, for most Canadians

with a university degree and a desire to teach, there are myriad opportunities to earn money "under the table" as English instructors. In fact, many Korean employers rely on the ease of hiring a non-visa English teacher to fill rapidly changing staffing needs. Hence, there are many Canadians who live and work in Korea without proper documentation.

As a percentage of the overall foreigner population in South Korea, the 15,000 or so Canadians living and working in the country is relatively small. The number of foreigners residing in Korea has only recently begun to grow, from 552,000 in 2001, to 1,000,254 (August) 2007. Only 2% of the total population, this number also includes short-term sojourners. By nationality, Chinese residents made up 44% of the overall foreigner population with 441,334 (266,764 of whom were ethnic Koreans), followed by Americans who made up 12% with 117,938. Vietnamese comprised the third largest foreigners group at 6% with 63,464, followed by Filipinos (5% with 50,264) and Thais (4% with 43,792). The others were mainly from Japan, Taiwan and Indonesia.

B. Canadian Organizations & People

There are many organizations in Korea that serve and connect the expat communities. However, there are few Canadian associations that exist formally, aside from a few university alumni associations, and the Canadian Chamber of Commerce in Korea (CCCK). On the other hand, there are other kinds of networking opportunities, notably through recreational activities such as Canada Ball Hockey Korea, and informal socializing at Canadian venues such as Watts on Tap and Rocky Mountain Pub (two very popular Canadian haunts in Seoul).

In short, Canadians in South Korea tend to self-organize and network informally, rather than connect through channels such as the Canadian embassy or CCCK. Additionally, field research conducted for this profile indicates that Canadians have limited interest in networking with other Canadians, and make little distinction between Canadians and other English-speaking foreigners. This is quite different from foreign nationals from other English-speaking countries, such as Britons and Americans, who generally maintain close ties and communication with their respective government and national business/trade associations in South Korea.

Given that the large majority of Canadians living in Korea work within the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) industry, it is unsurprising that Canadian organizations with the highest profiles are found there as well. Today, English language institutes in Korea embrace the "Canadian brand," with some English institutes in Korea adopting the name, curricula and standards of specific Canadian educational entities e.g. government training schools and private education firms. This arrangement enables the Korean firm to promote the credibility and value of an existing program, while at the same time using a foreign "brand" to differentiate the service from those offered by other local institutes. The developer of the Canadian program also benefits from the opportunity to expand overseas and attract foreign income. Some education companies in Korea are co-owned by Koreans and Canadians and managed by Canadians, and these organizations both provide Canadian teacher placement services and host English language training camps, as well as send students to Canada.

Canadian Cameos

The prevailing image of Canadians living in South Korea is that they are all English teachers. Indeed, there are few, if any, mainstream Canadian ‘notables’ in South Korea. However, there are a diverse range of Canadians who live, work and play in Korea, and the following cameos offer a fuller picture of why and how Canadians move to Korea, what they do, and what their motivations and reasons for staying/returning might be. (*Names have been changed to protect identities.*)

1. Adam

“Professionally, I think my success has been uniquely predicated on my ‘hybridity’ as both a Korean and North American.”

“I came to Korea as a single male professional, and saw it as a short-term adventure, recognizing the finite value of overseas Korean legal experience – honestly, I thought I’d have fun, and return within three years. Then I got married, had a child, and now, Korea’s become home.”

-34, legal director for major global firm.

-immigrated at age 13 to Canada, naturalized as Canadian citizen.

-never thought he’d return to Korea, but was (re)exposed to Korean context through University of British Columbia’s Visiting Scholar Program, as Law Student. Connected/worked with Korean Visiting Scholar and established close ties that later opened opportunity to work in Korean law firm.

-major reason to return to Canada would be quality of life for child/family, especially education.

-maintains property (where his parents live) in Vancouver.

2. Danielle

“I love Korea, and it’s been exciting so far – but we’ll see where things lead...”

-23, model, actress, student. Canadian-born.

-from Vancouver, studied political science at University of British Columbia; 1+ year in Korea.

-spent a gap year before final undergrad year, at Yonsei University’s language program.

-after graduation, came back to Korea for more language training.

-recently joined cast of “Misuda,” a very popular entertainment/talk show which features a regular cast of 12+ young foreign women chatting in Korean about their experiences of living in Korea, aired on KBS, a major national TV broadcaster.

-describes her residence in Korea as a “longer short-term” stay. That is, maintains a “we’ll see where things lead” mentality, and has kept strong ties to Canada. For example, she has not cancelled her mobile phone number in Vancouver, choosing instead to pay a nominal maintenance/hold fee to her Canadian provider.

-major deterrents to the possibility of committing to long term residency in Korea are health/environmental/lifestyle concerns, as well as gender inequality in the workplace.

3. Carla (female)

“I moved to Korea because I wanted to travel and have fun, not necessarily because it was Korea. But since moving here, I’ve been given opportunities that, as someone who was university-educated, but had no real corporate work experience, I wouldn’t have had entering the job market in Canada.”

- 25, South African-born Canadian citizen.
- raised in Toronto suburb, studied political science at University of Ottawa.
- lived two years in Korea.
- beginning 3rd year of employment with global language training company, recently promoted to managerial position.
- faces unique everyday challenges in Korea because of dark skin/racial prejudice.
- some concern over the value/transferability of work experience back to Canada.

4. David (male)

“I came to Asia looking for an Asian lifestyle; I’m not interested in drinking North American beer and eating Western food; that phase is done.”

“In Korea, you can work as much as you want, and earn as much as you want, which is a big difference from home. I work seven days a week here...work is life here and to some people, that’s sad, but for me, it’s become normal.”

“Korea is not Canada, it’s not an immigrant-friendly country – because I’m not of Korean heritage, nor do I plan to marry a Korean national, I’ve been told quite frankly that I’d be rejected in any effort to gain South Korean citizenship. This has led to loss of job opportunities because of bureaucratic hassles.”

- 31, full-time university instructor, part-time actor/television host.
- Canadian-born, parents are first-generation Guyanese/Irish.
- Ottawa native, studied music performance; came to Korea after graduation to pay down student debt and “try something new”. No background in English/education, but then eventually obtained TESOL certification.
- has lived eight years in Korea. Considers his move to Korea permanent and lifelong.
- His example prompted his younger brother and other acquaintances to also come to Seoul to find employment as English teachers.
- maintains property in Ottawa as rental income.

5. Laura (female)

“Welcome to Canada, Mediocrity for All.”

“Trailing spouses don’t have a lot of options, except to teach English. The Korean government sees us as taking a job a Korean could fill.”

“Canadians have an outstanding reputation here; people who get to know North Americans really do see us as more tolerant...we’ve grown up in a more international climate and so we’re more open to cultural change.”

- late 40s, freelance corporate trainer, “trailing spouse,” mother of two, Lithuanian-Canadian.
- originally from Ontario, where her family maintains part-time residence (i.e. summers); lived with husband in Lithuania prior to moving to Korea. Family has been in Korea for 10 years.
- Husband is a corporate executive for a commercial joint venture between Canadian and Korean food companies. Family includes two children -- one born/raised in Korea, one born in Canada. One is studying in private international school in Korea, the other attends private boarding school in Ontario.
- living in Korea perceived as overall very positive in regards to lifestyle, earning/saving potential (bought and paid for home in Ontario within five years), access to rest of Asia.
- key concerns are for children’s quality of education, lack of proximity to nature, lack of official Canadian presence/community in Korea.

6. Louis

“Professionally and financially, I think working in Korea is much better. The money is okay...but the draw is how much more exciting it is professionally. The work I do here is much more interesting than if I was doing the same thing in Montreal. In all, I’d say it’s quite emotionally rewarding, not just financial.”

“The only reason I’d return to Canada is if my business failed. Or, illness of course - I feel that I would get better medical treatment in Canada, since here in Korea, I have lots of friends but no family.”

- late 40s, French-Canadian citizen.
- Studied business in Montreal, Korean language at Yonsei University in Seoul.
- Sole proprietor of business consulting firm, registered in both Canada and Korea.
- first came to Korea in late 1980s, travelled extensively between two countries for many years before choosing Korea as ‘home-base’ about eight years ago.
- unmarried, socializes mainly with Koreans, and other ‘global citizens’ in Korea.

7. Hong (male)

“I pride myself in being Canadian, and the only strength we have is that we’re really nice people. But it’s also our weakness.”

“My standard of living and quality of life would have be similar had I stayed in Canada. But I personally probably wouldn’t have stayed in Canada. It’s just a question of interesting opportunities. The problem with Canada is that I’d be making business trips to St. John’s, Montreal, Vancouver. [Based] in Hong Kong, I would go to Singapore, Shanghai, Tokyo. So [as a young professional] it was much more interesting, and I’d get to see the world. Toronto, Montreal, Vancouver; they’re all great cities, but fairly quiet. As a young person, I wanted to sow some oats, experience something different.”

- late 30s, real estate developer/entrepreneur, three years in Korea.
- naturalized Canadian. Immigrated to Canada at age six, grew up in Calgary, studied at University of Toronto, attended law school in Ontario.
- moved to Asia as young professional, settled in Korea after marrying a Korean.
- cites marriage and family ties as major reasons for living in Korea.
- not committed to living in Korea, but fairly certain he will not ever return to Canada.

C. Summary of South Korean Immigration and Citizenship Policies

There are eight types of visas issued by the Korean government to foreign nationals. For Canadians, the most frequently issued visas are the E-2 (Conversational English/Foreign Language Instructor)

They are:

<i>Type A</i>	A-1 (Diplomats) A-2 (Official Duty) A-3 (Agreement)
<i>Type B</i>	B-1 (Visa Waiver) B-2 (Tourist/Transit)
<i>Type C</i>	C C-1 (Temporary News Coverage) C-2 (Short-term Business) C-3 (Short-term Visitors) C-4 (Short-term Employment)
<i>Type D</i>	D-1 (Culture/Art) D-2 (Students) D-3 (Industrial Trainees) D-4 (General Trainees) D-5 (Residence Reporters) D-6 (Religious Workers) D-7 (Intra-Company Transferees) D-8 (Treaty Investors) D-9 (Treaty Traders)
<i>Type E</i>	E-1 (Professors) E-2 (Teaching Foreign Languages) E-3 (Research) E-4 (Special Technology - Instruction) E-5 (Specialty Occupations) E-6 (Arts and Entertainment) E-7 (Other Particular Occupations) E-8 (Industrial Trainees Employment)
<i>Type F</i>	F-1 (Visiting and Joining Families) F-2 (Residence) F-3 (Dependent Families) F-4 (Overseas Koreans)
<i>Type G</i>	G-1 (Other)
<i>Type H</i>	H-1 (Working Holiday)

The majority of foreign nationals (i.e. Americans, EU) who want to visit Korea for a short-term tour or transit are permitted to enter Korea with no visa according to the principles of reciprocity or priority of national interests with a tourist/transit visa status (B-2, 30days). As of 1994, a reciprocal agreement was signed between Canada and Korea to waive visa requirements for nationals from both countries, thereby affording Canadians special status in Korea, where they may stay, without a visa, for up to six months.

Temporary Labor Programs

Skilled workers, including entertainers, researchers and language teachers, are welcome to temporarily work and live in Korea. Until 2003, South Korea had no official provisions for allowing unskilled labor temporary access to the labor market. Today, South Korea has three ways of handling the need for unskilled foreign workers: an expanded industrial trainee scheme; the employment management scheme; and the employment permit system. In the near future, the employment management scheme will be folded into the employment permit scheme.

Temporary workers from any of these schemes can take jobs mainly in small manufacturing industries, such as cast iron, forging, heat treatment and painting, and dyeing and finishing.

Industrial Trainee Scheme

The industrial trainee scheme was originally intended to upgrade the skills of foreign workers employed by overseas South Korean firms. It was modified in 1993 to ease labor shortages for small firms, particularly in the manufacturing sector. This trainee scheme was considered to be temporary since the trainees were to return to their home countries after one year. In 2002, the government increased the number of industrial trainees under the foreign trainee scheme by 20,000 to 145,000.

Employment Management Scheme

The undeniable presence of undocumented foreign workers caught the government's attention, and, in June 2002, it recognized the need to give worker status to unskilled foreign labour for the first time. The government calls this work permit initiative the employment management scheme. Although it was implemented at the same time as the increase in industrial trainees, this scheme is limited to foreign workers in the service sector who have Korean ancestors (these are mainly Chinese Koreans). Due to its limited scope, the employment management scheme did not significantly decrease the number of undocumented workers. Finally, in July 2003, the government introduced a new employment permit system for guest workers.

Employment Permit Scheme

Under the employment permit scheme, qualified Korean employers (those with less than 300 employees in the areas of manufacturing, construction and service are given priority) can enter into employment contracts with foreign workers who are in good health and under the age of 40. Employers who wish to employ unskilled foreign labour must first demonstrate that they have spent at least one month attempting to find Korean workers by requesting help from public employment centres.

These workers come to South Korea through government-to-government agreements. The government has signed Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) with the governments of eight countries, including the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Vietnam, Thailand and Indonesia.

After the maximum three-year employment period, foreign workers have to leave South Korea and stay outside the country for a one year before they are allowed to return for another three-year period. Family members of foreign workers are not allowed to enter, a restriction purposely designed to dissuade foreign workers from permanently settling in South Korea. When the employment permit scheme was introduced, it gave many undocumented foreign workers the opportunity to apply for a permit, depending on how long they had been in the country illegally. At the same time, undocumented workers who did not qualify for a permit were given a chance to leave the country without paying any fines. This amnesty boosted the registered foreign population 73.4%t between 2002 and 2003.

Not surprisingly, some undocumented workers who did not qualify for a permit have decided to stay, though it will be difficult for them to continue working and to avoid deportation. The government has publicized its intentions to enforce the scheme's deportation provision and to use the police to catch undocumented workers.

As of 2004, the proportion of undocumented workers in the total foreign workforce was still around 40%.

Naturalization and Citizenship

Very few foreigners ever become naturalized as South Korean citizens except through marriage or through family/ethnic heritage ties. Even so, there are approximately 45,000 foreigners reported to be awaiting citizenship. Indeed, the South Korean government often uses the term nationality and citizenship interchangeably, indicating the extent to which citizenship in Korea is also connected to a sense of politico-cultural practice and collective moral responsibility.

There are generally three ways for foreigners to obtain Korean citizenship: general naturalization, simplified naturalization and special naturalization.

General Naturalization

For this process, there are five requirements:

1. Maintain a legal address for five years in Korea.
2. Must be an adult, according to Korean law (over 20 years old).
3. Must have clean and orderly behavior (i.e. no criminals or those with communicable disease).
4. Must have the ability to support oneself, or must have other family members who can support the whole family (usually proven by a professional licence, real estate deeds, or a bank account with at least US\$30,000).
5. Must have basic Korean language ability and knowledge about Korean culture (involving a written test and an interview – the test is about fourth grade level).

Simplified Naturalization

Since having legal address for five years is the most difficult requirement, certain people in the following cases can get around it.

1. If one of your parents was a Korean citizen.
2. If you were born in Korea, and one of your parents was born in Korea.
3. If you are an adult adoptee of a Korean citizen.
**People considered in categories 1-3 only have to maintain legal address in Korea for three years.*
4. If your spouse is Korean, and maintained a legal Korean address for two years while married to you.
5. If your spouse is Korean, and stayed married to you for three years, while maintaining a legal Korean address for one year
6. If you could not meet the requirements of items 4 or 5 because the spouse died, went missing, or the marriage could not continue through no fault of the person, and you filled the time requirements without being married.
7. If you could not meet the requirements of items 4 or 5, but are raising or will raise a minor child out of the marriage, and you filled the time requirement without being married.

Special Naturalization.

Every requirement under general naturalization, except “clean and orderly behavior,” is waived if:

1. One of your parents is Korean citizen (unless you are an adult adoptee.)
2. You contributed greatly to Korea, subject to the President’s approval.

Dual Citizenship

In an effort to combat worsening ‘brain drain’ caused by emigration, the South Korean government recently announced planned changes to its citizenship policy, to allow dual citizenship. According to official statistics, 170,000 people have given up their Korean citizenship over the last 10 years, while only 50,000 have obtained it. At the same time, Korea is becoming increasingly multicultural, and the new policy is an attempt to enable more foreigners to integrate more fully into Korean society. Above all, the policy aims to remedy the difficult, tedious and cumbersome process of naturalization for foreigners living in Korea. Likewise, it hopes to boost the recruiting efforts of businesses, universities and research institutions, which often face difficulties in recruiting competent and talented foreigners due to citizenship rules.

Canadians wanting gain or recover Korean citizenship, had been required to renounce their Canadian citizenship within a six month period from the date of notice provided by the South Korean Ministry of Justice, allowing recovery of Korean citizenship. This was amended during the 11th session of the Presidential Council on National Competitiveness (PCNC), during which it was announced plans to lower the minimum requirement for foreign investors to get dual citizenships starting in 2009.

The proposed changes will also allow limited dual nationality for those who show exceptional talent in the arts, science and other fields. Once recognized as being skilled in science, economy, culture and sports, such foreign nationals will be subject to a special naturalization process to determine whether granting dual citizenship is in Korea's national interest. These candidates will be exempt from the five-year mandatory residency and the naturalization test to become Korean citizens. Such foreigners will be allowed to keep their original citizenship while living in Korea as Korean citizens. Overseas Korean immigrants who marry will have to choose one citizenship within a year, after they are told by the Justice Ministry to do so.

Under the current policy, individuals who obtain dual citizenship before they are 20 years old have to choose one citizenship by the time they are 22, and those who win dual citizenship after they are 20 have to choose one within two years. Their Korean citizenship is automatically revoked unless they follow this procedure under the current policy.

Government estimates (2009) put the current number of Korean citizens in South Korea as 51,559, as of December 2008. Korean-American citizens ranked first at 29,259, followed by Korean-Japanese at 14,499 and Korean-Canadians, 1,704.

D. Issues and Implications

Interviews with Canadians living in Korea uncovered diverse rationales for emigration, and varying motivations for staying or leaving. Financial and cultural opportunities were the main reasons that Canadians moved to Korea, and various factors such as family ties, lack of confidence in South Korea's educational system, and poor health/environmental conditions, were given as reasons Canadians would leave Korea. Issues such as the inability for foreigners to access certain services, such as Korea's major websites and online social networking services and online marketplaces (i.e. Cyworld, gMarket), were cited as inconveniences and barriers to integrating fully into Korean society. Other challenges mentioned by Canadians included Korean language acquisition, absence of "Brand Canada," and the lack of practical guidance or formal associational/networking opportunities provided through Canadian government for Canadian expatriates.

The recent changes to South Korea's citizenship policies may have important implications for Canada. There is already an identifiable trend among Korean families of 'yo-yo migration,' wherein parents and children routinely travel between the two countries, maintaining social, economic and professional ties in both places. The option of dual citizenship could mean that this becomes an increasingly viable and prevalent practice within overseas Korean communities in Canada, as well as motivate more Korean-Canadians to seek opportunity and settle as returnee immigrants in Korea.