

President Lee Jae Myung's Migration Policy and Chinese Migration to South Korea:

Problems of Intercultural Communication

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Abstract

This article analyzes President Lee Jae Myung's migration policy in the context of growing Chinese migration to South Korea and related challenges to intercultural communication. The study aims to identify key challenges arising in the interaction between the host society and Chinese migrants and to assess the effectiveness of the proposed policy measures. The study employs methods of comparative political analysis, discourse analysis of official documents and media sources, and elements of a sociocultural approach to the study of communication. The results demonstrate that, despite the declared course toward integration and social inclusion, significant barriers remain – linguistic, cultural, and institutional—exacerbated by societal stereotypes and the politicization of the migration issue. Particular attention is paid to the role of public policy in creating conditions for migrant adaptation and reducing social tension. It is concluded that improving the effectiveness of migration policy requires a comprehensive approach, including the development of intercultural dialogue programs, reform of integration mechanisms, and a more consistent government communications strategy.

Keywords: migration, migration policy, South Korea, Chinese migrants, Lee Jae Myung

Introduction

In 2025–2026, South Korea is experiencing profound demographic, economic, and social transformations that are significantly reshaping both its domestic development and its position within East Asia. One of the most urgent structural challenges facing the country is the continuing demographic crisis, characterized by an extremely low fertility rate and a rapidly aging population. South Korea has consistently recorded one of the lowest birth rates in the world, creating long-term concerns regarding labor shortages, pension sustainability, and the future competitiveness of the national economy. As the number of working-age citizens continues to decline, the state faces increasing pressure to maintain productivity and support economic growth in labor-intensive sectors such as manufacturing, construction, agriculture, healthcare, logistics, and services.

This demographic imbalance has made migration policy an increasingly important instrument of national development. In recent years, the country has experienced a steady increase in immigration flows, particularly labor migration, as employers seek to compensate for domestic workforce shortages. Among all foreign nationals residing in South Korea, Chinese migrants constitute one of the largest and most visible groups. Their significant presence can be explained by several interconnected factors, including geographical proximity, long-standing historical and cultural ties, economic interdependence, educational mobility, and well-established migration networks that facilitate both legal and informal migration channels.

The growing presence of migrants contributes to economic vitality, labor market flexibility, and demographic stabilization, but it also introduces serious intercultural communication challenges within what has traditionally been perceived as a relatively ethnically homogeneous society. South Korea's national identity has historically been built

around ideas of cultural unity, ethnic continuity, and linguistic homogeneity. Although globalization and international migration have gradually transformed this perception, many social institutions and public attitudes still reflect assumptions of cultural sameness. The expansion of foreign communities, especially large and highly visible groups such as Chinese migrants, therefore creates both opportunities for multicultural development and tensions related to identity, belonging, and social trust.

Problems of intercultural communication emerge at multiple levels of everyday life. Language barriers remain one of the most immediate obstacles to successful adaptation, particularly for migrants working in low-skilled sectors with limited access to formal education or language training. Misunderstandings may occur not only because of linguistic limitations but also because of contrasting cultural assumptions regarding hierarchy, politeness, responsibility, and social participation. These barriers can slow integration, reduce institutional trust, and increase social isolation among migrant communities.

In addition to interpersonal communication problems, public perceptions of migration are strongly influenced by media discourse, political narratives, and broader geopolitical tensions. Chinese migrants in South Korea are often represented through conflicting images: on the one hand, they are viewed as an essential labor force and a necessary part of economic sustainability; on the other hand, they may be associated with social competition, cultural difference, security concerns, and political suspicion. Negative stereotypes and anti-Chinese sentiment have become more visible in recent years, especially in online discourse and public debates concerning housing, employment, crime, and national identity. Such attitudes complicate not only integration policies but also the broader social acceptance of multiculturalism.

Under the administration of President Lee Jae Myung, migration policy has gained renewed importance as part of a broader agenda of social reform, economic modernization, and institutional equality. Lee Jae Myung's political discourse has emphasized social justice, labor rights, and the need for more inclusive governance, which directly affects debates surrounding migrant labor and integration. At the same time, migration policy remains constrained by public concerns over national identity, welfare distribution, and external security issues, especially given the geopolitical sensitivity of relations with China and the strategic influence of the United States in the region. Therefore, migration is not only a domestic social issue but also a matter of regional diplomacy and strategic positioning.

Relevance and Significance of the Topic

The study of Chinese migration to South Korea is particularly relevant in the context of demographic decline, economic restructuring, and political transformation in East Asia. Migration has moved from being a secondary labor-market issue to becoming a central element of national policy planning. As South Korea confronts long-term population decline and increasing labor shortages, the role of foreign workers becomes structurally indispensable rather than temporarily supportive. Chinese migrants, as the largest foreign population group, represent one of the most important indicators of how Korean society is adapting to multicultural realities.

The relevance of this topic is further strengthened by the political context of Lee Jae Myung's presidency, during which migration issues have become more prominent in both institutional policymaking and public discourse. Questions of visa regulation, labor rights protection, social integration, and equal access to public services are increasingly linked to broader debates about citizenship, national identity, and social cohesion. At the same time, the rise of anti-Chinese sentiment demonstrates that migration policy cannot be reduced to

economic management alone; it must also address the social and psychological dimensions of coexistence.

The practical significance of this research lies in the possibility of evaluating the effectiveness of current migration policy, identifying weaknesses in integration mechanisms, and forecasting future migration trends. The study also contributes to understanding how Korean identity is transforming under conditions of increasing multiculturalism and how intercultural communication problems affect long-term social stability. By examining both policy structures and lived social experiences, the research helps identify directions for improving migration governance and strengthening social cohesion.

Overall, this topic reflects the key demographic, social, political, and cultural challenges of contemporary South Korean society. It allows for a deeper understanding of how migration policy functions not only as an economic response to labor shortages but also as a strategic tool for managing diversity, identity, and national development.

Research Objectives and Tasks

The goal of this research is to conduct a comprehensive analysis of Chinese migration to South Korea after Lee Jae Myung came to power, with particular attention to migration policy, the socio-political environment, and the problems of intercultural communication and integration.

To achieve this goal, the following research tasks are established:

1. To analyze the key directions of South Korean migration policy during Lee Jae Myung's presidency, including visa regulations, labor migration governance, protection of migrants' rights.

2. To examine the scale and structure of Chinese migration to South Korea by identifying the main categories of migrants.

3. To determine the prospects for the further development of migration processes and to identify possible directions for improving migration management and intercultural integration policies in order to reduce social tensions and strengthen long-term social cohesion.

Method

This study applies a mixed methodological framework combining qualitative and quantitative approaches to analyze President Lee Jae Myung's migration policy, Chinese migration to South Korea, and the intercultural communication challenges connected with migrant integration. Since the research examines political decision-making, demographic change, public attitudes, and social adaptation simultaneously, one method alone is not sufficient. Therefore, the study is based on three complementary methods: Content Analysis, Mixed Methods Research, and Correlational Research.

This methodological design makes it possible to compare official migration policy with the real social experiences of migrants and host society members, as well as to identify the gap between institutional goals and practical integration outcomes.

Content Analysis

Content analysis serves as the main qualitative method because migration policy is primarily expressed through official documents, political statements, legal regulations, and media discourse. This method is used to examine how Chinese migration is framed by the government and represented in public discussion.

The main sources include official policy materials from the Government of the Republic of Korea, migration regulations, visa policies. Special attention is given to policy priorities such as labor migration, protection of migrant rights, demographic sustainability, and multicultural integration. For example, official policy documents show the expansion of work visa quotas and stronger support for foreign workers as part of the national response to labor shortages and population decline.

Mixed Methods Research

Mixed Methods Research functions as the general methodological framework because the topic requires both structural policy analysis and the study of lived migrant experiences. Qualitative and quantitative methods are used together to provide a more complete understanding of migration processes.

The qualitative component explains how migration policy is designed and justified by political institutions. The quantitative component measures how these policies are experienced by migrants and perceived by Korean society. For example, official policy may promote multicultural inclusion.

A sequential explanatory model is applied. Content analysis identifies the dominant policy directions under Lee Jae Myung, such as visa expansion, labor rights protection, and integration programs.

This methodological triangulation increases reliability and allows the study to examine the difference between policy declarations and real social outcomes.

Correlational Research

Correlational research is used to identify statistical relationships between migration trends and intercultural communication outcomes. The goal is not to prove direct causation but to reveal significant associations between migration variables and integration challenges.

The study focuses on several relationships: the connection between the growth of Chinese migration and public social tension, the relationship between Korean language proficiency and successful adaptation, and the association between discrimination and trust in institutions.

Secondary statistical data are taken from OECD reports, immigration statistics, labor market surveys, and public demographic data. For example, the OECD Economic Survey

(2024) highlights that foreign residents account for only about 4–5% of the total population despite severe labor shortages, while Korean migration statistics show that Chinese nationals remain the largest foreign group.

Correlation analysis helps evaluate whether stronger institutional support for language education and legal stability is associated with better integration outcomes and lower social conflict.

Together, these methods allow the study to examine not only what migration policy under Lee Jae Myung declares, but also how Chinese migrants actually experience integration in South Korean society and where the major problems of intercultural communication emerge.

Results

Key Directions of Migration Policy under President Lee Jae Myung

The analysis of migration policy under President Lee Jae Myung shows that migration governance has become an important part of South Korea's broader social development strategy. This is closely connected to the country's demographic crisis, including one of the world's lowest fertility rates, rapid population aging, and a growing shortage of domestic labor. Migration is no longer seen only as a temporary labor-market solution but increasingly as a structural necessity for economic sustainability and long-term development.

According to Statistics Korea, by the end of 2024 the number of foreign residents exceeded 2 million people, or about 3.9% of the population. In 2025, this figure increased to approximately 2.65 million people, around 5.2% of the national population. Chinese citizens remain the largest foreign group, making migration policy toward them especially important. (Korea JoongAng Daily, 2025)

One of the main directions of Lee Jae Myung's migration policy concerns visa regulation and labor market restructuring. Unlike earlier approaches focused mainly on temporary low-cost labor, the new policy reflects a more institutionalized and selective strategy. The government expanded work visa quotas in sectors facing severe labor shortages, like manufacturing, construction, agriculture, logistics, and care services. At the same time, policies encourage the arrival of international students, skilled professionals, and technical specialists. (The Dong-A Ilbo, 2025)

This shows a transition from short-term labor substitution to a more sustainable migration model. Foreign labor is increasingly seen not only as an economic necessity but also as a long-term demographic resource. Domestic labor shortages cannot be solved only through pronatalist policies and require structural migration solutions.

Another major direction is the protection of migrants' rights. President Lee publicly criticized repeated labor rights violations involving foreign workers, especially in low-skilled sectors where delayed wages, poor working conditions, and exploitation remain common. Investigations into abuse cases were initiated, and stronger enforcement of labor standards was emphasized. (Kim, H.-J., 2025)

This reflects Lee Jae Myung's broader political focus on social justice and equal treatment. Migrants are increasingly recognized as workers with legal and social rights, not only as economic instruments. However, implementation remains uneven, especially in smaller enterprises and informal sectors where monitoring is limited.

Despite official inclusion efforts, strong social contradictions remain. Anti-Chinese and broader anti-immigrant sentiments continue to shape public discourse, especially regarding labor competition, housing, crime perceptions, and national identity. Chinese migrants are often viewed as economically necessary but socially undesirable, creating a contradictory environment.

In 2025, Lee Jae Myung ordered stronger responses to anti-Chinese and anti-immigrant rallies, arguing that such movements damage South Korea's international reputation, economic interests, and diplomatic stability. This shows that migration policy is connected not only to labor issues but also to foreign policy and national image. (Reuters, 2025)

Overall, Lee Jae Myung's migration policy reflects an attempt to balance economic demand, human rights protection, and social cohesion. However, its effectiveness remains limited by persistent stereotypes, weak institutional implementation, and public resistance to multicultural change.

The Scale and Structure of Chinese Migration in South Korea

Chinese citizens remain the largest foreign national group in South Korea, highlighting their structural importance for the labor market, education system, and urban economy. According to the Ministry of Justice, by July 2025 the total number of foreign residents reached about 2.73 million, of which approximately 972,000 were Chinese – around 35.6%. This means more than one in three foreign residents is Chinese, making this group central to migration policy and public debate. (Government of the Republic of Korea, 2025)

Chinese migration is highly diverse and includes several main categories. The first is ethnic Koreans from China (Joseonjok), who have cultural and linguistic proximity to Korean society. Many of them hold F-4 visas, and this group represents the largest share among Chinese migrants. (Government of the Republic of Korea, 2025) Although they integrate more easily in legal and linguistic terms, they still face discrimination and identity-related tensions.

The second group consists of labor migrants without Korean ancestry. They are concentrated in manufacturing, construction, agriculture, fisheries, and services – sectors with severe labor shortages. Their work is essential but often low-paid and unstable. By 2025, more than 1.1 million foreign workers were employed in South Korea, with Chinese nationals forming a significant part of this workforce. However, integration is limited by language barriers, legal insecurity, and low social mobility. (EduTimes, 2025)

The third category is international students. South Korea has become an attractive education destination, with over 300,000 foreign students, including many Chinese. This group is especially important because it often transitions into skilled work or long-term residence, although social isolation outside universities remains common. (Kim, E., 2025)

The fourth group includes entrepreneurs and investors. Chinese migrants are active in small businesses, especially retail, food services, and hospitality, mainly in Seoul, Incheon,

and Gyeonggi Province. While these networks support economic growth, they may also reinforce spatial and social clustering if integration policies are weak.

Geographically, more than half of foreign residents live in the capital region, reflecting access to jobs, education, and infrastructure. However, this concentration can also increase visibility and intensify tensions related to housing, employment, and local competition.

Despite their economic importance, Chinese migrants face persistent challenges, including language barriers, limited mobility, and social segregation. These issues require stronger integration policies, anti-discrimination measures, and intercultural communication support. Without them, economic reliance on migration may grow faster than social cohesion, making Chinese migration a key test of South Korea's transition toward a multicultural society.

Discussion

The results of this study demonstrate that migration policy in contemporary South Korea can no longer be understood solely as a labor market instrument. Under the administration of President Lee Jae Myung, migration has become deeply connected to demographic sustainability, social cohesion, and the broader transformation of Korean national identity. Chinese migration occupies a central place in this process because Chinese citizens represent the largest foreign population group and because their presence reflects both the economic necessity of immigration and the social tensions surrounding multicultural change.

One of the most significant findings is that South Korea's demographic crisis remains the fundamental driver of migration policy. Despite a slight increase in fertility rates in 2024, when the total fertility rate rose from 0.72 to 0.75 children per woman, the country still maintains one of the lowest birth rates in the world and remains far below the population replacement level of 2.1. (Yeung et al., 2026; Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2024) This means that the structural problems of labor shortage and population aging are not temporary but long-term conditions that will continue to shape state policy.

A shrinking working-age population creates direct pressure on industries that depend heavily on stable labor supply, particularly manufacturing, construction, agriculture, logistics, healthcare, and services. Domestic labor alone is insufficient to maintain economic productivity. As a result, migration policy becomes not simply a matter of border control but a strategic demographic response. The government's increasing willingness to expand labor migration programs reflects this reality.

At the same time, according to OECD estimates, foreign residents still make up only about 4–5% of the total population, which remains below the global average for developed

economies. (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2024) This indicates that South Korea still has significant capacity for further migration expansion. Government discussions about increasing foreign worker quotas, improving visa access, and strengthening integration mechanisms show that migration is gradually being incorporated into national demographic planning rather than treated as a temporary exception.

The study confirms that social challenges remain one of the main limitations of current migration policy. Language barriers continue to restrict access to education, healthcare, stable employment, and public services. Migrants are often concentrated in specific neighborhoods and labor sectors, which limits social mobility and reinforces residential and economic segregation. While this may create support networks, it can also increase social distance between migrants and local citizens.

Persistent stigmatization of foreigners, especially Chinese migrants, further complicates integration. Anti-Chinese sentiment in South Korea is shaped not only by labor competition but also by historical memory, geopolitical tensions, media narratives, and concerns about cultural identity. Chinese migrants are often seen as economically necessary but socially distrusted, which weakens official inclusion policies.

The intercultural dimension of migration is therefore especially important. Although Chinese and Korean societies share Confucian roots, important differences in social values and behavior create barriers to adaptation. These differences may not cause direct conflict, but they often lead to misunderstandings that gradually increase social tension.

One major difference concerns social hierarchy. In Chinese society, hierarchy exists but is often more flexible. In Korean society, however, hierarchy is stricter and strongly connected to age, professional rank, and formal etiquette. Chinese migrants unfamiliar with

these norms may unintentionally appear disrespectful, which can affect workplace relationships and trust.

Communication styles also create difficulties. Both cultures value indirectness, but Chinese communication often focuses on preserving “face”, while Korean communication is more strongly shaped by formal language and social protocol. This may cause misunderstandings in workplaces and public interactions.

Differences in networking practices also matter. In China, *guanxi* emphasizes informal personal connections, while in Korea networks are more often based on school background, company membership, or regional origin. What seems normal in one context may be seen as inappropriate in another.

Attitudes toward rules also differ. Chinese social practice often values flexibility and pragmatism, while Korean society places stronger emphasis on conformity and formal rules. This may create perceptions that Chinese migrants do not fully respect local norms, reinforcing stereotypes and exclusion. Perhaps the most sensitive issue concerns national identity. South Korea has traditionally maintained a strong sense of ethnic homogeneity, while the growing visibility of Chinese migrants raises concerns about cultural change and belonging. This helps explain why anti-Chinese sentiment often goes beyond labor competition and becomes linked to fears about the future of Korean society.

These findings suggest that migration policy improvement must go beyond visa regulation and labor market planning. The first priority should be stronger local integration programs, including Korean language education, migrant support centers, legal consultation, and community-based adaptation. Since integration happens mainly at the local level, municipalities and provinces play a key role in reducing isolation and building trust.

The second priority is educational and communication initiatives aimed at reducing stigma and improving public understanding of migration. Anti-immigrant attitudes cannot be solved only through administrative control; they require long-term social education, public dialogue, and more balanced media representation. Intercultural competence should become part of both institutional policy and public discourse. (Asia Daily, 2025)

Third, transparent mechanisms for obtaining long-term residency and permanent legal status are necessary. Migrants who see their future as unstable are less likely to invest in language learning, social participation, and long-term integration. Legal stability strengthens both economic productivity and social responsibility.

Finally, stronger support for multicultural families and second-generation migrants is essential, as they will play an important role in shaping the future social landscape of South Korea. Thus, sustainable migration governance requires combining demographic strategy with inclusive social policy. Migrants should be treated not only as a solution to labor shortages but as full participants in the future of society.

Conclusion

The analysis demonstrates that Chinese migration to South Korea under President Lee Jae Myung is a stable and structurally significant phenomenon shaped by demographic decline, labor market transformation, and broader social change. Migration policy has moved beyond the traditional focus on temporary labor supply and has become part of a wider strategy of national development and demographic sustainability.

The government has sought to build a more systematic and inclusive migration policy by expanding legal migration channels, strengthening labor protections, and developing integration measures such as language education, social services, and regional support

programs. However, the effectiveness of these efforts remains limited by public resistance, anti-immigrant sentiment, and institutional weaknesses in implementation.

The Chinese diaspora remains the largest and one of the most diverse foreign communities in the country. Chinese migrants contribute significantly to the Korean economy through labor participation, education, entrepreneurship, and regional economic networks.

The study also shows that intercultural communication plays a central role in migrant adaptation. Differences in hierarchy, communication norms, social networking practices, attitudes toward rules, and national identity can complicate everyday interaction even between societies that share Confucian roots. Without effective intercultural support, these differences may strengthen stereotypes and increase social distance between migrants and local residents.

In the context of long-term population decline, migration is becoming necessary for South Korea's socio-economic stability. Its success depends on stronger adaptation programs, anti-discrimination measures, transparent pathways to long-term residency, and support for multicultural families and second-generation migrants.

Overall, Lee Jae Myung's administration demonstrates that migration policy increasingly influences not only economic development but also the redefinition of Korean identity and South Korea's regional position in East Asia.

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