

THE SOCIAL STATUS AND CULTURAL IDENTIFICATION OF LABOR MIGRANTS (A CASE STUDY OF UZBEKS IN SOUTH KOREA)

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the socio-economic conditions and cultural identification of Uzbek labor migrants in the Republic of Korea. The study relies exclusively on empirical field materials, interviews, and analytical observations included in the dissertation dataset. The article analyzes the structural dynamics of migration flows, demographic composition, integration into the labor market, social conditions, and the mechanisms for preserving cultural identity within Uzbek migrant communities. Particular attention is paid to the role of diaspora institutions, religious practices, and symbolic cultural elements in shaping collective identity. The findings indicate that Uzbek migrants demonstrate a dual identification model, whereby, alongside economic integration, they maintain their national-cultural identity through social cohesion and cultural reproduction.

Keywords: labor migration, social status, cultural identification, diaspora institutions, religious practices, national traditions, transnational processes, social integration, labor, migration movement, social spheres, diaspora solidarity, legal relations, adaptation mechanisms, acculturation model, demographic composition.

АННОТАЦИЯ

В данной статье рассматривается социально-экономический статус и культурная идентичность трудовых мигрантов из Узбекистана в Республике Корея. Исследование основано исключительно на эмпирических полевых исследованиях, интервью и аналитических наблюдениях, включенных в базу данных диссертаций. Анализируются структурная динамика миграционных потоков, демографический состав, интеграция на рынке труда, социальные условия и механизмы сохранения культурной идентичности узбекских мигрантских общин. Особое внимание уделяется роли институтов диаспоры, религиозных традиций и символических культурных элементов в формировании коллективной идентичности. Результаты показывают, что узбекские мигранты демонстрируют модель двойной идентичности, сохраняя свою национальную и культурную идентичность посредством социальной сплоченности и культурного воспроизводства, одновременно будучи экономически интегрированными.

Ключевые слова: трудовая миграция, социальный статус, культурная идентичность, институты диаспоры, религиозные практики, национальные ритуалы, транснациональные процессы, рынок, социальная интеграция, труд, миграционное движение, социальные сферы, солидарность диаспоры, миграционное движение, правовые отношения, соответствующие механизмы, модель аккультурации, демографический состав.

INTRODUCTION

Labor migration from Uzbekistan to the Republic of Korea is currently emerging as one of the largest and most stable forms of transnational migration. Ongoing processes of economic modernization in Uzbekistan, imbalances within the domestic labor market, and the expanding perceptions among youth regarding migration strategies and labor mobility have rendered this phenomenon a highly relevant subject for scholarly inquiry. In particular, transformations within the Korean labor market—often characterized by its “3D” (dirty, dangerous, and difficult) dimensions—along with migrants’ increasing demand for social protection, mechanisms of cultural adaptation, and processes of personal transformation, necessitate comprehensive and multidimensional analysis. Migration produces not only economic but also social, spiritual, and cultural consequences, making it a significant field of study for both the social sciences and historical analysis.

Level of Study (Literature Gap): The primary objective of this article is to provide a systematic analysis of the social life of Uzbek labor migrants in the Republic of Korea, as well as the processes of cultural identification and self-awareness within diaspora communities. The research is grounded in qualitative approaches, including field interviews with migrants and observations of their everyday social experiences, which enable a deeper scientific understanding of the subject. While labor migration has been widely examined from an economic perspective in existing studies, issues such as migrants’ cultural identity, the role of diaspora institutions, and the formation of collective solidarity within the context of Uzbekistan–Korea relations remain insufficiently explored. This article seeks to address and partially fill this existing research gap.

Research Aim: to conduct a comprehensive, multidimensional, and in-depth scientific analysis of the social status, living conditions, employment structure, and positions of Uzbek labor migrants across various segments of the labor market in the Republic of Korea, as well as their processes of cultural identification and adaptation.

Research Objectives:

1. To identify the factors influencing migration flows;
2. To examine the demographic composition and employment patterns of Uzbek migrants in Korea;

3. To analyze living conditions, social environments, and levels of adaptation;
4. To determine the role of diaspora institutions, religious practices, and national traditions in shaping identity;
5. To assess the consequences and social risks associated with irregular migration.

Literature Review and Methodology.

Following the attainment of independence, Uzbekistan experienced economic instability, industrial decline, and rising unemployment, all of which contributed to the intensification of labor migration. In the 1990s, employment abroad became a primary life strategy for many citizens seeking to restore their economic well-being. Initial migration flows were predominantly directed toward Russia and other CIS countries, and international organizations have characterized this phase as informal migration based on social networks [3].

During this period, labor migration to the Republic of Korea also expanded steadily, marking a new phase in transnational labor exchange. With the introduction of the Industrial Trainee System in 1993, Uzbek citizens began working in Korea as technical trainees [15]. The 1990s also witnessed the expansion of bilateral economic cooperation, the emergence of major Korean companies in Uzbekistan, and the establishment of political and legal foundations for labor migration. Uzbek communities and diaspora organizations began to form in cities such as Seoul and Busan [13].

In 2004, the Industrial Trainee System was abolished and replaced by the Employment Permit System (EPS) [11]. Uzbekistan joined this system in 2006, introducing institutional mechanisms such as Korean language testing, electronic verification through HRD Korea, and comprehensive medical examinations. Uzbek migrants began working in Korea under three-year E-9 visas while simultaneously developing industrial skills. According to official statistics, more than 65,900 Uzbek citizens were sent to Korea through intergovernmental programs between 1995 and 2025 [14].

Field research indicates that migration to Korea among Uzbeks is not accidental but closely linked to clearly defined strategic life goals. Migrants primarily seek to improve their social status, strengthen their position within society, and enhance their capacity to support their families. Many respondents emphasize that South Korea, with its strong work ethic, stable wages, and opportunities for upward mobility, represents one of the most favorable destinations for achieving economic and professional advancement.

A second key factor is the establishment of stable and consistent income sources. Due to the instability or seasonality of domestic labor markets, employment in Korea provides migrants with opportunities for long-term financial security, particularly for those responsible for supporting family members remaining in Uzbekistan.

A third factor involves the accumulation of capital for housing, entrepreneurship, or future economic independence. Some respondents interpret migration decisions as part of broader strategies related to marriage, family formation, and the provision of better educational opportunities for their children. In certain cases, labor migration intersects with marriage migration, resulting in the emergence of transnational families. Thus, migration to Korea functions not only as an economic strategy but also as a social and demographic one.

Following the sharp increase in migration flows during the 2010s, the first institutional forms of the Uzbek diaspora began to emerge in Korea. Religious centers, cultural associations, and Uzbek-speaking communities appeared in major cities such as Seoul, Ansan, and Busan, contributing to the preservation of cultural identity and facilitating social adaptation [8]. At the same time, digital platforms such as Facebook and Telegram became important tools for information exchange, mutual assistance, and strengthening diaspora solidarity [4].

After the easing of pandemic restrictions in 2022, migration processes gradually resumed. In 2022–2023, labor migration flows to Korea recovered, reinforcing the role of Uzbek migrants as an important labor force in low-skilled sectors of the Korean economy [7].

Socio-Demographic Composition of Labor Migrants

The migrant population is predominantly composed of men aged 20–39, whose migration propensity is driven by the need to achieve economic stability, fulfill family obligations, and meet strategic housing needs. Field data indicate the following regional distribution of migrants: 40% originate from the Fergana Valley, 25% from Samarkand and Kashkadarya regions, 15% from Surkhandarya and Bukhara regions, 10% from Tashkent city, and 10% from Karakalpakstan and Khorezm regions. Region of origin directly influences migrants' social networks, support mechanisms, and housing opportunities [6].

Employment Sectors

The employment structure of Uzbek labor migrants is largely concentrated in the manufacturing sector, which accounts for approximately 65% of total employment. An additional 20% are employed in construction, 10% in agriculture, and 5% in services. In international migration literature, such occupations are often classified as “3D” (dirty, dangerous, and demeaning) jobs, indicating that Uzbek migrants primarily integrate into the Korean labor market through physically demanding, high-risk, and low-prestige employment.

Living Conditions and Social Life

Field studies reveal that most Uzbek migrants working under the EPS system reside in employer-provided dormitories. According to UNDP data, these facilities are often overcrowded, with four to eight individuals sharing a single room, and are

characterized by poor ventilation and substandard sanitary conditions. As a result, some migrants prefer to rent independent accommodations such as one-room apartments or goshiwons. However, high deposit requirements and rental costs limit access to such options. Newly arrived migrants often initially reside with friends or relatives, reflecting the strength of mutual support within diaspora networks and facilitating early-stage adaptation. Housing conditions play a direct role in shaping migrants' social integration [5].

Processes of Cultural Identification

The cultural identity of Uzbek migrants in Korea is shaped by several key factors. Religious practices function as central institutions reinforcing diaspora cohesion. Muslim communities in cities such as Bucheon, Ansan, and Busan serve not only as spaces for preserving religious identity but also as hubs for social support and spiritual solidarity. Collective practices such as Friday prayers, iftar gatherings, and religious events strengthen migrants' sense of belonging [16].

Field research also highlights the importance of national traditions in maintaining cultural memory. Uzbek migrants continue to celebrate traditional holidays such as Navruz, Ramadan, and Eid al-Adha, as well as family ceremonies, thereby reinforcing collective identity. Traditional cuisine—such as plov, shashlik, and samsa—serves as a symbolic cultural element that strengthens solidarity within diaspora communities. These practices enable migrants to remain connected to their cultural roots while adapting to a new social environment.

Social media platforms also play a crucial role in diaspora life. Telegram and Facebook groups such as “Korea_info,” “Uzbeks in Korea,” “Uzbek Women in Korea,” and “Korea_pochta” have become essential communication tools for information exchange, job search, legal consultation, and problem-solving. These digital networks enhance internal cohesion, accelerate adaptation processes, and reduce social isolation among migrants.

From a theoretical perspective, the acculturation model developed by John W. Berry provides a methodological framework for analyzing these processes. According to this model, migrants adopt one of four strategies in relation to the host society: integration, assimilation, separation, or marginalization [2].

Irregular Migration and Its Consequences

Despite the existence of structured legal mechanisms, irregular migration remains a significant issue in South Korea. According to a 2006 report by Amnesty International, more than 180,000 undocumented migrants resided in the country, a substantial portion of whom were Uzbek citizens [1]. Key challenges include informal employment, lack of access to healthcare and social protection, and the constant threat of deportation.

Field materials indicate that in recent years some recruitment agencies have sent young individuals lacking language proficiency to Korea, resulting in cases of unemployment, financial loss, and social vulnerability. These conditions exacerbate risks such as legal illiteracy, adaptation difficulties, and economic exploitation. According to a 2025 report by International Organization for Migration, 8,812 undocumented Uzbek migrants were identified in Korea, with increasing rates of irregular employment in manufacturing, services, and construction sectors [10].

The Korean Immigration Service has intensified inspections in 2024–2025 due to rising migration-related violations, including the use of falsified vehicle registrations. Large-scale enforcement operations in Jeonnam Province have increased monitoring in industrial zones and major transportation routes [12].

IOM reports further emphasize that irregular migration leads to labor exploitation, excessive working hours, and limited access to healthcare, particularly in construction and service sectors. In response, the Korean government launched the “Undocumented Worker Regularization Initiative” in 2024, aimed at temporarily legalizing experienced undocumented workers [9]. Additional measures include increasing EPS quotas and strengthening bilateral cooperation with Uzbekistan.

Overall, irregular migration in Korea represents a complex phenomenon shaped by economic factors, legal constraints, linguistic and cultural barriers, and individual vulnerabilities, requiring comprehensive policy and social interventions.

Conclusion

The social status of Uzbek migrants in Korea is shaped by economic opportunities, housing conditions, social networks, and the activities of diaspora institutions. Their cultural identity is consistently preserved through religious practices and national traditions. At the same time, irregular migration contributes to increased psychological stress, social instability, and legal risks. Overall, Uzbek migrants in Korea have formed a transnational labor diaspora that embodies a complex social system combining economic integration with cultural continuity.

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