

## HOW MIGRANTS FROM CITIES BECOME POTENTIAL INNOVATORS IN KOREAN RURAL COMMUNITIES

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**Abstract:** Since 2010 there were more migrants from urban center to rural area due to the increase of retirees population and willingness to seek alternative lifestyles to a neo-liberal society. By this migrants movement, rural policy makers expected and considered as a new source of labor to supplement the farming industry and to vitalize social activities in rural society, and to provide organizational ability to systemize rural projects in order to cope with a changing environment. However, it is not quite clear how these migrants may bring about changes in farming and in local communities. This paper will discuss the conditions and potentiality of these migrants in relation to farming projects. The paper argued that most migrants were well-educated, innovators for new farming practices, market oriented, tend to engage in health food production, and emphasize on eco-farming or environmentally friendly farming. As newcomers they have limitations in regards to farming technology, knowledge, physical power and land holdings. In regards to eco-friendly farming, they seem to be influenced more by NGOs and governmental support for organic farming. The migrants who do not farm mostly involved in village projects during the course of implementation. It was concluded that the migrants were very valuable assets to rural community and play a crucial role in putting together various interest groups in villages and establishing income-generating projects so that villagers can start being optimistic about their future.

**Keywords:** Urban migration; Eco-farming; Village movement; Rural Korea

### 1. Introduction

There is a surprising trend in Korean rural communities that since 2010 more migrants have been coming from urban centers rather than moving to them. There have been various interpretations to try and understand this trend among many scholars (Kim, *et al.*, 2011, Park, 2016). Firstly, this trend comes from the rising population of retirees from the baby boomer generation. An increase in early retirements, so-called honorary retirements, also seems to push some to move to rural areas. Among this group, many decided to pursue a new source of income, either major or supplementary. Some take advantage of this opportunity to try an all new lifestyle in the rural communities. They can go back to their native village or to a new village. Secondly, we can also witness migrants who seek alternative lifestyles to a neo-liberal society. This group seems to be divided into two. One that devotes themselves to eco-communities and another that tries to provide a healthy environment for their children. Both of these groups are more or less strongly community-orientated ones.

There have been mixed expectations among rural policy makers when observing these migrants. One expectation is to consider them a new source of labor to supplement the farming industry and to vitalize social activities in rural society. The other expectation is to provide organizational ability to systemize rural projects in order to cope with a changing environment. However, to meet these expectations, reasonable infrastructure to help ensure migrants settle down and remain in rural communities is keenly needed. There are files of educational programs offered by pseudo-governmental institutions to support potential migrants to rural communities. They cover a wide degree of topics that include the basic techniques of traditional farming, managing farms, and social relations in villages. Local governments also provide ample support to these potential migrants.

However, it is not quite clear how these migrants may bring about changes in farming and in local communities. This paper will discuss the conditions and potentiality of these migrants in relation to farming projects.

## 2. Discussion

### 2.1. *New concept of farming among migrants-newcomers*

There have been various farming attempts among migrants from cities. It has been reported that their farming does not follow conventional patterns. Their attempts seem to not fit traditional agricultural systems. They tend to choose techniques they find through the internet instead of relying upon local farming technology. They get help from local farmers but do not depend upon them. Rather, they prefer looking for new crop utilizing technology and knowledge, often from cyberspace. They seem to gather information through education, documents, and other newcomers. In that sense their concept of farming is totally different from old villagers and farmers. No wonder that more conflicts are noticed between migrant farmers and local farmers rather than with non-farming migrants (Kim *et al.*, 2011).

Most migrants are consumers of local crops, not producers, but they are also innovators for new crops. Their concept of farming is closely related to the environmental and organic farming movement that began in the late 1980s. Their main concerns for farming can be summarized as follows. First of all, relatively well-educated and urban experienced young migrants tend to pay attention to market situations. For those who seek new sources of income in farming, cyberspace is vital in terms of information, techniques, and market. They are reluctant to participate in conventional farming not only due to the lack of technology and experience, but also due to the heavy physical burden. This fact precludes them from staple subsistence farming. Rather, they tend to engage in health food production. Secondly, most migrants emphasize eco-farming or environmentally friendly farming. This method of farming needs cooperation or support from neighboring farmers. Often it is not easy to persuade local farmers to cooperate unless these new techniques are proven to be highly profitable. There have been cases that local farmers follow newcomers in new crop farming and fermenting technology for juice producing fruits and vegetables. Being mostly engaged in eco-organic farming also limits the size of farms and income. In addition, marketing is more the domain of those linked through the internet than for local consumers. On the other hand, these farming methods can become highly commercialized. Limited commercialized farming and marketing can allow migrant-

newcomers to utilize their networks and connections that they established in their city days. In that sense their concept of farming is a supplementary and commercialized one. This qualification seems to be valued as a new social resource to break through conventional farming and marketing.

### *2.2. Social movement and environmental and organic farming*

Primarily, there have been two driving forces behind the environmentally friendly and organic farming movement in Korean rural society. One is the social movement of the 1980s which lead us to democracy through massive public demonstration. While the demo-cratization movement was gaining its limited purpose in the late 1980s, it helped usher in the development of cooperative life associations (Yoon 2015). Some of the earliest among these groups were farmers' groups and feminist groups, which would become the two dominant cooperative life associations. Other organic producers' groups have also organized. Currently, the issue of food safety has become the main concern among farmers' associations, which had noticed the risk of conventional farming's dependence on fertilizers and pesticides, known as the chemical treadmill. Farmers have long suffered and been victimized by this modern form of commercial farming. Leaders for the movement toward more sustainable and environmentally conscious farming were those who had transitioned their activities from the democratic movement to a life support social movement.

The environmental and organic farming movement had become influential when the government had adopted an open-market policy for industry. Korean rural policy makers see eco-friendly farming as an evolving way to fight back against imported crops in the open market. In 1994 the division of eco-friendly farming was launched in the Ministry of Agriculture and Fishery. Officially the government started supporting eco-friendly farming with the promulgation of laws to support eco-friendly farming in 1998.

The Korean eco-friendly farming and organic farming movement first developed on the backs of NGOs that mostly originated from the demo-cratization movement up until the early 1990s. By the mid-1990s, the government actively joined in with this movement. Consumer cooperative societies actively built up stores and markets in the late 1980s and allowed for direct transactions with agricultural producers. These society stores not only sell eco-friendly crops and vegetables, but also offer environmental education to their members and encourage meetings between consumers and farmers. This movement seems to be effective at teaching the significance of environmental care and organic farming as a means to improve quality of life. It has encouraged farmers to join the organic farming movement. Organic crops get special attention even in supermarkets. Eco-friendly food and organic crops have become the cornerstone of socially concerned and intelligent consumption. The concern for food safety has risen in lockstep with increasing attention to organic food.

### *2.3. Why migrants from cities prefer organic farming*

Migrants tend to engage in non-traditional farming due to various reasons. As has been discussed above, they are not keen to staple farming. Rather, they are interested in health food which has higher value-added prices than conventional produce. As newcomers they have limitations in regards to farming technology, knowledge, and

physical power. Their small land holdings also limit the available space for cultivation and the methods with which to farm. Despite these impediments, migrants are mostly seeking an alternative life, an eco-friendly life, and good health in rural villages. They choose agriculture and rural villages to escape from a neo-liberal city life. In regards to eco-friendly farming, they seem to be influenced more by NGOs and governmental support for organic farming.

Not many migrants depend upon farming solely for their income. Living experiences in cities seem to teach them how life can be miserable when people are only concerned with efficiency, productivity and competition to survive. They are those who give up city life for an alternative life in rural communities. Therefore, eco-friendly farming is what they seek against an inhumane city lifestyle. Furthermore, income from agricultural products tends to only supplement other income. Migrants to rural communities do not seem to come only to farm, rather to seek a new balance with a new environment and themselves. Their concept of community and farming can cause conflicts with local conventional farmers. However, local natives can also learn from these newcomers to reevaluate the environment of their rural communities.

Organic crops and vegetables or eco-friendly produced products tend to circulate either directly on Internet sites or in cooperative stores. In this field the amount of products is rather small. It does not require a large market to distribute. Relatively large social networks of migrants have become a source of circulation for their own products. In due course, the ways to produce and to circulate products often differ from the ways of local farmers.

#### *2.4. Role of migrants in the new village movement*

Programs for potential migrants to rural communities always include lessons on the social relation between farming villagers. As a newcomer, migrants are expected to adjust themselves to a conservative social environment. Aged local natives and newcomers are always expected to get along well. In reality rural communities have long suffered due to a lack of man power and of new information and technology in farming. Many old systems were dissolved and limited sources of income weaken hope for the future. Sustainability as a village is often in danger.

There have been many attempts to build up new villages to overcome present obstacles. A new concept of community has been adopted in rural policy (Yang *et al.* 2001, Song *et al.* 2008). It emphasizes strong identity as a member of a village. It encourages new ways of seeing all the potentiality of community. Its local knowledge and unique environment can be a source of significant resources. It attempts to seek a source of income utilizing local crops and stories. Despite this beautiful reevaluation of rural community, it is not easy to succeed with only the native local members of a village. It needs manpower to manage 'projects' to build a new community.

There have been various project-supported plans for the wellbeing of rural communities. 'Making a village-project', 'village company-project', and 'experiencing a village-project' are all vigorously supported on the competition basis, but not many villages have had much success. A few successful example villages are those which allow migrants to be managers of the projects. This indicates that in rural communities, urban experienced young newcomers can be very valuable assets to the community.

The new concept of ‘village citizen’ is adopted to explain the role of migrants in old villages. As Chung (2014) suggests, migrants who do not farm but are willing to fulfill their role as a productive member of the village can be categorized as a ‘village citizen’. By imposing ‘citizenship’ to migrants it allows their active involvement in village projects during the course of implementation. It is expected of them to draw plans to combine old resources with potential new resources and to take charge of project management. The social networks and organizational skills of each migrant can be vital assets to the whole community.

Sincere trustful ‘village citizens’ can be vital members to manage ‘village companies’ together with native villagers. It is expected that the vision of a ‘living alternative village’ can come true through them (Chung 2014).

### 3. Conclusion

Migrants from cities to rural areas are a totally new kind of member in Korean rural society. Their presence represents the difficulties and potentiality of Korean society. Modern Korea has driven all members to be a cog in the ever growing machine of society. Efficiency, diligence, and competition are the main driving forces that run the society. This system affects all aspects of life. Winners get the most benefits, while the majority can easily be in a desperate situation. The rising number of migrants may reflect this trend. Often they explain that they are tired of living in constant competition, barreling toward a hopeless future. It is not fair to say that all migrants move to rural communities out of desperate situations, but it is reported that many wish to try an alternative lifestyle. In that sense, they see some hope in rural life.

On the other hand, many Korean rural communities have suffered seriously. Mass migration to cities has depleted what little human capital remained. The majority of those who stayed behind are a rapidly aging population focused on farming. Some of these fading communities have recently witnessed an influx of newcomers, but the productivity of farming is only back up through the use of machinery and chemicals. It is when people start worrying about the dissolution of society that relatively well educated younger members look to join rural communities.

Can these migrants from cities be a new hope for Korean rural society? It is too early to answer. However, their experiences are worthwhile to observe. There have been some successful stories in which migrants play a crucial role in putting together various interest groups in villages and establishing income-generating projects so that villagers can start being optimistic about their future.

One thing that is clear with this trend is that these migrants are keenly aware of the problems of a neo-liberal society and look for an alternative life. Their attempts seem to start with eco-friendly and organic farming which had been initiated by NGOs that fought for democracy in the late 1980s. These groups, at that time, were also desperate to look for an alternative life.

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