

Social Integration of Korean Diaspora in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the social integration of Korean immigrants in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC). Drawing upon the theoretical frameworks of Émile Durkheim, Edna B. Foa and Uriel G. Foa, it reconceptualises social integration by extending its relationship with Resource Theory. It then interprets the lived experiences of Korean immigrants through in-depth interviews, exploring the factors that facilitate or hinder their integration into Vietnamese society. The findings highlight the socio-cultural realities shaping the lives of Korean immigrants, including language proficiency, cultural attitudes, religious practices, and the challenges of navigating cultural differences. Furthermore, Koreans in HCMC express various frustrations and constraints relating to housing, the quality of medical services, and apprehensions about participating in road traffic, all of which emerge as significant barriers to social integration. The study adopted a qualitative research design, employing in-depth interviews with 25 participants. All interviews were conducted face-to-face and lasted approximately one hour on average. Interviews were carried out in English, Vietnamese, and Korean, with interpreter support provided where necessary. All identifying information was rigorously anonymised, and participants' personal details were replaced with symbolic codes.

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INTRODUCTION

The social integration of South Korean migrants has been the subject of extensive scholarly debate, evolving from traditional assimilation models in the West to

contemporary patterns of ‘sojourning’ in Asia. In the United States, research has historically focused on permanent immigrants residing in ethnic enclaves as a means of navigating assimilation pressures and systemic barriers (Ma & Yeh, 2005; Cutler et al., 2008). By contrast, in emerging Asian economies such as India and Thailand, Korean expatriates predominantly occupy managerial positions within multinational corporations (Hasegawa, 2019; Kim, 2021). Although these migrants encountered workplace stress and cultural friction, their integration is characterised by a transnational lifestyle, marked by the strong preservation of their cultural identity through language, food, and religious institutions (Luewiphan, 2019). Fechter (2007) argues that expatriate communities are far from homogeneous. Although they differ in demographic characteristics such as age, educational background, occupation, social status, income level, and degree of integration into the host society, they remain connected through shared transnational resources and lifestyles (Fechter, 2007). Benson and O’Reilly (2009) introduced the concept of ‘lifestyle migration’ to demonstrate that individuals migrate not only for economic reasons or a change of residence but also in pursuit of a better quality of life (Benson & O’Reilly, 2009). Building upon Benson and O’Reilly’s lifestyle-oriented approach, Beaverstock (2002) characterises expatriates as highly educated and professionally skilled individuals who are actively engaged in translocal corporate networks. Consequently, they are

regarded as part of a ‘transnational elite’ (Beaverstock, 2002). Expatriates tend to form social connections primarily with other foreigners, while maintaining only limited interaction with local residents. This often leads to the formation of expatriate enclaves characterised by strong internal cohesion but relative detachment from the host society (Beaverstock, 2002). In their study of intra-Asian migration, Yeoh and Lin (2013) argue that migrants are required to comply strictly with labour recruitment policies imposed by host countries. They further identify a bifurcation within immigrant labour forces, characterised by a clear division according to skill level. Even highly skilled migrants are admitted through specialised categories for foreign talent, whereas the majority of migrants from the People's Republic of China (PRC) face significantly more restricted opportunities for admission to Singapore because they are classified as unskilled workers (Yeoh & Lin, 2013). Coates (2019) argues that transnational migrants aspire to achieve a good life; however, even after attaining their aspirations, many continue to experience a lack of belonging (Coates, 2019).

In Vietnam, this phenomenon is particularly pronounced because of the deep economic and cultural ties between the two countries. The ratification of the Free Trade Agreement (FTA), together with their shared export-oriented industrialisation models, has positioned Vietnam as a strategic partner of South Korea (Cory, 2022; Kim, 2023; Turner et al., 2019). This economic synergy is further reinforced by the ‘Korean Wave’,

through which cultural products, from traditional media to digital platforms—have facilitated a distinctive form of cultural integration within Vietnamese society (Nguyen & Özçaglar-Toulouse, 2021; Jang et al., 2021). While previous research has examined ethnic economies in Hanoi's My Dinh area (Kim, 2022) and the Confucian-rooted corporate culture of southern Vietnam (Le, 2023), the specific dynamics of social integration among the Korean community in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) warrant more in-depth investigation.

As Vietnam's principal economic centre, HCMC has become a major destination for Korean nationals seeking career opportunities and educational advancement (Tran et al., 2020). However, the growing influx of migrants has also generated complex social challenges. Social integration is driven by the dual imperatives of survival and belonging, providing access to practical resources such as language acquisition and social networks while simultaneously fulfilling the fundamental human need for security and social connectedness (Berggren et al., 2023; Kowsikka & Robinson, 2019). Nevertheless, pathways to integration are frequently obstructed by linguistic barriers, cultural unfamiliarity, and discriminatory attitudes, which may result in social isolation and limited civic participation (Gidron & Hall, 2020; Wessendorf & Phillimore, 2019).

Despite the rapid growth of the Korean community in HCMC, the lived experiences of its members remain underexplored,

particularly with regard to the diversity of their social roles. Following the conceptual distinction proposed by McNulty and Brewster (2017), this study identifies the participants as business expatriates and their dependants rather than immigrants seeking permanent settlement. The demographic profile of the sample supports this classification. Approximately 76% of respondents had resided in HCMC for fewer than ten years, with many occupying senior managerial positions or operating their own businesses, earning annual incomes of up to USD 130,000. The community is predominantly male-led, comprising executives accompanied by their family members, alongside a smaller group of students (Yem, 2015).

This article addresses an important gap in the literature by examining the social integration of Koreans in HCMC through a functional and resource-based perspective. Specifically, it explores two interrelated dimensions: first, the contemporary socio-cultural context and lived experiences of Korean expatriates; and second, the factors that facilitate or hinder their social integration. By including both high-status professionals and often-overlooked groups, including homemakers, pastors, and the self-employed, this study demonstrates how demanding work environments and institutional self-sufficiency shape a distinctive pattern of integration, one characterised more by functional necessity and family-centred reliance than by broad engagement with the host society.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

Fundamental Theories of Social Integration and Resource Exchange

This section outlines the core theoretical concepts concerning how individuals connect with society and the exchange mechanisms that facilitate this process. According to Durkheim (1984), functional adaptation among different parts of society occurs naturally when interactions between these parts are frequent and close. This process of integration “tends of their own accord to achieve an equilibrium, becoming self-regulatory” (Durkheim, 1984). However, social integration is not merely a spontaneous process. Society, through its institutions and norms, reinforces and sustains integration by shaping and generating the “social beliefs and practices act” of individuals (Durkheim, 1982). Accordingly, Durkheim conceptualises social cohesion as a dynamic process governed by underlying principles, in which social normality is understood through four key components: (1) the regulation of individual desires through collective cultural symbols; (2) rituals and symbolic practices as mechanisms of social cohesion; (3) normative regulation supported by legitimate political structures; and (4) the acceptance of social inequality as a functional necessity (Turner, 1981). Conversely, the absence of successful integration can be identified through its “abnormalities”, including anomie, egoism, lack of coordination, and the forced division of labour, all of which indicate disruptions

in the process of social integration (Mishra & Rath, 2020; Turner, 1981).

Complementing this macro-sociological perspective, Social Resource Exchange Theory offers a framework for understanding interpersonal relationships. Foa and Foa (1980) conceptualise interpersonal exchange as a process involving six categories of resources: love, services, status, goods, information, and money. These exchanges are governed by the principles of particularism and universalism, whereby the value of each resource depends on its degree of specificity to the relationship. Within this framework, highly particularistic resources, such as love, possess greater value within close interpersonal relationships, whereas more universal resources, such as money, function across broader social contexts.

Positioning the Study Within Existing Literature

This subsection situates the present study within the existing body of scholarship by highlighting the limitations of traditional theories when applied to contemporary multicultural and migratory contexts. Building upon Durkheim's work, numerous scholars have developed influential theories of social integration, including Parsons (1951) through the concept of the "social system", Bourdieu (1977) through the notion of "field", and Habermas (1985) through the theory of "communicative action". However, these theoretical perspectives were largely developed within European social contexts and devoted comparatively limited attention to social integration

in multicultural settings. Turner (1981) addressed some of these limitations through his ethnographic studies of non-Western societies by introducing the concepts of "communitas" and "liminality". These concepts explain how individuals transition from one social status to another while simultaneously developing relationships with one another and engaging with the cultural community of the host society.

Furthermore, to ensure conceptual clarity, it is essential to distinguish the terminology used to describe the study population. Consistent with the construct clarity advocated by McNulty and Brewster (2017), this study identifies its participants as 'business expatriates' rather than 'immigrants'. This distinction is important because business expatriates are primarily characterised by professional motivations and temporary residence, whereas the term immigrants generally imply an intention to settle on a long-term or permanent basis. By adopting the business expatriate perspective, this study aligns its theoretical framework with the medium-term residency patterns and highly skilled professional profiles that characterise much of the Korean community in Ho Chi Minh City.

The Study's Analytical Focus and Framework

Drawing upon the theoretical foundations outlined above, this study develops a specific analytical framework for examining the Korean community in Ho Chi Minh City. Social integration is analysed by focusing on how individuals establish and maintain social networks within the broader

macro-social context. The framework seeks to identify the principal factors shaping these networks, including social support, social influence, social cohesion through participation and interaction, and access to and control over resources (Berkman et al., 2000). Within this perspective, resource exchange is understood not only as an ongoing social process but also as an important objective through which individuals pursue self-actualisation.

Accordingly, the level of social integration among Koreans in Ho Chi Minh City is assessed through their capacity to access, utilise, and mobilise socioeconomic resources. As individuals consistently expect exchange relationships to be fair and mutually rewarding, any "discrepancies from these expectations trigger feelings of disappointment" (Foa & Foa, 2012). Taken together, these theoretical perspectives provide a conceptual bridge between macro-level patterns of social integration and micro-level processes of resource exchange. By positioning resources as a central mechanism of integration, this framework explains the motivations underlying social integration among Korean business expatriates within the specific context of migration to Vietnam.

METHODS

Sampling and Data Collection

This study employed a qualitative research design, using in-depth interviews with 25 participants. The sample predominantly comprised individuals aged between 40 and 60 years. The interview process was

conducted in two phases. The first phase involved interviews with four Korean participants and was intended to generate preliminary insights and identify emerging themes. Based on these initial findings, the interview guide was refined and expanded for the second phase. During this subsequent stage, a further 21 participants were interviewed using the revised interview guide, which incorporated the additional themes identified during the first phase.

All interviews were conducted face-to-face and lasted approximately one hour on average. Interviews were carried out in English, Vietnamese, and Korean, with interpreter support provided where necessary. The research team consisted of Vietnamese researchers who conducted the face-to-face interviews with the Korean participants. All participants provided informed and voluntary consent and demonstrated a clear understanding of the purpose of the

study. Where participants responded in Korean, professional interpreters assisted by translating their responses into Vietnamese.

All identifying information was rigorously anonymised, and participants' personal details were replaced with symbolic codes. Although the sizeable Korean community in Ho Chi Minh City might suggest that participant recruitment would be relatively straightforward, gaining access to participants and conducting in-depth interviews proved challenging. Busy work schedules and reluctance to engage with unfamiliar researchers created significant obstacles. To address these challenges, a non-probability sampling strategy combining purposive and snowball sampling techniques was employed. Participant recruitment was guided by selection criteria including age, educational attainment, occupation, family structure, reasons for migration, and length of residence in Ho Chi Minh City (Table 1).

Table 1
Key sociodemographic descriptors of the korean participants (N = 25)

Criteria	Content
Gender	Male: 16 (64%) Female: 9 (36%) Reason for female participants' residence: Husband's work relocation (6); Own employment/study (3)
Age	40-60 years: 24 (96%) Under 40 years: 1 (4%)
Educational level	Doctorate: 4 (16%) University: 15 (60%) High school: 6 (24%)
Marital status	Married: 16 (64%) Single: 9 (36%)
Length of residence in HCMC	Less than 5 years: 12 (48%) 5-10 years: 7 (28%) 10-15 years: 3 (12%) Over 15 years: 3 (12%)
Occupation	Self-employed: 9 (36%) Managerial/Executive: 5 (20%) Educator/Instructor: 2 (8%) Homemaker: 7 (28%) Student: 1 (4%) Pastor: 1 (4%)
Employment status in HCMC	Stable employment (more than 1 year): 16 (64%) No formal employment (homemakers, students, and pastor): 9 (36%)
Income	High income (Managers, Branch Directors): USD 80,000-130,000 Middle income (Self-employed, Pastor, Teachers): USD 40,000-80,000 Dependants/Spouses: Financially supported by spouse or parents' General pattern: Higher educational attainment was associated with higher income.

Source: Authors' own work

Data Analysis

The qualitative data were transcribed, cleaned, and analysed thematically following the six-step procedure proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006): (1) familiarisation with the dataset; (2) coding the data; (3) generating themes; (4) developing a thematic framework; (5) identifying patterns across the data; and (6) interpreting the findings and preparing the research report.

Following the coding process, the authors identified 1,278 initial codes, which were subsequently refined into 638 final codes. These 638 codes were then organised into fourteen thematic categories: (1) job search and income; (2) spending patterns; (3) local language proficiency; (4) culinary experiences; (5) perspectives on citizenship; (6) interactions with local people; (7) participation in social activities; (8) reasons for migration; (9) living conditions in Ho Chi Minh City; (10) social networks; (11) barriers to social integration; (12) adaptation strategies; (13) intentions to remain in Vietnam; and (14) recommendations from Korean participants.

Based on the relationships among these categories, the authors further consolidated the fourteen topics into five overarching themes: (1) Access to Housing, encompassing challenges related to language barriers and cultural differences in housing and rental practices; (2) Access to Transportation, examining accessibility, usability, and perceptions of the safety and affordability of both public and private transport; (3) Access to Health and Education, focusing on the availability

and quality of healthcare and educational services for expatriates and their families; (4) Participation in the Labour Market, exploring employment opportunities and the challenges associated with integration into the local workforce; and (5) Participation in Community and Public Life, examining participants' engagement in political and civic life within the city.

Although these five themes provide an analytical framework for examining the social integration of the Korean community in Ho Chi Minh City, they should not be viewed as independent dimensions. Rather, they are closely interconnected and mutually reinforcing. For example, levels of integration in education and healthcare are intrinsically linked to participation in community activities and public life. Similarly, overcoming language barriers creates more favourable conditions for Korean expatriates to integrate into different aspects of everyday life in Ho Chi Minh City.

RESULTS

Access to Housing

When Koreans relocate to Vietnam, many choose to reside in District 7 of Ho Chi Minh City. This vibrant and relatively affluent urban district is home to one of the city's largest Korean communities. Living in close proximity enables community members to exchange resources and adapt more quickly to their new environment. They commonly obtain information about housing, employment opportunities, education, and local services through

relatives, friends, or fellow Koreans. As one participant explained:

When I arrived here, I started working right away because an acquaintance of mine had opened a Korean salon in Phu My Hung with his wife, so I worked with him in District 7. (Female, 48 years old, single, living alone)

During holidays and traditional festivals, members of the Korean community can easily gather to socialise, exchange gifts, share meals, and celebrate cultural traditions, thereby maintaining their cultural identity while living abroad. These findings support Durkheim's theory of social integration, which emphasises the importance of social networks in fostering social cohesion (Turner, 1981). Reliance on friends and relatives for assistance with housing demonstrates the importance of pre-existing social ties in facilitating adjustment to a new environment. Such networks provide essential resources, including practical information and emotional support, thereby reducing the difficulties associated with adapting to an unfamiliar social and cultural setting.

Koreans arriving in Vietnam possess varying levels of social and economic resources. Individuals with higher educational qualifications and professional status are generally better positioned to obtain information about employment and accommodation through their business partners, professional contacts, and employees in Ho Chi Minh City. As one company director explained:

When I first came to Vietnam, I spent a great deal of time looking for suitable accommodation. I asked Korean business partners who had lived in Ho Chi Minh City for many years to recommend suitable places. My Vietnamese employees also recommended good restaurants and other useful services. (Male, 45 years old, company director)

In addition to identifying suitable accommodation, foreigners living in Ho Chi Minh City often encounter complicated legal procedures when renting or purchasing property. These processes can be time-consuming and may expose individuals to financial fraud. One participant reflected:

In Korea, we pay a deposit to the landlord for a period of about two years without having to pay monthly rent. In Vietnam, however, we pay a deposit and still have to pay monthly rent of between USD 1,000 and USD 2,000. This is very expensive. (Male, 45 years old, company director)

Frequent amendments to regulations governing the residence of foreign nationals in Vietnam have also created uncertainty regarding administrative procedures related to housing transactions. From the perspective of Resource Exchange Theory, as proposed by Foa and Foa (2012), these unclear and restrictive administrative procedures illustrate how limited access to important resources can generate frustration and uncertainty. Such constraints make it more

difficult for Korean expatriates to establish secure and stable living arrangements.

Another participant described the legal complexities surrounding land ownership in Vietnam:

Previously, land ownership in Vietnam presented significant challenges. Land use rights were often limited to leases of between 20 and 50 years, creating a feeling more like renting than owning. Because of these legal complexities, I asked a friend to purchase land on my behalf. After my friend unexpectedly passed away, his wife claimed ownership of the property. As I had no legal basis to challenge her claim, my attempts to negotiate with her were unsuccessful. (Male, 60 years old, consultant, married)

To minimise the risks associated with purchasing or renting property, many Koreans rely on assistance from relatives, friends, Vietnamese students, and Korean community organisations to benefit from their experience and local knowledge. One participant recalled:

I received a great deal of help. For example, when I was looking for a house, someone accompanied me to view the property and helped me sign the contract. When I first started teaching at the centre, they also explained many things and supported me in different ways. (Female, 50 years old, divorced, living alone)

Overall, Koreans in Vietnam tend to adopt a concentrated residential pattern,

forming communities with fellow Koreans while maintaining the values, customs, and traditional lifestyles of their homeland. For many participants, relocating to Vietnam does not necessarily imply cultural integration into Vietnamese society. Instead, they tend to maintain a degree of social distance from the local community, as reflected in their preference for residing in neighbourhoods with a substantial Korean population rather than living among Vietnamese residents. This finding is consistent with Beaverstock's (2002) observations of expatriate residential patterns.

Access to Transportation

The in-depth interviews revealed that all participants expressed dissatisfaction with road traffic conditions in Ho Chi Minh City. Many reported experiencing considerable culture shock upon their arrival because of severe traffic congestion during peak hours, unfamiliar traffic regulations, and what they perceived to be poor traffic discipline among road users. Consequently, even after living in the city for many years, many Korean residents remain reluctant to drive themselves to work or school. One participant described the situation as follows:

The streets are constantly congested, with frequent traffic jams. I often see vehicles driving on pedestrian pavements, travelling against the flow of traffic, and occupying road space illegally. Experiencing the evening rush hour clearly demonstrates the level of noise and dust pollution I am referring

to. The absence of clearly designated lanes for cars, buses, and motorcycles is particularly problematic. It reminds me of traffic conditions in Korea during the 1960s and 1970s. (Male, 58 years old, consultant, married)

Middle-aged Korean residents consistently reported difficulties adapting to traffic conditions in Ho Chi Minh City. Gender and occupation appeared to have little influence on participants' perceptions of these challenges. In contrast, a younger participant demonstrated greater adaptability to the city's traffic environment. Upon arriving in Ho Chi Minh City, she initially found the traffic overwhelming. However, after living in the city for one-year, Vietnamese friends helped her understand local traffic practices, assisted her in obtaining a Vietnamese driving licence, and even helped her purchase a motorbike for commuting to university and work. She explained:

When I first arrived in Vietnam, I was overwhelmed by the traffic and avoided driving by myself. I relied entirely on Grab for transportation. After about a year, however, the cost and inconvenience of using Grab encouraged me to look for another solution. A Vietnamese friend helped me obtain a driving licence and even bought an old motorcycle for me. (Female, 23 years old, student)

Participants with higher incomes often employed private drivers, allowing them and their families to travel more conveniently

and comfortably while avoiding the stress associated with driving in Ho Chi Minh City.

Access to Health and Education

The findings indicate a general lack of confidence among Korean residents in the quality of healthcare services available in Vietnam. Of the 25 participants, 13 had experience using Vietnamese healthcare services but expressed dissatisfaction with the quality of care, citing overcrowding, long waiting times, and what they perceived as inadequate communication between doctors and patients. Furthermore, 24 of the 25 participants relied on Korean national health insurance or supplementary insurance provided by multinational companies operating in Vietnam to meet their healthcare needs. Even Korean students studying in Vietnam predominantly used their Korean health insurance. As one participant explained:

I believe the most challenging aspect of living in Vietnam for Koreans is the healthcare system. Vietnamese hospitals prioritise local residents, which often results in overcrowding and limited attention being given to foreign patients. Even basic consultations seem rushed, with little time for detailed explanations. Whenever I become ill, I feel compelled to seek treatment at either a Korean hospital or an expensive international hospital. (Male, 49 years old, homemaker, married)

The cost of healthcare services was identified as another major concern. Worries

about medical expenses were common across all participant groups, regardless of marital status, migration status, or income level. Consequently, many participants limited their use of Vietnamese hospitals and sought medical treatment only in emergency situations. Instead, Korean expatriates generally preferred healthcare services provided by foreign-invested private hospitals and international medical centres. Dissatisfaction with the quality of healthcare services emerged as a common theme across the interviews. This limited confidence in Vietnam's healthcare system appears to have a modest but discernible influence on the social integration and long-term settlement strategies of Korean expatriates in Ho Chi Minh City. One participant described his experience as follows:

Concerns about healthcare costs often discourage us from seeking medical treatment. For minor illnesses, we rely on medicines sent by relatives in the United States. If we experience a minor injury at work, we usually visit an international hospital, receive outpatient treatment such as an examination, bandaging, and medication, and then return home to recover. (Male, 55 years old, coffee shop owner, married)

To reduce the challenges associated with accessing healthcare services, participants drew extensively upon their personal and social networks. Those with higher socioeconomic status were generally willing to pay for treatment at leading international hospitals, while Vietnamese

business partners often introduced them to reputable medical specialists and assisted them in arranging appointments. Similarly, instructors frequently relied on recommendations from their students when selecting reputable private clinics close to their homes. One participant commented:

I often become ill and do not have enough time to visit local hospitals because of the long waiting times. Fortunately, one of my students recommended a reputable private clinic that her family regularly visits. Since then, I no longer worry about seeing a doctor. (Male, 60 years old, married, living alone)

Participants with more limited personal networks frequently sought assistance through Korean community organisations. One participant explained:

We have a communication network on KakaoTalk, and they showed me how to use it. For example, our group has around 300 members. It shares information about the current Covid situation in Vietnam announced by the government, as well as information to support Korean families in need. If I have an accident, I can contact the group, and someone will come to help me. (Male, 45 years old, married, living alone)

With regard to education, many Korean families in Ho Chi Minh City chose to enrol their children in international schools during their early education before encouraging

them to pursue higher education in South Korea or other developed countries. One participant who had lived in Ho Chi Minh City for more than 20 years explained:

After my daughter completed secondary school in Vietnam, she returned to Korea to continue her education and is now working there. My son graduated from high school in Vietnam and is currently in his second year at a university in Korea. We believe this will provide them with better employment opportunities. (Male, 60 years old, consultant, married)

These findings suggest that Korean expatriate families place considerable importance on providing their children with an internationally oriented education. Educational decisions are shaped by both the academic aspirations of their children and the financial capacity of their families to access high-quality educational opportunities.

Overall, the findings indicate that Korean expatriates have limited confidence in the quality of healthcare and education available in Ho Chi Minh City. Their use of these services is generally selective, situational, and temporary, and is often accompanied by relatively low levels of satisfaction. Whenever circumstances permit, they prefer to obtain healthcare and educational services in South Korea or other developed countries. As a consequence, opportunities to establish meaningful social relationships with Vietnamese residents through these institutions remain limited. Although not always expressed explicitly, participants' perceptions reveal

an underlying sense of social differentiation that influences their patterns of interaction with the local community.

Participation in the Labour Market

Employment opportunities and the quality of the working environment are among the principal considerations influencing relocation decisions. Korean expatriates are generally entrepreneurial and actively pursue opportunities for both personal and professional advancement. Many supplement their primary employment by investing in real estate, operating golf-related businesses, managing coffee shops, or establishing foreign language centres. In addition to employment prospects, participants identified several features that made Ho Chi Minh City an attractive place to live, including comparatively low tuition fees, a favourable climate, a comfortable lifestyle, and a relatively low cost of living. These findings are consistent with Benson and O'Reilly's (2009) concept of lifestyle migration. As one participant observed:

The weather is beautiful here, life is comfortable, and the cost of living is low. (Male, 44 years old, single, living alone)

Notably, many women who had relocated to Ho Chi Minh City to accompany their husbands expressed high levels of satisfaction with their daily lives. One participant described her routine as follows:

My husband leaves for work at 8:00 a.m. after breakfast with the family and

spends the entire day at the office. Since moving to Vietnam, I have experienced a greater sense of personal and social fulfilment. After taking my children to school, I usually enjoy a leisurely coffee before spending the rest of the day grocery shopping, meeting friends, buying household items, visiting a spa, or attending church services. (Female, 44 years old, homemaker, married)

Educational attainment plays a significant role in shaping employment opportunities for Korean expatriates in Ho Chi Minh City. Individuals holding university or postgraduate qualifications generally occupy managerial or specialist positions within companies. Those with only secondary-level education often relocate to Vietnam to join family members, and their occupations typically remain unchanged before and after migration. Participants aged 50 years and above frequently occupied senior positions, including managers, executive directors, and business development consultants. Those aged between 45 and 50 years were predominantly self-employed, whereas participants aged between 40 and 45 years included a larger proportion of employees and educators. Older expatriates, particularly those who had lived in Ho Chi Minh City for an extended period, often possessed established businesses and investment portfolios. By contrast, younger Korean expatriates demonstrated greater cross-border labour mobility than their middle-aged counterparts. Participants also reported that their average annual income in Ho

Chi Minh City exceeded their earnings before migration to South Korea, ranging from approximately USD 40,000 to USD 150,000. One participant explained:

Senior employees typically earn more than USD 50,000 per year. Relocating to Ho Chi Minh City often includes a housing allowance of between USD 1,000 and USD 2,000 per month. Compared with Korea, the cost of living here is relatively affordable, making it easier to save money through careful financial management. (Male, 50 years old, cosmetics sales specialist, married)

In addition to age and educational background, cultural, social, and economic capital significantly influence employment opportunities and income among Korean expatriates in Ho Chi Minh City. Individuals with a basic knowledge of Vietnamese language and culture generally demonstrated a stronger understanding of the local labour market. Through their social networks, comprising both Korean and Vietnamese contacts, they acquired valuable knowledge of consumer preferences, market demand, and business opportunities. Families with substantial financial resources, particularly those whose relocation was supported by employers, often arranged Vietnamese language training for spouses and children, with some family members even pursuing bachelor's degrees in Vietnamese Studies at local universities. In contrast, participants who migrated independently, whether alone or while leaving their families in South Korea, frequently prioritised work above

all else, limiting their opportunities to learn Vietnamese or develop broader social relationships. One participant explained:

My brother and I came here to study Vietnamese Studies. We live in an area with many Koreans. I asked my Vietnamese classmates for advice on opening a laundry shop. I have been running it for two years now, and the business is doing well. (Female, 23 years old, student)

These findings support Durkheim's theory of social integration, which suggests that successful integration is promoted through social interaction, cultural understanding, and the development of social networks (Turner, 1981). Participants who actively engaged with Vietnamese society by learning the language and interacting with local residents demonstrated higher levels of social integration. Such engagement enhanced their understanding of the local environment, improved their employment prospects, and contributed to a stronger sense of belonging. Conversely, those who prioritised work over cultural engagement and social interaction generally experienced greater difficulties integrating into Vietnamese society.

Within the workplace, language barriers and differences in food culture often hinder communication and relationship building with Vietnamese colleagues. Linguistic differences can result in misunderstandings and, at times, conflicts between managers and employees, as well as among colleagues at the same organisational level. Consequently,

many participants found it difficult to establish harmonious working relationships, develop a sense of belonging, or build close interpersonal connections in the workplace in Ho Chi Minh City.

Participation in Community and Public Life

Korean expatriates demonstrate relatively limited participation in formal political and civic activities in Ho Chi Minh City. Despite residing in the city for extended periods, cultural and linguistic differences often constrain interaction between Korean expatriates and the surrounding Vietnamese community, including relationships with immediate neighbours. Although professional relationships with Vietnamese colleagues are generally cordial, they rarely develop into close personal friendships. During periods of difficulty, Korean expatriates primarily seek assistance from the Consulate General of the Republic of Korea in Ho Chi Minh City or rely on their own Korean social networks, approaching local authorities only when absolutely necessary.

Participants identified three principal spheres of social interaction: (1) the Korean community, including family members, social networks such as KakaoTalk groups, compatriot associations, and religious organisations; (2) the local Vietnamese community, consisting mainly of colleagues and interactions with public institutions; and (3) intercultural relationships established through marriages between Koreans and Vietnamese.

Compatriot associations and religious organisations emerged as the most influential forms of social support. Nguyen's study (2021) highlights the importance of interactions among migrants, government agencies, and non-governmental organisations in strengthening social capital within immigrant communities. Similarly, the in-depth interviews revealed that compatriot associations and religious organisations played a vital role in helping Korean expatriates secure employment, establish themselves in Ho Chi Minh City, and expand their social networks. Of the 25 participants, five reported receiving substantial assistance from fellow Koreans working in the same profession, including support with job searches, housing arrangements, and overcoming the practical challenges encountered during their initial period of settlement. This early support contributed significantly to participants' psychological well-being and facilitated their successful adjustment to life in Ho Chi Minh City. One participant described his experience as follows:

I am a Korean citizen who married in Shanghai and worked there for many years as a hairdresser. A friend told me that the hairdressing industry in Ho Chi Minh City offered excellent opportunities, with a larger customer base, particularly among Korean clients who preferred Korean-owned salons. As a result, I relocated to Ho Chi Minh City, rented an apartment, and opened my own hair salon. (Male, 40 years old, hair salon owner, married)

Two of the 25 participants had been transferred to Vietnam by their employers to assume senior positions or resolve specific organisational challenges. Their knowledge of Ho Chi Minh City was acquired primarily through company training programmes, professional networks, and previous short-term business visits. One participant explained:

When I learned that my organisation needed staff to relocate to Vietnam, I volunteered because I had always liked Vietnam and the lifestyle in Ho Chi Minh City. I feel welcomed here, and the people are very friendly and supportive. I believed Ho Chi Minh City offered the greatest potential for business development because of its large population, vibrant environment, and harmonious community compared with other Vietnamese cities. Although I have also lived in developed countries such as the United States, Australia, and France, I consider Ho Chi Minh City to offer greater opportunities for market expansion because its economy is more dynamic and less saturated than those mature markets. (Male, 58 years old, consultant, married)

Korean expatriates also strengthen their social ties through active participation in compatriot associations and religious organisations. They regularly engage in sporting activities, including tennis and baseball, with fellow community members and participate in religious activities within Protestant, Catholic, and Buddhist

congregations. These findings support the argument advanced by Fleischmann and Khoudja (2023), who contend that religion functions as a powerful source of social cohesion by strengthening interpersonal relationships and community solidarity. In addition, social media platforms, particularly KakaoTalk groups, play an important role in connecting members of the Korean community by facilitating communication, disseminating information, and providing practical support.

These findings are also consistent with Durkheim's theory of social integration, which suggests that individuals derive support and a sense of belonging through shared values and social networks (Berkman et al., 2000; Grunow et al., 2023). Ethnically based organisations, including religious groups and compatriot associations, provide Korean expatriates in Ho Chi Minh City with a strong sense of community and social cohesion. They function as protective social environments by offering practical assistance, shared experiences, and emotional support, thereby helping members cope with the challenges of living in a foreign country. One participant commented:

I belong to a group of Protestant friends who attend church together regularly, followed by coffee and meals. We consider each other to be like family while living in Vietnam. We stay in regular contact through our KakaoTalk group, where we exchange information and experiences. Because my Vietnamese language skills are

limited, I depend on both my husband and this supportive network whenever I need assistance. (Female, 60 years old, homemaker, married)

Levels of participation in compatriot associations and religious organisations varied across different groups within the Korean expatriate community. Participants who had been transferred to Ho Chi Minh City by their employers, many of whom held senior positions with demanding workloads, generally reported lower levels of community participation because of time constraints. By contrast, those who had migrated independently demonstrated much stronger engagement with Korean community organisations. These participants relied extensively on fellow community members for practical information, emotional support, and assistance in overcoming the challenges of daily life in Ho Chi Minh City. These differences suggest the existence of varying levels of social engagement within the Korean expatriate community.

Overall, the daily lives of Korean expatriates in Ho Chi Minh City, including work, healthcare, education, and leisure activities, remain centred largely on relationships within the Korean community. Consequently, opportunities to establish closer relationships with Vietnamese residents remain limited, and participation in local community activities and civic organisations is generally low.

DISCUSSION

The findings on the social integration of the South Korean community in Ho Chi

Minh City (HCMC) reveal a pattern of social integration that differs considerably from traditional models of migration, thereby contributing to broader scholarly debates on segmented integration. Unlike permanent Korean immigrants in the United States, who frequently encounter strong assimilation pressures and systemic barriers such as language difficulties and legal marginalisation (Yem, 2015; Cutler et al., 2008), the participants in this study largely occupy a relatively privileged socioeconomic position. Within the context of HCMC, economic success does not necessarily lead to deeper social assimilation. Instead, it produces a pattern of residence that may be described as economically successful, socially selective, and culturally bounded. This reflects a form of functional integration comparable to that observed among Korean managers in India and Thailand, where expatriates maintain strong transnational connections and engage with the host society primarily to support business operations and professional objectives (Hasegawa, 2019; Kim & Lee, 2021).

Building upon this functional perspective, the integration experiences of Korean expatriates are further shaped by the resources they bring to the host society. Consistent with Resource Exchange Theory, the findings suggest that social well-being is closely associated with access to and exchange of practical resources (Foa & Foa, 1980). Participants with higher incomes generally enjoy greater access to quality housing, healthcare, and educational

opportunities, enabling them to adapt more comfortably to life in HCMC. At the same time, this unequal distribution of resources highlights the existence of social stratification within the Korean community itself. Although higher levels of education and income facilitate the functional aspects of everyday life, they may also reinforce attitudes and social practices that limit broader engagement with the host society. Field observations indicated that some participants maintained a degree of social distance from Vietnamese residents unless they occupied comparable professional or social positions. This suggests that social attitudes and class-based perceptions may exert a stronger influence on patterns of integration than language barriers alone. Even among international students and long-term residents married to Vietnamese spouses, a distinct Korean identity remained central, and relatively few participants reported developing deep, reciprocal relationships with members of the local community.

This tendency towards social insulation is further reinforced by a high degree of institutional self-sufficiency and a relatively closed corporate culture. Although similarities can be observed with the Korean enclave in Hanoi's My Dinh district, particularly in relation to the reproduction of Korean lifestyles through consumption (Kim, 2022), the Korean community in HCMC, especially in District 7, is further strengthened by distinctive organisational structures. As Le (2023) observes, Korean enterprises often operate within a Confucian

organisational culture characterised by collectivism and high-power distance, creating organisational environments that largely fulfil employees' professional and social needs internally. The present study suggests that limited integration is frequently a consequence of these structural and occupational conditions rather than solely the result of individual preference. For many professionals, the demanding workload and long working hours associated with Korean managerial culture (Kim & Lee, 2021) leave little time or energy to develop meaningful relationships beyond the workplace. Likewise, accompanying family members often experience a form of integration constrained by their dependence on ethnic institutions. Although Korean schools, churches, and community organisations function as valuable sources of practical and emotional support (Luewiphan, 2019), they may also unintentionally reduce opportunities for sustained engagement with the wider Vietnamese community.

Participants' reliance on Korean social networks in response to challenges encountered in Vietnam provides empirical support for Durkheim's concept of mechanical solidarity (Durkheim, 2013), whereby cohesion within a group is strengthened through shared identity and collective values rather than through integration into the broader social system. At the macro level, Vietnam's political stability emerged as an important factor influencing participants' decisions to live and work in the country, reflecting the common belief that people are naturally

drawn to secure and stable environments. While favourable economic conditions continue to attract Korean investment and skilled professionals, participants also identified legal and administrative barriers affecting foreign residents. Streamlining administrative procedures and further improving the regulatory environment for foreign professionals could enhance Vietnam's attractiveness as a destination for international talent while supporting more sustainable forms of long-term social integration.

Despite these contributions, the study has several limitations. First, the sample size is relatively small and focuses primarily on business expatriates occupying relatively high-status professional positions. Consequently, the findings may not fully capture the experiences of lower-income Korean workers or individuals employed outside major corporate organisations. Second, the study is confined to Ho Chi Minh City. Given the economic, cultural, and demographic differences across Vietnam, future research should undertake comparative studies involving Ho Chi Minh City and other centres of Korean settlement, such as Hanoi and Bac Ninh. Such comparisons would provide a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the diverse experiences of the South Korean diaspora in Vietnam.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) presents a dual landscape for the South Korean

diaspora by offering substantial professional opportunities while simultaneously maintaining structural barriers to deeper social integration. The findings indicate that although Korean expatriates achieve a high degree of economic integration, their social integration remains selective. While recent legal changes relating to property ownership have contributed to greater residential stability, practical challenges associated with residency, including complex administrative procedures and continued reliance on private international healthcare services, encourage an enclave-based pattern of living.

A defining feature of this experience is the central role played by intra-ethnic social networks. Rather than reflecting broad integration into the host society, these networks, including religious organisations and compatriot associations, function primarily as mechanisms of adaptation. They provide essential practical, emotional, and economic support while simultaneously reducing the need to engage more extensively with the wider Vietnamese community. Consequently, strong intra-group cohesion paradoxically reinforces social distance and contributes to relatively low levels of participation in local community activities.

This pattern of encapsulated integration persists even among long-term residents and those in intercultural marriages. Overall, the experiences of Korean expatriates in HCMC are characterised by functional self-sufficiency and a transnational mode of residence that is economically embedded yet socially insulated. To promote more meaningful social integration, it is necessary

to address institutional barriers while creating greater opportunities for sustained cross-cultural interaction.

The findings also have important policy implications. At present, Ho Chi Minh City lacks institutionalised mechanisms for cultural brokerage that can effectively support foreign communities in navigating administrative and public service systems. Local authorities could strengthen social integration by developing and digitising legal and administrative guidance in Korean and by appointing bilingual Vietnamese-Korean liaison officers in District 7 to assist Korean residents with public services and administrative procedures. In addition, hospitals could improve accessibility by providing Vietnamese-Korean bilingual signage and information materials, enabling Korean residents to access healthcare services more easily while encouraging greater engagement with local institutions.

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