

Erica Vogel, *Migrant Conversions: Transforming Connections between Peru and South Korea*

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Over the past decade, researchers have become more interested in issues concerning diversity and migration throughout East Asia. One emerging theme in this body of work has been growing interest in the lives of smaller foreign populations that have been overlooked in previous literature in favor of larger, more publicly visible foreign and ethnic minorities (for instance, Brazilians and Koreans in Japan or ethnic Korean return migrants from China living and working in South Korea). The increased attention to these smaller foreign communities offers glimpses into lives that are truly at the margins of the societies in which they exist, and such attention gives voice to communities who find themselves operating in places distant from their homelands. Erica Vogel's *Migrant Conversions: Transforming Connections between Peru and South Korea* contributes to this important line of work by providing an ethnographic depiction of the lives of Peruvians in South Korea. Vogel does this by exploring how Peruvians experience “conversions” that help them make better sense of their experiences as (often) undocumented migrants. The book is based on “twenty-four months of ethnographic fieldwork in both South Korea and Peru” that Vogel conducted between 2006 and 2011 (19).

Migrant Conversions explains that Peruvians—like many other foreign populations in East Asia that have become the focus of recent attention—have been present in South Korea since the mid-1990s. Many finding their way to South Korea because of its proximity to Japan (where tens of thousands of Peruvians migrated to in the 1990s and 2000s), Peruvians have established roots in South Korea and have come to see it as a tangible alternative to Japan. Although at the time of Vogel's fieldwork there were just “815–2,000” Peruvians in South Korea (19), this number was considerably higher at its peak.

Conceptually, the book explores three types of conversions Peruvians experience: money (chapter 2), religious (chapter 3), and cosmopolitan (chapter 4). Vogel defines conversions as “the way migrants negotiate the meanings of their lives in a constantly changing context of place, statuses, and relationships and continue to make meaningful impacts on their worlds even when their money has run out” (5–6). Money, religion, and cosmopolitan aspirations—and changing conditions surrounding each of them respectively—thus facilitate how Peruvians negotiate their migration experiences, as well as the volatility and precarious reality that they face in their everyday lives.

The book does an excellent job of portraying the everyday experiences of Peruvians, explaining the ways that the global financial crisis impacted their lives, how they become engaged in Christian religious organizations and use this participation to rework their identities, and how they utilize economic and social capital in different ways at different points during their migration experience, among others. The multi-sited aspect of this ethnography provides a unique view into how Peruvians in South Korea, their remittances, and their families in Peru who receive them intersect, as well as how they have all been impacted by exogenous events beyond their control, such as the financial crisis. Peruvians working in Korea, and who were steadily sending remittances back to Peru, were hard hit by the inability to remit the same amount of money to

their families, which affected their families' lives in Peru. Vogel's multi-site fieldwork allows the reader to see the material and social impacts of remittances on the families of those involved.

The reader of *Migrant Conversions* also obtains a clear understanding of how Peruvians situate themselves within the contours of Korean society and how they are affected by top-down government policies and sociocultural institutions in Korea today. For example, Vogel explains how many Peruvians who work in Korea rediscover religion and do so in a way that is more Protestant and evangelical in nature than they were in Peru. Vogel proceeds to show how this religious conflict can create tensions among Peruvian families, especially when they return to Peru.

The book also dedicates some attention to the ways Peruvians fit into South Korea's multiculturalism and globalization agendas, and how the presence of undocumented Peruvians in South Korea interacts with the state's multiculturalism and migration policies. Vogel argues that Peruvians are not the type of multicultural agents that the South Korean state was looking for, which hinders Peruvians' ability to operate in Korea, makes them subject to immigration raids and deportation, and intensifies their precarious existence in Korea (chapter 1). This positions Peruvians as Others who are situated outside of the state's multicultural framework, which adds a further layer of complexity to the problems they experience in South Korea.

Among other things, the book also explores the ways that Peruvians conceptualize and enact cosmopolitan aspirations in South Korea, the different ways that undocumented and documented Peruvians deal with their environmental constraints, and the factors that ultimately took Peruvians to Japan. In particular, Vogel explains how one family's efforts to provide their child with an English-language education offer them new ways to reconfigure their identity through striving for cosmopolitan acceptance in the contemporary world.

Migrant Conversions provides rich ethnography into the lives of Peruvians who have worked in South Korea. In doing so, it connects Peruvians to larger economic forces, domestic religious and political aspirations, and the personal aspirations of Peruvians themselves. The ethnography truly provides a "thick description" of the lives of Peruvians and conceptually conveys how they make meaning of their experiences.

While the book offers excellent ethnography, the book is on the short side, and adding some additional chapters could have provided more substance to the book. One of its shortcomings is that it does not really show the impact that Peruvians have had on South Korean society; the book centers around the Peruvians themselves and offers nominal mention of their engagement within the religious organizations and local economies in which they are situated. Readers are thus left with a haphazard view of how Peruvians impact Korean society at cultural, political, and social levels. Adding a chapter on this, even a speculative one, would have made the book of much greater relevance to readers interested in Korean society. How Peruvians impact the religious organizations they passionately become part of, how they influence the Korean school system (where some send children to school despite lacking proper documentation), and how they establish relationships with Koreans are notably absent from the book. Especially significant is the lattermost, as voices from the Korean perspective seldom appear in the book.

Shortcomings notwithstanding, *Migrant Conversions* is an interesting book that makes a timely contribution to enhancing our understandings of the plurality of foreign experiences in East Asia. It offers readers excellent ethnography combined with

interesting conceptual arguments. The book would be of most interest to anthropologists and sociologists studying migration, as well as scholars in Asian studies and Latin American studies hoping to better understand the migrant experience from these perspectives.

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