

## What is the Well Ageing of Korean Migrants?

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This paper investigates to uncover the unheard stories of older Korean migrants living in Auckland, who shifted out from Korea in later life. The stories are shared by six older Koreans who participated in a semi-structured interview, five female, and one male. The study identified three factors considered to play a part in well ageing for those older migrants. The three facets are 1) a learning experience; 2) a sense of belongingness and; 3) self-contentment. The findings from the study suggest perception of what is seen as well ageing that distinguishes the participants in this study from those older Koreans living in Korea. While there has been a continuous interest in the sector of well ageing, there is still a lack of understanding that specifically looks at the well ageing process in older migrants around the globe. This paper contributes to knowledge on the perception of the well ageing process based on the shared thoughts of older migrants.

Key words: Well Ageing, Older Korean, Perception, Self-Learning

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## Introduction

Many studies focused their lenses on a renewed interest on well ageing ideology especially in Western society, as the baby boomer generation enters the ageing process (Chapman, 2006). There has been a great emphasis on seeking ways of spending a healthier and more successful later-life as the levels of education, and economic growth and wealth have increased among the ageing population (Parker et al., 2002). . Lee et al (2019) interpreted successful ageing into successful later-life and developed with criteria on what successful later life would include for Koreans. The criteria constitute a balance within the diverse aspects of later life, and they are: physical and mental health; self-acceptance and self-control in psychological adjustment; close relationships with spouse and children; social relationships and productive participation; financial security; and welfare.

Korea is rapidly entering into a superaged society. According to Statistics Korea, in 2019 people aged 65 and over would increase by 46.5%, and by the year 2067 it will comprise up to 45.4% of the whole Korean population (Jin, 2019). With such change, the growth of interest in exploring the ways of enhancing later life has increased as well. As with the international gerontology literature, studies about older Koreans living in Korea had a perspective on the topic of well ageing depending on their disciplinary nature. However, some shared commonalities were identifiable among researches (Yoon, 2016; Jin, 2019; Lee et al., 2019) on what kind of elements were considered to be crucial for older Koreans in terms of well ageing.

One of the most mentioned factors that plays a critical role in well ageing for older Koreans was the quality of social relationships (Lee et al., 2019; Yoon, 2016). Social relationships included participating in leisure activities and social interactions with other people. In the study carried out by Yoon (2016), participants often questioned what was exactly meant by the term 'leisure activities'. Thus, the interview questions had to be re-formed using elaborated terms to explain what leisure activity could include. It was found that the majority of participants in Yoon (2016) often stayed home watching television or doing house chores. While Lee et al. (2019) presented their findings into two-fold, older Koreans' purpose in later life, and what ageing means for older Koreans, participants in their study emphasised that older people must maintain positive mindsets about their later life.

To sum up, findings on what factors are considered to be critical in well ageing for older Koreans had some corresponding notions to Rowe and Kahn's (1997) model. However, while older Koreans acknowledged the importance of high cognitive and physical functioning, they did not mention much about being actively engaged with life. But instead, older Koreans showed difficulty in understanding what it means to be active socially. While in the international literature the concept of well ageing has no one agreed set of factors or measures, Korean academics exploring older people's wellness in Korea also emphasise that there is a need to conceptualise the model of well ageing based on

Korean cultural values and practices.

This study focuses on migrants experiencing the ageing process away from their country of origin. Such migrants' experiences may be exacerbated by additional challenges they face that are associated with settlement in the host country. Migrating to another country is a significant life event that migrants encounter, with many challenges impacting on the way of living and social networks.

While in this globalised world, academics have focused a light on migrant lives as workers, students, children, teenagers, spouses or parents, the voices of ageing Koreans in a host country are yet to be heard. The stories presented in this paper give voice to some older Koreans living in New Zealand as ageing migrants, and offers some insights into what they consider to be well ageing.

### **Koreans in New Zealand**

In 2014, Statistics New Zealand described Koreans as the fourth largest Asian ethnic communities residing in the country (Stats NZ, 2014). According to the data released in 2019, the size of the Asian<sup>7)</sup> population doubled since 2001, from 11.8 percent in 2013, to 15.1 percent (707,598) in 2018. This means, New Zealand is at historically high levels of migration, and more than a quarter of the population was born from overseas (Fry & Wilson, 2018).

While the New Zealand society is diversifying within and across ethnic groups (Statistics New Zealand, 2018), active Asian immigration in the country only began from the late 1980s, which brought in a substantial number of migrants from all over Asia. The most recent update identified a total of 35,664 residents in New Zealand are Korean (Statistics New Zealand, 2018), which illustrates that there has been an enormous increase of Korean migrants who have entered New Zealand between the years 2001 and 2018.

Korean migrants' settlement patterns in New Zealand are quite different from other countries with a relatively short migration history comparatively to other larger immigration countries, such as the United States with its first wave of Korean migration in 1903 (Wayne, 1988). The main feature distinguishing Korean immigration in New Zealand from the migrant figures of other larger immigration countries is that Korean migrants settling in New Zealand were drawn from the higher social class at the time, as highly skilled professionals and business entrepreneurs (Yoon and Yim, 1997). In other words, Korean migrants who came to New Zealand during the time period of active

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7) 'Asian' included: Asian (not further defined), Bangladeshi, Chinese (not further defined), Fijian Indian/Indo-Fijian, Filipino, Indian (not further defined), Indonesian (including Javanese/Sundanese/Sumatran), Japanese, Khmer/Kampuchean/ Cambodian, Korean, Lao/Laotian, Malay/Malayan, Other Asian, Pakistani, Sri Lankan (not further defined), Taiwanese Chinese, Thai/Tai/Siamese, Vietnamese.

migration wave were categorised as able to contribute to New Zealand's financial status. Although there has been a small decrease in the Korean immigration growth between the year 2001 and 2018, the number of Korean populations grew continuously.

Specifically looking at migrants aged 65 and over, which is the age group of interest, New Zealand received approximately 56,707 older people between 2004 to 2019 (Statistics New Zealand, 2020). There was not much discrepancy in gender proportion among arrivals in this age group. During the immigration boom period from 2001 onwards, many Korean elders came to New Zealand at their adult children's invitation. Park and Kim (2013) also identified that one of the most common reasons older Koreans come to New Zealand is often related to family, including such as reunification with their adult children.

Some of the characteristics of older Korean migrants living in New Zealand were observed through Park and Kim's (2013) work. According to the study, elderly migrants are neither voluntary nor involuntary. They are not considered as voluntary migrants because they are not self-initiated or motivated, nor sufficiently adaptable in processes of adjusting in a new environment. Contrarily, they are not involuntary migrants, such as, refugees who have no other choice than to shift out to another country.

In the decade from the 1990s, there has been a rapid growth of Koreans visiting New Zealand. there are diverse reasons why Koreans decided to migrate or travel to New Zealand. Apart from reunification with family members, reasons could include the Korean government's policy in 1989 encouraging overseas travel, a robust Korean economy, study opportunities, or the introduction of direct flights between New Zealand and Korean in 1993 (Yoon & Yoon, 2012). However, one common reason for choosing New Zealand that was raised by the older Koreans whose voices are presented in this paper was the clean and green environment of the host country. Environmental factors played a prominent role for them to choose New Zealand and accordingly influenced them the most to continue living in this country.

## **Methods**

This study used a qualitative method that was aligned with an interpretivist approach underpinned by based on individual interviews. The study involved six older Korean migrants living in Auckland, aged between 64 to 86 who had resided in New Zealand for at least ten years. Their basic demographic information is summarised in Table 1. A snowballing technique was applied for the recruitment of participants. The interviews were semi-structured, they were divided three sections such as living condition, life after migration, and learning experiences. Duration of interviews were less than an hour.

The venue was decided based on participants preference, where they felt most comfortable and secure to participate in an interview. Data analysis was used to thematic framework.

Table 1. *Participants' backgrounds*

Pseudonyms	Gender	Age	Migration year
Adel	F	74	1993
David	M	72	1995
Kate	F	64	2001
Olivia	F	76	2001
You	F	76	2006
Sue	F	86	2009

## Results

Different aspects of living were observable, including their perceptions on well ageing. It was identifiable that the older Korean participants were engaged with three dimensions as a sign of well ageing. 1) current involvement in a learning activity; 2) a sense of belongingness; and 3) a feeling of self-contentment. Furthermore, external factors that influenced the three facets included environmental, communal, and societal circumstances. The three facets do not work independently but rather interdependently with one another..

### *Learning experience*

Older Korean participants demonstrated learning experience and its importance in order to feel that they are well ageing. Some older Korean migrants saw learning engagement as a healthy way of living their later life. You referred to learning as a way of getting healthier, and it helps to maintain a well-being mind. David stated his purpose of learning was to become healthier, and he emphasised that well-being is not only related to physical health, but it is more about mental health. Sue also acknowledged the benefit of learning in later life, although she tended to express a hesitating view towards learning something at an old age.

Learning something is always good. In our age group, well-being is very important, and it is pretty much the only thing we have to keep up with. Learning will help older people in many ways to maintain a healthier lifestyle. (Sue)

Among different ways of enhancing social interaction for older people, engaging in a learning activity was the easiest and meaningful method. At the beginning of the interviews with the older Korean participants, it was strongly evident that they held a traditional idea of what learning is. There was a tendency that almost all of them only recognised a classroom setting or learning in the presence of a teacher as ‘proper’ learning. However, with some probes explaining that anything could be counted as learning, not only the formalised activities, they began to understand the idea of what informal and incidental learning is. Once they acknowledged the concept of informal learning, they talked about a tremendous amount of learning experiences.

It was found that they put much effort to maintain their skills of using modern technologies such as a smartphone or tablet. Stadler and Teaster (2002) also addressed the importance of older people to learn to adapt to rapidly changing technology not to be left out from the constantly developing world. Older Korean participants appreciated that they still could participate in learning at an older age and took joy in it. Many of the participants described learning as a tonic in later life. Having to participate in different learning activities is not just about gaining new knowledge for those older Koreans, but it is a way of interacting with others, and to keep themselves busy, to be able to step out of the household. Learning participation provided them with a place to go, prevented them from getting isolated, enabled them to meet people, share information, which played a significant part in well ageing as migrants in the host country. Older Korean participants also gained a sense of belongingness by involving in different learning activities.

### ***Belongingness***

A sense of belongingness is not only about whether the older Koreans felt they were included as migrant citizens in the host country, but it has more reference to their engagement in a community or even a small social group. Many researchers discuss the importance of community involvement, and in that, such involvement would enhance migrants’ acculturation process (Park et al., 2018; Ward et al., 2001; Amit & Bar-Lev, 2014; Bauman, 1996). Belongingness is the key connector that links the individuals in society, and for migrants especially, it ascertains that they are not outsiders of the host country. Academics suggest that migrants’ belongingness is highly connected to their well-being, and they emphasise that a lack of sense of belongingness for migrants even result in affecting their decision to continue staying in the host country (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Capra & Steindl-Rast,

1991). In the case of the older Koreans living in New Zealand, a lack of sense of belongingness did not necessarily affect them in this aspect since their migration was dependant on family reunification. However, they did express that their community and social participation affected their psychological health a lot. They shared their depressing experience of feeling lonely and left out by not having enough places to belong to.

I thought I will be able to go to more places and join more communities in my later life, but I mistakenly thought there will be a chance. The world has gotten smaller as I get old. I think it is very important for all of us to seek out places to go, to contribute as much as we can. We need to belong to a number of places to not become lonely and disabled as one individual in this country. (Kate)

The older Korean participants produced a lot of positive energy and joy through their participation in different communities. Not many of them were involved with communities that are non-Korean, and language played the most prominent role in restricting the participants' ability to socialise with the local New Zealanders. Nevertheless, the study found that they did not feel the necessity to step out from the circle of the Korean community since they were happy and had people to interact with. One of the reasons why older Korean participants put less effort into learning English is because there is no place for them to practise what they learn because they do not have a connection with the local New Zealanders. You expressed some disappointment of not having any English native speaker friends that she can practise the language with. She is the only participant who is still putting effort in learning English, but due to such restrictions, she feels challenged.

The only thing I am still not satisfied with is the loss of connection with non-Koreans living in New Zealand. I still wish I have more Kiwi friends. Having no non-Korean speaking friend even after living in New Zealand for this long, I feel like I have an issue. I love learning English, but I have no place to use what I learn. I wish I had someone I can talk to on any topic that is related to New Zealand ... you know like news ... information [related to New Zealand]. When I meet up with other Korean ladies, we only talk about the things that don't interest me. And besides, even if we did [talk about what is happening in the local area, or the country] none of us knows whether it is correct or not. (Olivia)

The reason why Olivia described her relationship with the local people as a 'lost connection' is

because she had some regular customers who would visit her and talk in English for some time when she used to own a business. Apart from Olivia, other older Koreans did not show any inconvenience of not socially engaging with non-Koreans mainly because they did not have a chance to engage with them in the past; thus, they had nothing to compare with.

Sue expressed relief of having a place to go and that she can meet up with other Koreans regularly through a community she belongs to. She believes this is one of the reasons she can stay healthy and positive.

Knowing that I have a place where I belong to is like a blessing at my age. At my age, people feel sad because they feel like they are abandoned or not useful in the community or society anymore. Assigned to a group of people ... you know even a small gathering helps a lot for aged people to stay positive and certainly feel like my later life is going well. I belong to church, and I belong to a table tennis club. Even with the two participation I can keep myself busy. The most impressive thing about being a member of a community is I can't wait for Wednesdays and Sundays to come. It's the joy of my life at the moment that gives me happy energy. (Sue)

You also talked about the importance of belongingness for people in her age group. She has been volunteering at a local Korean church as a knitting instructor for almost ten years now. You first started this voluntary involvement because one of her friends recommended her to the church. She never expected to contribute for this long.

When I first started this, it was like a burden for me. I only said 'yes' because the person who recommended me was a close friend of mine. I owed her because she helped me a lot when I first came New Zealand. At that time, I was only going to volunteer for a year maximum. But it's been 10 years. Knitting class was like a chore for me at first but now it's the source of energy. I think it is very important that we have a place that we belong to, especially for older people. Family is different from this kind of interaction. As we age, we need to move more, not only exercising but interacting with other people a lot. A sign of well ageing is not something unique or special. (You)

The findings from the study indicate that a sign of well ageing includes a sense of belongingness. It is evident that having a place to go for an activity of one's interest, and to interact with others

apart from the family members, plays a crucial role for older migrants to gain positive energy in their later life. Also, the experiences of older Koreans acknowledge that a certain understanding of the way of life in New Zealand needs to happen in order to feel a comfortable sense of belongingness, and this is clearly fostered by informal and formal opportunities for social interactions. Although the majority of older Koreans were only engaging in the Korean communities, through active social communication with other Korean members, they gained a secure sense of belongingness. This not only provided them with a place to go and participate in activities, but they expressed a substantial relief that they belonged somewhere in this host country. Through meeting other Koreans around a similar age and background insured the older Koreans, a sense of belongingness, which they felt their later life is well formed.

### *Self-contentment*

A feeling of self-contentment is also crucial for older Koreans, and this is gained through what they are involved with, such as, learning and community-based activities. The participants expressed a lot of self-fulfilment and satisfaction when they shared their stories on their learning involvement, their social groups or community where they felt they belonged. It was found that their contribution did not last long if they could not attain a feeling of self-contentment in the activities or communities they engage in, for example, Olivia expressing satisfaction towards her singing in a high-standard choir.

Olivia proudly talked about her English learning participation and that she is enjoying it more than anything she did after moving to New Zealand. "I am so proud of myself. My English teacher said my writing is very neat! When I hear such compliments, it feels really nice." In fact, Olivia brought her English notebooks to her interview and went through the pages to exhibit her work. She referred to learning English as a lifelong homework for any migrants who moved from non-English speaking countries, and she emphasised that learning a language in her age group is never easy. However, the only reason she could continue is that she feels a great sense of satisfaction from completing each term. There could be many other reasons based on the participants' circumstances for not being able to participate in improving their language skills, since almost every non-English speaking migrant would have tried learning English after their arrival in New Zealand.

Adel is another participant who spends her daily life filled with self-contentment. She travels across New Zealand and visits dynamic museums and exhibitions. She had no free time available for such visits in the earlier years of her migration because she was fully occupied trying to adjust and adapt to the new culture and life. Now that she has completed her duty as a mother raising two children, she actively explores different cities of New Zealand by herself. Adel believes that she cannot fully explore nor enjoy her trips if someone accompanies her. She takes the bus and train to further places,

and she is always up to date with events held around where she lives, and in other cities. She expressed a great sense of self-contentment in exploring around different cities not only because of what she sees but also because she is doing everything on her own.

I feel so excited when I put my feet into my sneakers in the morning when leaving home for another new exploration. I love not only visiting set up exhibitions or events, but I also enjoy visiting the art of nature, what nature has given us I learn a lot through this. Even the journey to the place is learning for me. I need to arrange everything in English, and this gives me the chance to communicate in English, which is a good practice for me. I also learn to use ticket machines, online bookings, and I do all small bits. Then, I feel very proud of myself. The fact that I did everything on my own.  
(Adel)

Accordingly, many literature suggest that learning engagement is one of the keys to best facilitate in a host country for migrants (Zhu & Zhang, 2019; Guo, 2010). However, the participants did not only acknowledge that the learning engagement helped a part in settling to the host country but also plays an essential role in having a more meaningful later life. Learning experiences of the older Koreans constitute all of the learning types, whether knowledge or skill was attained formally, informally, intentionally, or incidentally, however, considering the age group of the participants the experiences were mostly associated with informal learning settings. As Rowe and Kahn's (1997) model of well ageing include one's active engagement with life, Schuller et al. (2004) highlighted that learning engagement allows the development of three significant forms of capital for people, which are human, social, and identity capital, and in the case of the older Korean participants, social capital appeared to be the most substantial benefit of learning. The older Korean participants saw learning engagement as one of the essential tools in the process of their ageing, more precisely, a tool to age well.

The study also identified that the participants, especially the female participants, find much self-contentment through voluntary participation. One frequently mentioned voluntary work activity from the participants was the Korean Garden, which involves visiting local parks every month to pick up rubbish. This was seen to be one of the most sophisticated ways of spending time for the participants. Through this activity, older Koreans gained self-fulfilment and expressed joyfulness at the fact that, although it may be a small contribution, they are helping the community and environment. You is also one of the contributors to this voluntary work, and she connected her participation to showing appreciation to the host country "I am very thankful for what I get from the government, and this may not have been possible at all if I still lived in Korea. I felt I am doing so little compared

to what I've received so far." Olivia, who also participates in this activity, explained the complementary view, "Korean Garden is good in many ways. It's good because I can volunteer to contribute to New Zealand, picking up rubbish may seem like a very small contribution, but I am still doing something for the environment." Participants paid dues of ten dollars per month because it is one of the requisites of joining the Korean Garden; they were willing to pay to pick up rubbish.

It is difficult to easily go and join activities that requires meeting new people at my age. It takes a lot of courage psychologically because as we age, we lose confidence. I am physically well, but for many people in my age, they face a challenge to join the community because of lack of mobility. But we need this kind of involvement, which is often times quite difficult. I guess what I am trying to say is for us, there needs to be a strong self-satisfaction that overcomes the fear towards participating in different activities to go out and be active. I am sure that pretty much everything that older people are doing right now are possible because we gain self-contentment from doing it. (Sue)

Adel also talked about the importance of self-contentment for older Koreans living in New Zealand. She shared a similar notion to Sue that gaining self-contentment is very important as people age, that could play a crucial role in well ageing for older people.

As people age and get elderly, they get lost in so many things. We are given a lot of free time but sometimes we don't know what to do with it. Then sometimes it leads to a not so pleasant period where we feel we are no longer useful in the family, or society. Then we lose confidence in anything that we do. I think one of the best ways to make our lives active again is we need to find what we are interested in doing. You know, like doing things from our own interest. And that way we can gain more satisfaction from what we do, and I think confidence and healthy ageing process will naturally happen. Older people's clock is also ticking, and it is current. (Adel)

By and large, the older Koreans in this study considered self-contentment as the key reason that enables them to be active in the community and society. All of the participants' contributions as a member of a community of other learning activities placed its foundation on self-contentment. To sum up, the findings from the study indicated that the older Korean migrants highly valued the importance of three facets, learning, a sense of belongingness, and self-contentment as a sign of well ageing.

The three facets observed to be working together in gaining a sense of well ageing for older Koreans residing in New Zealand.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

Older Korean migrants' stories indicate that many areas in life narrow down as they age. It does not only refer to physical mobility but in terms of psychological and social functions as well. They confessed that places they could go and contribute to have reduced with ageing, which led to a greater possibility of feeling isolated or depressed.

Studies on well ageing based on the Korean context analysed physical and psychological health, future hopes, children's success in the society, having a purpose in later life, social connection, relationship with adult children, religion, living an active life, dying well, and maintaining positive thoughts about life, as factors that indicated well ageing. With their reflections on physical and psychological well-being as well as active engagement with life, the older Korean participants living in New Zealand demonstrated factors that corresponded to Rowe and Kahn's (1997) typology, as well as those of studies conducted in Korea.

The universal factors identified by all studies introduced in this paper include the importance of social connection, active socialising, active living, and maintaining positive thoughts and mind about later life. As to Rowe and Kahn's (1997) emphasis on physical and psychological well-being as well as active engagement with life concerning older people's well ageing, older Korean participants living in New Zealand showed corresponding factors to Rowe and Kahn along with the studies in Korea.

Older Koreans in those studies often included their children's success in the society and their relationship with their children as part of crucial well ageing factors; however, none of this was mentioned among older Koreans living in New Zealand. This is predicted to be in relation to less competitive environment of New Zealand than Korea, where their children's success do not differ much from other Koreans in the community. Also, as explained in Koreans in New Zealand, Koreans who migrated to New Zealand, especially around the time when the participants of the study came over, their financial or social status was quite high since they already retired from work before moving to the host country. Consequently, neither the older parents nor their adult children experienced the kind of lowering of their employment prospects after migration that is a commonly cited experience in the literature, both in New Zealand and internationally (Fielding, 1995; Min, 2016).

Another distinguishing factor mentioned by older Koreans in the studies conducted in Korea that was not shared by the Korean participants living in New Zealand was the question of financial security. This is perhaps because older Koreans aged 65 and over who either hold a permanent resident visa

or a New Zealand citizenship receive superannuation from the government. The superannuation system is well established and universal in New Zealand, and older people receive quite a practical benefit from the government. The participants in this study were well aware of this: they felt very well cared for, and they all shared their appreciation for the New Zealand government. They correspondingly said they do not believe that their life would have been this comfortable at this age if they still lived in Korea. In Korea, it is often seen where older people pick up recycling rubbish around the streets and sell them for food and to pay their rent. On the other hand, the participants in this study pay money to join a community to go and pick up rubbish at a local park with a purpose to give a small contribution to the host country, which is an interesting phenomenon to look at.

This paper has revealed that there is a distinction in the perception of well ageing depending on the social environment in which older Koreans reside. The paper also demonstrated that older Korean migrants of the study who are living in New Zealand are active contributors within their host society with a purpose to show their appreciation to the country.

Although more studies in relation to well ageing of older people are done compared to the past, there is still not enough research and a lot more to learn about older Koreans' well ageing process in the host country. Furthermore, as was mentioned, Westernised models of well ageing for older people have limitations to apply to non-Western background people. Thus, there is a necessity for more research to be investigated to encourage a model of well ageing for older Asian migrants. As the world is rapidly entering into the tremendous growth of an ageing migrant population, older migrants have much to teach us well ageing in host societies.

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