Multicultural Korea:
Celebration or Challenge of Multiethnic Shift in Contemporary Korea?

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Abstract

As the increase of foreign migrants in Korea transforms a single-ethnic homogenous Korean society into multiethnic and multicultural one, Korean government and the civil society pay close attention to multiculturalism as an alternative value to their policy and social movement. This paper scrutinizes the realities of multiethnic and multicultural shift in terms of the matrix of class, gender, ethnicity, and physical space in Korea, and takes note of multiple social actors creating multicultural milieu in Korea with contradictive policy agenda and political stances. This article's main thesis is that the current discourses and concerns on multiculturalism in Korea are mere political rhetorics and slogans, not the constructive and analytical concepts for transforming a society.

Keyword: multiculturalism, multicultural discourse, multiethnic shift, multicultural topography, international migration, marriage-based migrant women, migrant worker, globalization.

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Visual expressions of traditional Korean culture have gradually ebbed in everyday life in the process of Korea's industrialization and urbanization. It has become difficult to find expressions of traditional culture in contemporary Korean cities, except in traditional architectures. A Western mode of living, which includes food, clothing, shelter, and patterns of consumption, is so prevalent that some foreign migrants in Korea, especially those from Third World countries, get the impression that Korea is already a westernized society without a prevalent traditional culture (Han 2003a). On the other hand, the westernization in everyday life in Korean society has conversely induced nostalgia for traditional culture arising out of a moral obligation to cultural nationalism. The visual reproduction in the media of various cultural expressions symbolizing traditional culture during major holidays, such as Chuseok (Harvest Moon Festival) and the lunar New Year's holiday, can be interpreted as an expression of cultural nationalism involving traditional culture.

For example, this year's Chuseok was once again flooded with a variety of special feature programs and articles. However, a remarkable change this time was the emergence of diverse types of foreign migrants as the leading actors. In previous festivals, foreign residents appeared only in the context of displaying their skill at Korean language, songs, and dances. This year, however, they appeared in the media not as foreigners, but as legitimate constituents of Korean society. Marriage-based migrant women, migrant workers, and other types of foreign residents had begun to express their own voices.

A weekly KBS TV show entitled, "Minyeodeul-ui suda" (Chatting with Beauties), gained popularity as the participants, foreign female residents living in Korea, voiced their candid comments about Korean society and its people. Then for a Chuseok special in September 2007, KBS also aired "Minamdeul-ui suda" (Chatting with Hunks). Although these programs have been criticized for limiting topics to the trivialities of everyday life and for occasionally airing risqué remarks, they offered sharp critiques of Korean culture from foreign perspectives, thereby enhancing the possibilities of constructive cross-cultural interactions.

In other cases, conventional educational programs that glorify the traditional family system and family ideology by focusing on the preservation of traditional culture do so by putting foreign daughter-in-laws on display while they demonstrate traditional family ideology as a way of selling cultural tradition. In particular, one MBC TV show, entitled "Finding the Best Foreign Daughter-in-Laws", was "programmed to provide an opportunity to think about the preciousness of the family through foreign daughters-in-laws who nurture healthy homes by overcoming cultural differences, and at the same time to promote an understanding of internationally-married families, a new type of family in the twenty-first century, and to move forward to a healthy multicultural society" (Choe 2007). This "healthy multicultural society" put forth by the program typified the current discourses on multiculturalism in Korea. The publicity leaflet for the program negated the original intent by highlighting the fact that the immigrant wives appearing on the show "had adapted themselves to their new home environments 200% by mastering trot singing, traditional Korean culinary skills, and operation of farm appliances, not to mention local dialects" (Choe 2007).

Most of the provincial TV programs and newspaper feature articles, designed with similar intents, also focused on "learning how to observe Chuseok" through the perspectives of immigrant wives. These programs and articles were a response by the mass media to the Ministry of Justice's announcement that the number of foreign residents in the country had exceeded 1 million. After the announcement, the mass media began to carry programs and articles on the issue of migrants and their lives in Korea. Even though much of the content was repetitive, the programs generally received positive assessments. According to Song(2007), "Greeting the era of 1 million foreign residents, Chuseok TV specials cast off the practice of presenting Chuseok as a 'single nation festival,'" and made it possible for "people of diverse races and countries to play the role of leading figures in soap operas, talk shows, and documentaries."

Special features involving Chuseok dramatically highlight the situation Korean society is in today. Demographic changes have result-

ed from diverse groups of foreigners migrating to and settling down in Korea, and has given rise to the need to renew the identity of Korean society. Reactions to such changes from academia, the news media, civil society, and the government have all converged to form the beginnings of a multicultural society. The term "healthy multicultural society" has been so popularized that it is commonly used in discussions on the future prospects for Korean society. Therefore, the press, civil society, and the government are speaking on the subject of multiculturalism, celebrating it as the future of Korean society. Discourse on multiculturalism has become politically correct and mainstream in a relatively short period of time, paradoxically because Korea has thus far had little serious debate or argument over multiculturalism or the transformation of Korean society. With the government aggressively formulating and implementing policy to the extent that it has been characterized as "state-sponsored multiculturalism" (Kim H. 2007), multiculturalism appears to be taking shape as the future path of Korean society.

However, current discourse and policy on multiculturalism are filled with rhetoric and praise and consist of little more than the Chuseok articles and special features discussed above. The reality of the current situation is best portrayed in TV programs that were originally designed to help expand "healthy multiculturalism," but instead stress the female marriage migrants' "mastery of dialects" and "200% adaptation to Korean culture."

While the central government formulates policies in support of multiculturalism by taking into account the principles of cultural diversity and support for multiculturalism, the actual programs that are implemented on the ground often fail to accomplish the intended goals of those policies. Administrative agencies executing the programs, either because they fail to understand the intent of policymakers and advisers, or because they are unable to secure an expert staff to carry them out, resort to conventional approaches, which result in something far from the original intention. For example, most programs for migrant women are diverted into efforts to assist in their assimilation into Korean culture.

Conscious of such problems, this paper attempts to analyze the reality of multiethnic shift and scrutinize the discourse on multiculturalism produced in Korean society. The current discourse on multiculturalism is based on a rosy vision of the ideals of multiculturalism. Despite the fact that diverse multicultural players have different interpretations of and prospects for multiculturalism, there exists virtually no debate or accord on the specific policies of and prospects for the multicultural society each is pursuing. Multicultural society and multiculturalism are not used as analytical concepts reflecting the reality of Korean society, but merely as rhetorical concepts or political slogans for future visions of Korea.

To critically analyze the current discourse on multiculturalism, I first look into the demographic changes in Korea and examine the multicultural phenomena created by those changes. I examine how Korean society's multicultural topography is determined through the matrix of racial, class, and gender relations among foreign migrants and native groups. Since migrants and natives have different understandings and political stances on multicultural phenomena in Korea, due to their respective social classes and genders, I attempt to reveal how each of the relevant actors values the process of transformation in Korean society through the current discourse on multiculturalism. By doing so, I argue that the discourse on multiculturalization in Korea is composed of multiple layers and diverse perspectives, and I point out the need for the constituent actors to expose their differences so that these differences may be put into discussion and competition with one another.

Formulation and Characteristics of Korea's Discourse on Multiculturalism

The direct cause for the emergence of Korea's discourse on multiculturalism was an abrupt increase in the number of foreigners migrating into the country. In the wave of globalization, Korea was reincorporated into international migration networks, and as a result, began

to experience unprecedented social changes.

Korean society's first coupling with international migration took place in December 1902, when a group of Korean migrant workers departed for Hawaii aboard the Gaelic. Previous to this, the rapid aggrandizement of sugar cane cultivation in response to the popularization of "sweetness" and the expansion of plantations of various kinds caused the forced migration of Africans to America through the tragic Atlantic slave trade from the 16th to the 19th centuries. After the Atlantic slave trade was banned in the early 1800s, slave labor was replaced with cheap Indian and Chinese laborers who were moved to Fiji, Papua New Guinea, and the West Indian Islands. Koreans' migration to Hawaii in the early 20th century marked Korea's late joining of this massive wave of international migration.

Korean workers' migration to Hawaii opened a long chapter in the history of Korean migration overseas, including to the henequen farms in Mexico in 1905. Then, for political and economic reasons stemming from Japan's colonization of Korea (1910-1945), many Koreans migrated to Manchuria, the Maritime Province of Siberia, the Sakhalin Islands, and Japan. In 1937, ethnic Koreans in the Maritime Province of Siberia were forced to move to Central Asia by Stalin. In the 1960s, after independence from Japanese colonial rule, Korea aggressively pushed ahead with industrialization, and a large number of Koreans migrated to Germany, Vietnam and the Middle East as miners, nurses and construction workers.

South Korea, however, which had long exported labor since its independence in 1945, shifted into a labor importer primarily due to internal factors, like economic growth and demographic changes. For example, the political democratization that proceeded prior to and following the 1988 Seoul Olympics facilitated an active labor movement and wage increases, mainly centered around conglomerates. Then small and medium-sized businesses, suffering from a weakened competitive edge in the face of high wages, moved their plants overseas, and many others found it difficult to man their factories with local low-wage labor. Korean companies operating abroad attempted to bring low-wage foreign workers into the country as trainees, while

Korea's economic growth encouraged foreign workers to come to Korea.

In addition to these internal factors, external factors also played a major role. The biggest one was a rapid increase in global migration. The Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations estimated that at the end of 2005, 191 million people were living outside their native countries (United Nations 2006). International migration had rapidly accelerated since the beginning of globalization in the 1990s. Furthermore, these regional circumstances were affecting foreign migration to Korea. The 1990s Gulf War prompted a large number of Southeast Asian migrant workers in the Middle East to change their work plans, and Korea stood out as a new, promising destination for them.

Besides the geopolitical situation, the feminization of migration affected migration to Korea as well. Females, once passive migrants in the Asian region, began to emerge as active players in international migration. Responding to an abrupt rise in demand for manpower, such as those in care-oriented services, an increasing number of Asian women from underdeveloped countries began crossing borders, and Korea became a desired destination. A rise in international marriages between Korean males and foreign females in particular also contributed to this outside factor, boosting the number of female migrants to Korea.

Due to these internal and external factors, the number of foreign residents in Korea now exceeds 1 million, or near 2 percent of the total population. According to the Ministry of Justice, a total of 1,000,254 foreigners, including short-term residents such as tourists, long-term residents staying for 91 days or longer, and illegal migrants, were residing in Korea as of August 24, 2007. Of the total, 724,976 were long-term migrants. Distribution by nationality of long-term residents consisted of China (441,334; 44%), the United States (117,938; 12%), Vietnam (64,464; 6%), the Philippines (50,264; 5%) and Thailand (42,792; 4%). Among immigrants from China, over 150,000 were Joseonjok, descendants of Koreans who left the Korean peninsula during Japanese colonial rule. There was also a noticeably

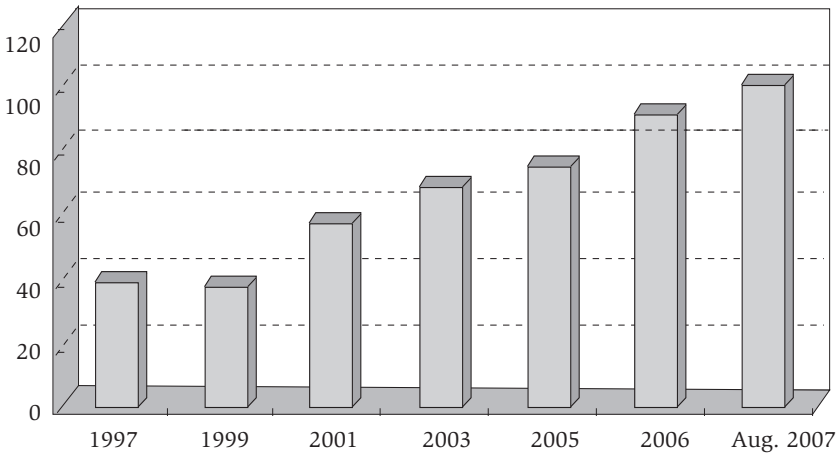
sharp rise in Vietnamese immigration, due to the increase in the number of marriage-based migrants, equalling that of mostly male migrant workers.

The total figure of 1 million-plus foreign residents in Korea, making up nearly 2 percent of the registered Korean population of 49,130,000, represented a 158 percent rise over 1997 (386,972), and a 15 percent increase over the preceding year of 2006 (865,889). These statistics spell out a steep rise in the number of foreign residents in Korea. The majority of the long-term residents consist of 404,051 (56%) migrant workers, 104,749 (14%) marriage-based migrants, and 47,479 (7%) foreign students.

According to statistics on registered migrant workers, compiled in December 2006,[1] the total of 236,262 registered migrant workers comprised an overwhelming majority (88.5%) of unskilled workers,

Table 1. Yearly Increase of Foreign Residents in Korea

Unit: 10,000 persons



Source: Ministry of Justice (2007).

1. 2006 Justice Ministry Statistics, re-quoted from Kim Nam-il (2007).

24,036 professionals (10.2%) and 3,183 people in sports and entertainment. Of unskilled workers, 80,629 (38.6%) were from China, 24,992 (12.0%) from Vietnam, 23,394 (11.2%) from the Philippines, and 17,886 (8.6%) from Indonesia. Among those in professional fields, 6,604 (27.5%) were from the United States, 5,163 (21.5%) from Canada, 1,602 (6.7%) from United Kingdom, and 1,226 (5.1%) from Japan. Those in sports and entertainment consisted of 1,866 (58.6%) from the Philippines, 281 (8.8%) from China, 223 (7.6%) from Russia, and 106 (3.3%) from the Ukraine.

Unregistered foreign residents, mostly migrant workers, were estimated at 225,273. Nearly half, or 45 percent, were Chinese nationals (101,984, of whom 37,573 were Joseonjok). China was trailed by the Philippines (14,749; 7%), Vietnam (14,333; 6%), Thailand (13,978; 6%), Mongol (13,354; 6%) and Bangladesh.

Marriage-based migrants more than tripled, from 34,710 in 2002 to 104,749 in 2007, according to December 2006 statistics,[2] but 87,252 had yet to acquire citizenship. This group was comprised of 51,982 Chinese (59.6%) including Joseonjok, 14,892 Vietnamese (17.1%), and 4,041 Filipina (4.6%), with the remainder coming from Mongol, Thailand, Uzbekistan, Russia, Cambodia, and elsewhere.

The composition of foreign residents in Korea is amazingly diverse. Most countries in the world are represented, but the five top-ranking countries—China, United States, Vietnam, the Philippines and Thailand—make up over 70 percent of the total. However, seeing that they are mostly Asian countries, it would be too early to say that Korea has become "multiracial." Rather the term "multiethnic" would be more applicable to the transformation of Korean society.

The Multicultural Topography of Korean Society: Ethnicity, Class, Gender, and Space

The process of multiethnicization in Korean society, resulting from

2. Ministry of Justice, 2007.

the increase of foreign migrants, is resulting in not only demographic changes, but cultural changes as well. For example, foreign migrants' cultures and lifestyles have become visible in Korean society. Superficially, the rising number of foreign migrants has increased the opportunities for Koreans to encounter different cultures, including ethnic food, clothing, accessories, and music, as well as increased exposure to other cultures in everyday and family life. Due to this increase in contact with foreigners in both urban and rural areas, we may conclude that the process of multiethnicization is taking place across the entire country. In this respect, multicultural discourse is also underway along with multiethnicization.

However, the problem is that multicultural phenomena is taking place in Korea on multiple levels, depending on the migrants' placement within the matrix of class and gender. Foreign migrants currently living in Korea are divided into socioeconomic classes based on the economic strength of their native countries and their occupations in Korea. Unskilled migrant workers and marriage-based migrants who have married socially marginalized Koreans occupy a lower-class position in society, while professional migrants from developed countries and marriage-based migrants who have married middle- or upper-class Koreans not only live entirely different social lives, but also enjoy differential treatment in relation to their cultural backgrounds.

Surely, such differentiation is not confined to Korea but is common worldwide. Discrimination between "denizens," those who are engaged in professional occupations,[3] and "margizens," those who are economically weak and marginalized in their resident countries,[4] differentiates even the rights they seek to gain as migrants. In addition, margizens go through different channels in terms of being incorporated into and positioned as players in a multicultural Korea.

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3. In the literature on migration and citizenship, the term "denizen" means alien residents who do not give up the citizenship of their native countries and do not try to live permanently in or acquire permanent residence from their host countries. The term refers to foreigners who enjoy privileges in the host countries because multinational corporations secure them with the right to use state welfare systems in the host countries. (Cohen, 1997; Hammar 2003).

On the other hand, denizen cultures, from the multicultural perspective, is as culturally empowered as the native Korean culture. Koreans are receptive to and positive toward denizens' cultures, but pay little attention to the cultures of margizens, i.e., the native cultures of unskilled migrant workers and marriage-based migrants from other Asian countries. As a consequence, margizens are unable to secure a social space where they can enjoy their cultures and find opportunities for their cultures to contribute to Korea's multicultural milieu.

As for unskilled migrant workers, class relations emerging in the political and economic context of international migration are reproduced at their places of work and residence. Research on the human rights status of migrant workers indicates that they are placed not only into an employer-employee relationship, but also a hierarchical relationship vis-à-vis Korean workers (Seol et al. 2002), which is reflected when the migrant worker's culture encounters Korean culture (Han 2003b). Civic organizations fight for the cultural rights of migrant workers and call for cultural exchanges with Korean society as part of the current discourse on multiculturalism. However, the implementation of those assertions causes disputes.

One important step taken for the purpose of promoting migrant workers' cultural rights and their exchanges with Korean society is the Arirang Festival. One of the major criticisms of this event was that the leading players in the festival were still Korean activists, not migrant workers. Many migrant worker activists criticized the festival, saying that they were not permitted to play a leading role.

> When we participated in the 2005 festival, the government made an issue with the title of our band "Stopcrackdown." They also interfered with the songs we wanted to sing. We thought of boycotting it, but decided to participate at the insistence of the civic organiza-

4. "Margizen" refers to a new category of people constituted by international migration. They occupy a marginalized status like migrant workers in Europe. They remain excluded from legal, political, and sociocultural channels in their host countries (Mirtiniello 1994).

> tions. We eventually sang the songs we wanted to sing, but with some minor modifications.[5]

Another conflict arose in the selection of cultural content to be presented at the festival. The conflict made it clear that the life and cultures the migrant workers wanted to portray were not in line with what the government or the sponsor had envisioned or planned. The government and the sponsor wanted the migrant workers to introduce their traditional cultures, but a few migrant worker activists preferred to expose their real living conditions in Korea. In the end, Stopcrackdown boycotted the 2006 Arirang Festival on the grounds that it could not comply with the sponsor's request that the group only perform traditional Nepalese music (Sim 2007, 66). From the perspective of the sponsor, the purpose of the festival was to solve the problem of low attendance and interest of native Koreans by presenting a variety of cultural performances.[6]

This episode epitomizes the level of multiculturalization that is now underway in Korea and calls into question who the main actors should be in this process and what should be discussed. The migrant workers' festival was a government-supported program intended to actively facilitate cultural exchanges between migrant workers and Korean society. However, even as migrant workers were encouraged to participate in the construction of a multicultural society, unexpected conflicts and questions entered the picture. The inability to identify representations of migrant cultures that were acceptable to both the Korean government and the migrants led to discussion of who

5. Interview data with the leader of the migrant workers band Stopcrackdown, Minu (Sim 2007, 66).
6. Based on an interview with an activist affiliated with the organization, Muticultural Open Society, charged with the preparation of the Arirang Festival (April 17, 2007). Another activist confessed the difficulty of running a program for cultural interchange between Korean people and migrant workers. When he held a "multicultural café night" for presenting migrant worker's cultural traditions, only foreign workers attended. The activists from the civic organization were the only Koreans who joined the program. Interviewed with Lee Cheol-seung, representative of Gyeongnam Migrant Workers Center.

should determine the content of a multicultural society and to which end. Unfamiliar cultures are selected, interpreted, and internalized using Korean society as the standard, often in conflict with migrant residents in Korea who insist on different representations of their cultures. For example, African migrant workers point out that the Korean press portrays African cultures with a constant focus on "primitiveness." One African migrant worker criticized a Korean broadcasting team for requesting that he arrange the filming of a scene depicting the "primitive lifestyle" of Africans (Han 2003a). I had a similar experience when I was preparing for field research in Nigeria. The production team for "Challenging Expeditions Around the World," a popular TV program that aired on KBS in the 1990s, asked me to recommend an African community that was still leading a "stone age" lifestyle so they could film primitives living in uncivilized conditions. They claimed that their intent with the program was to appeal to the tastes of local viewers who were drawn to such shows. Most of the migrant workers disapproved of such stereotypes in Korean society, as they portray a distorted view of their own cultures (Seol, Choe, and Han 2002).

What is neglected in the current discourse on the ongoing process of multiculturalization is a discussion centered on the question of who are and should be the leading players in making such cultural exchanges happen, and help develop a multicultural state? Multiculturalization does not take place in a neutral void; it is carried forward by diverse cultural players who put their own native cultures into action and enable them to interact with one another. What multicultural society seeks is not a mere coexistence of different cultures in isolation, but rather a mingling of different cultures and harmonious exchanges of diverse cultural elements. However, the current multicultural phenomena and discussion happening in Korea take very little note of the issues of hegemony and hierarchy of intercultural exchanges, as well as the practices and reproduction of cultural agencies.

Marriage-based migrants are also agents in the process of multiculturalization. However, their agency is doubly fettered in terms of

class and gender. They are positioned in the mishmash of gaps in economic strength between Korea and their native countries, gender relations between the two, and the socioeconomic classes to which their husbands, in-laws and families belong.

Also, international marriages arranged through unreliable marriage brokers often constitute a form of human trafficking, resulting in a life of forced servitude for marriage-based migrants. The various hefty expenses borne by the husband and his family in carrying out the international marriage are sometimes used as a pretext for turning the marriage and the relationship between the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law into one of master and servant. Some Korean husbands and parents-in-laws justify this hierarchical relationship by arguing that they have spent big money to "buy the bride." Such attitudes reduce the issues faced by marriage-based migrant women to raw domestic violence and human rights abuses. Accordingly, civil activists who advocate for the rights of such women must concentrate their efforts on emergency counseling for cases of domestic violence and sexual abuse, similar to the counseling administered to the foreign migrant workers. Realizing, however, that the fundamental resolution of these problems will not be possible without restructuring the values inherent in Korean society, the activists have begun to adopt and advance discourses on multiculturalism in this country.

Interestingly, marriage-based migrants, who are the most likely among the foreign migrants to permanently settle in Korea, are ironically subject to the strongest and harshest demands for assimilation into Korean culture. According to various surveys, they have no opportunities to enjoy their native cultures in their everyday lives in their host country. One mother-in-law even went as far as to throw a foreign dish prepared by her immigrant daughter-in-law out of the kitchen (Wang et al. 2005; Han 2006a; Kim Y et al. 2006). While many middle-class native Koreans living in the city enjoy a so-called multicultural lifestyle by eating pad thai noodles and Vietnamese pho for lunch, drinking chai tea in Indian restaurants, and shopping for various ethnic accessories and clothing, many marriage-based migrant women are not allowed to enjoy even the most basic cultural

rights in their daily lives.

One must also keep in mind that the cultural differences and conflicts experienced by marriage migrants occur primarily within the family. Both marriage-based migrant women and their families point to the fact that they have different cultures, and accordingly, encounter many difficulties. But the onus for solving those differences rests mainly with the wives. The most serious issue is the prevailing misconception that cultural differences are confined to food and language, and that serious family conflicts stem from extra-cultural factors such as individual character and fidelity. Worse still is the fact that these so-called extra-cultural factors actually stem from cultural differences, rather than anything else, goes unrecognized (Wang et al. 2005; Han 2006a; Kim Y. et al. 2006).

Korean men who marry foreign women and their families demand that these migrant women assimilate into Korean culture by imposing the entire burden of adaptation to the new culture on them. Recent media stories about international marriages, though greatly absent of past biases, mainly emphasize the women's seemingly amazing abilities to adapt themselves to Korean language and culture. In many cases, such media coverage functions as a form of intense pressure for immigrant wives to culturally assimilate, and misguidedly heightens the expectations of their Korean husbands and families.

Another problem with marriage-based migrant women lies in the fact that most of them live in low-income families in urban and rural areas. Having had little opportunity to gain cultural literacy, their husbands and families generally lack cultural sensitivity and are often ill-disposed to other cultures. The multiculturalism policy emphasized by the government and civic organizations has little relevance and appeal for a mother-in-law who throws out a foreign dish prepared by her daughter-in-law claming it is inedible, or a husband who's only expectation is that his foreign wife will be able to prepare dishes suited to his palate as quickly as possible (Han 2006a). Idealistic efforts by many civil activists to teach the Korean husbands the mother tongue of their immigrant spouses are often ineffectual in the

face of the low level of education they have received and their economically unstable livelihoods.

In this respect, the multicultural state of affairs on the part of migrant workers and internationally married families give rise to the concern that their actual problems are concealed by the discourse on multiculturalism that focuses on discussing cultural diversity or intercultural exchange and understanding. Their main interest remains in resolving the political and economic conditions endemic to international migration, or the problems pertaining to their living conditions and state of sojourn. Accordingly, the discourse on multiculturalism that includes migrant workers and marriage migrant women as agents cannot but differ from the general discourse in Korean society and contain elements that the Korean government, which maintains the framework of the nation-state, finds difficult to accommodate or does not prefer.

The multicultural topography of Korean society is realized spatially as well. Foreign migrants are spatially expanding the multicultural topography by creating diverse diasporic neighborhoods. The city of Seoul now has a Japanese enclave in Dongbu Ichon-dong, African enclaves in Itaewon and Haebang-chon, a French enclave in Banpo-dong (Seorae village), and a Joseonjok enclave in Guro-dong. Areas frequented by foreign migrants from specific countries have also been noted, such as the one near Dongdaemun Market where migrants from Russia, Central Asia, and Mongolia gather, and another along Daehangno Street where Filipinos congregate (Kim Hyun Mee 2005, 20-21). In some neighborhoods in Gyeonggi-do province and others, such as the “Borderless Village” in Ansan, migrant workers live together in groups where they are at liberty to express and enjoy their own cultures.

The multicultural spaces formed by these migrants display a hierarchical spatial distribution. Based on living costs and access to the labor market, migrant workers tend to form enclaves in the outer reaches of Seoul, around the ends of subway lines, or near industrial complexes in the capital and its vicinity (Seol 2006). This contrasts with transnational professionals who live in group residences mainly

located in the upper-class residential areas of Seoul.

The problem is that these multicultural spaces not only duplicate existing class divides in Korean society in terms of area distribution, but they also invite discrimination by the locals based on the migrants' respective social statuses. The Japanese enclave in Dongbuichon-dong and the French Seorae Village in Banpo-dong are located in neighborhoods preferred by the local middle-class and benefit from the positive publicity and other forms of support provided by local autonomous bodies. On the other hand, areas occupied by foreign migrant workers are effectively ghettoized.

Migration by ethnic Koreans overseas also presents itself as a new theme in Korea's multicultural scene. As with the return migration of Joseonjok to Korea, descendants of those who left the Korean peninsula during Japanese colonial rule are also returning to Korea. Those immigrating back to their home country include not only Joseonjok but also Goryeoin (ethnic Koreans living in Central Asia) and ethnic Koreans living in Sakhalin. They all pose a new variation on the traditional concept of the Korean "nation or ethnic group."[7] Most often, ethnic Korean migrant workers felt frustrated by the attitudes native Koreans hold toward them, because they are viewed as foreign migrant workers from underdeveloped countries. By not receiving the equal treatment they expected as members of the same "nation or ethnic group," they are made to agonize over their identity (Yu 2005).

In addition to the return of these groups, the number of native Koreans who are emigrating is also on the rise. Most Koreans who emigrate choose to be naturalized in their host countries. Therefore Koreans who are emigrating and becoming naturalized overseas raise

7. This paper uses both *minjok* and *gukmin* as Korean equivalents for the word "nation" and both *minjok* and *jongjok* for "ethnic group". Although nation has long been translated as *minjok*, it is also rendered as *gukmin*, and ethnic group as *jongjok*, depending on whether it refers to constituents of a state, a political community. Both Korean equivalents are used to help readers understand that their meaning is identical with that of *minjok*, which is used by Koreans on an everyday basis.

the need to distinguish between the concept of the nation and the ethnic group, concepts that were long considered identical in Korea.

As revealed in the course of debates over the Law on Overseas Koreans and its revision, there is a tendency in Korean society to discriminate between ethnic Koreans living in developed countries, such as the United States, and those living in relatively poor countries. In other words, both nationality and social class function as vital factors in the matrix of the treatment of ethnic Koreans.

In the end, Korea's multicultural landscape is composed of multiple layers made up of the varied social classes and different genders of the participants. The multicultural space and circumstances formed in each layer are different. Nonetheless, the multicultural policies and discourses prevailing in this country overlook these differences, with the result that each segment of society uses its own language to tackle the issues of multiculturalism, a concept for which no general consensus has yet been formed.

The Topography of Multicultural Policy

The Korean government began to express a deeper interest in multicultural policy in April 2006 when it announced comprehensive measures for marriage-based migrants. Various policy measures pushed by the central government, along with those conducted by local governments, have resulted in a considerable number of projects and programs, to the extent that the project of Korean multiculturalism can be regarded as state-initiated. The Ministry of Gender Equality and Family is currently in charge of issues regarding marriage-based migrants. Even though the Korean government's policy toward migrants has several problems, there is no doubt that much interest in multiculturalism has been expressed in the course of policy-making and policy implementation. The Ministry of Gender Equality and Family has been deeply interested in multiculturalism, especially when it sets up and implements policies for assisting marriage-based migrants—such that the ministry has titled its policy vision, "to cre-

ate an open, multicultural society." The Korean government stresses multicultural education for multicultural family members so that various programs would not simply force marriage-based migrants to assimilate into Korean society. This also instills the need to enhance intercultural understanding to help international marriage families settle comfortably in Korean society.

On the other hand, migrant workers, despite having immigrated to Korea at an earlier period than the marriage-based migrants, have not received much attention from the Korean government. The initial governmental policy for migrant workers did not allow for official labor migration from other countries. The Industrial Trainee System adopted in 1993 was a temporary remedy that did not recognize migrants as workers but as apprentices (industrial trainees). However, the system did not guarantee the fundamental rights of migrant workers and forced them to endure low wages and inhumane treatment, resulting in a large number of unregistered workers. Migrant workers and civic group activists demanded the abolition of the system, calling it a "modern version of a slavery system" (Seol 2005). It was with the introduction of the Employment Permit System, legislated by the National Assembly on July 2003, that the government made a policy change. Finally, the Industrial Trainee System and the Employment Permit System were integrated into a single system in January 2007. But the Korean government still views migrant workers as temporary residents of Korea and is reluctant to support their settlement and integration into Korean society. At this point, the only thing that can be regarded as a sound result of multicultural policy is the governmental support for the Arirang Festival.

It would therefore be hasty to characterize the government's policy regarding migrants as multicultural. It is undeniable that the central government's policy towards marriage-based migrants has adopted many multicultural aspects in terms of policy vision and framework, but many problems arose when the policy was put into practice. Looking over the programs implemented by local governments, government-related organizations, and civic groups, it is apparent that those programs take a primarily assimilative approach, rather

than a multicultural one. These programs place more emphasis on the migrants' accommodation into Korean society and cultural understanding, and accordingly, is lacking in cultural diversity and awareness (Kim, Kim, and Han 2006, 233). Even the small number of multicultural programs available for marriage-based migrants and their family members are insufficient and exist largely in name only.

As previously noted, it is very difficult to define the Korean government's policy stance as multicultural. Multicultural policy is premised on the politics of recognition, in which the rights of members of an ethnic, religious or cultural community are respected (Kim N 2006; Eom 2006). According to this interpretation, the Korean government has yet to pronounce an earnest form of multiculturalism as a basic policy. Most often, the content is too fragmented to be considered a coherent policy of multiculturalism. In fact, some scholars assess the current status of the government's multicultural policy as "paternalistic" (Sim 2007).

Moreover, in analyzing the current government's governance structure, it is also difficult to label it as state-initiated multiculturalism. It is to be noted that the government has recently increased cooperation with civil society in formulating and implementing policies about migrants. The government has adopted a considerable number of policy agendas established by civic organizations. Competition between government and civic organizations gives rise to inconvenient relations in which "the customers are snatched away unilaterally and the operations disrupted" (Kim Hye-sun 2006, 25). Therefore a recent evaluation of Korean multiculturalism as "state-sponsored multiculturalism" (Kim Hui-jeong 2007) needs to be reconsidered. A civil activist whom I interviewed revealed that the rapport built over a long time between civic organizations and foreign migrants and local communities is broken when the government subsumes it as part of its own projects by wielding monetary resources.[8] Some civic organizations opted for proceeding with their own

8. Kim Hyeon-seon, an activist with Mindulle School, Jangsu County, Jeollanam-do province, interviewed on May 2007.

migrant support projects without governmental support,[9] and many others expressed the hope that the government would execute its projects without fanfare.[10]

Local governments, lacking experience in assisting foreign migrants, tend to enforce migrant projects that rely on civic organizations without properly understanding the central government's policy. In terms of policy formulation, the central government substantially incorporates the views of civic organizations that are experienced in the migrant movement, with its policy directions differing little from those of civic activists. But the local government policy executors sometimes fail to understand the policy directions and haphazardly execute immigrant support projects. In doing so, civic organizations are merely seen as means to mobilize immigrants, giving rise to many disputes.

In a way, the interpretation may also be offered that the government and civil society, in the process of formulating and implementing migrant policies, have now entered a competitive relationship based on a cooperative system that they established. Therefore, the term "state-sponsored multiculturalism," as interpreted by Kim Hui-jeong (2007), still only applies partially and does not entirely explain Korea's multicultural scene.

The Topography of Multicultural Discourses

The multiculturalist discourse underway in Korean society was initiated by civil society with the aim of making Korean society hospitable to both migrant workers and marriage-based migrants, while granting them cultural rights, not as outsiders, but as legitimate constituents of Korean society. As civic groups that were actively

9. Moise (phonetic), a Catholic social service agency based in Daejeon, boycotted a support project for marriage immigrants during the early stage of their migration, sponsored by the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family.
10. Yi In-gyeong, an activist with Mingling Multicultural Center for Female Migrants in Busan, interviewed on July 18, 2007.

engaged in supporting the migrants adopted multiculturalism as an alternative approach to migrant issues, multiculturalist discourse began to gain momentum within civil society. Behind the civic group's more active involvement in the multiculturalist movement lay the success of continuous campaigning, led by activists, and improved policy measures made by the Korean government to alleviate the demands made by the migrants themselves. The more the government responded to the needs of migrants by expanding their programs and "taking away the civic organizations' customers" (Kim Hye-sun 2006), the more the civic organizations that supported migrants adopted a multiculturalist stance in order to establish a new foundation for activism. Through the adoption of this new stance, civic organizations expanded the target of activism by engaging the general Korean public in the promotion of multicultural values.

For this reason, activists from civic groups have not allowed any criticism of the current form of multiculturalism, for fear that it would degrade the value of their newfound territory. When I offered lectures or presentations on the subject in the past, I witnessed some activists becoming visibly uncomfortable. In one case, a former representative of the Joint Committee for Migrant Workers in Korea expressed his anxiety during the discussion session regarding some of the problems of multiculturalism that I mentioned during my presentation. He was not pleased that I was critical of something that they considered a good alternative to migrant issues.

On the contrary, another migrant support group criticized the present form of multiculturalism for failing to represent the realities that migrants face in Korea today. For example, the Migrant Union, which has taken a different political stance from other groups, has not engaged in the present multicultural discourse. This group makes an effort to help create migrant workers' unions, and believes it is more critical to resolve the issue of non-registered workers' visa status. The political stance taken by the Migrant Union is not due to their sophisticated criticism of multiculturalism, but simply from the differing foundational political strategies of the migrant movement.

This approach is represented by Oh Kyung-Seok (2007), who

argues that multiculturalism "should be focused on survival, rather than culture. The slogan of cultural coexistence cannot but seem empty to those who live in fear of imminent crackdown and deportation." He also asserts that "the given priority is the visa status of non-registered migrants, which guarantees a minimum standard of living and work opportunities." From this viewpoint, the present multicultural discourse can distort the essence of migrant issues (Oh 2007, 13).

The multicultural discourse evident in the mass media is in step with that of the civic groups. Rather than concretely reporting on or reflectively discussing multiculturalism, press coverage still remains at the level of political rhetoric, merely presenting multiculturalism as an alternative to racism and prejudice toward migrants. Such reporting increased especially during Hines Ward's visit to Korea, when there was no in-depth analysis of the multicultural discourse in Korea. Even while covering British and French cases of multicultural policies, the press failed to address any of the problems experienced in those countries regarding multicultural policies.

Meanwhile, the current discourse on multiculturalism in Korea is also linked to rights advocacy, not only for foreign migrants but also for numerous social and cultural minorities whose rights have long been ignored in Korean society. The political democratization achieved in the 1990s, some contend, has dissolved "the sustained common notion that Korean society is culturally and ethnically homogeneous." They add that the "expanded voices on the part of the minorities and the marginalized have caused a major crack in our social structure." According to them, "the dominant stereotypical image of Korea as a homogenous society has been broken" (Yi and An 2007, 110).[11] The practical discourse that Korean society is being

11. These assertions have something in common with the experience of Canada, which initially pushed ahead with a policy incorporating diverse social groups for the purpose of guaranteeing the cultural rights of immigrants based on nationality, but that later had to acknowledge that the issues of various cultural minorities in its social mainstream constituted an important portion of its multiculturalism policy.

transforming into a multicultural one and that it will eventually become a multicultural society suggests that in addition to foreign migrants, other native minorities should also participate in the campaign for multiculturalism as leading players.

In sum, diverse positions and theories compete with one another in the discourses on multiculturalism. They range from the migrant movement camp, which regards migrant workers and marriage-based migrants as the leading players, the media discourse that uses multiculturalism merely as a "rhetoric indicating a society in which various ethnic groups and cultures coexist" (Yi and An 2007, 115), the middle class' consumption-oriented multicultural discourse that views foreign cultures merely as an object of consumption or "cuisine multiculturalism" (Han 2006a), to the discourse of some governmental officials that understands multiculturalism policy as a population policy designed to cope with a low birth rate and rapidly aging population.[12]

The Realities of Multiculturalism in Korea and Problems in Multicultural Discourse

Discourses on multiculturalism currently remain at the level of introducing foreign discourses and speculating on their prospects for the future of Korean society, rather than systematically analyzing Korean society or the realities faced by those multicultural societies. As previously noted, civic organizations, the mass media, and the government all remain at similar levels in this discourse. In response, the Korean Sociological Association launched a systematic discussion in 2006 as a stage-by-stage analysis of Korean society's progress toward a multiethnic and multicultural state, as well as discourses on multi-

12. As confirmed by the remarks the provincial government's gender equality bureau director made at the 2006 Gyeongsangbuk-do Province Gender Equality Policy Research Institute seminar, many civil servants justify policies in support of female immigrants for marriage as a means of resolving the problems caused by the country's low birth rate.

cultural society. Eom Han-jin (2006), who participated in the research, argued that to properly understand the multiracial and multiethnic shift in Korea, one must take a different approach. Current changes in Korean society have taken place due to the abrupt, massive, and diverse migration that occurred as a result of the neoliberal international division of labor amid the flow of globalization, and accordingly differed from the classic migration patterns rooted in religious, political, and economic causes exhibited in the West. Kim Hye-sun (2006) asserted the importance of exposing the mechanism of conspiracy and competition contained in the theory that Korea is a single ethnic nation based on preservation of the patriarchal society. She argued that competition between the government and civic organizations over projects involving marriage-based migrants and the diverse positions of multicultural theory accepted by the masses need to be analyzed. Pointing out problems involved in the ideology of multiculturalism, Jeon Gwang-hui (2006) argued that neither the establishment of an administrative agency tasked with policies for foreigners nor the accommodation of multiculturalism will resolve the problems we now face.

Oh Kyung-Seok (2007) went a step further and charged that in order to truly tackle the problem at hand, one must ask for the most adequate form of multiculturalism, not for the mere introductions of diverse theories of multiculturalism. He asserted that Korea's multicultural policy currently centered on marriage-based migrants is wrong. He made the unjustifiable statement that marriage-based migrants in the West are "not even considered major constituents in multicultural society" (Oh 2007, 4) because unregistered migrant workers constituted the core of the migrant issue. In his argument, however, he overlooked the fact that the migrants to which he referred in the reference (Kymlica and Lee 2005), as one of the leading players in Western multicultural societies, pointed specifically to marriage-based migrants in Korea. Nonetheless, his call for discussions on the issue of subject matter in the construction of a multicultural society was presented as an important proposition. Although I cannot agree with his stance that migrant workers, especially non-

registered migrant workers, must be regarded as the leading players in multicultural society, I agree with his statement that the present discourse on multiculturalism and the government's multicultural policy are nothing but fictional and deceptive declarations that require some rethinking. As he stated, "the realities of foreign migrants are distorted, the status of the practical players in our multicultural society marginalized, the gaps between discussions for the sake of a discourse, and the multicultural scene on the ground deepened" (Oh 2007, 4). Based on this critical observation, he asserted that it was still important for foreign migrants, especially foreign migrant workers who play a leading role in transitioning Korean society into a multicultural one, to exercise their right of survival and "life rights" by choosing a preferred mode of living. Discourse on multiculturalism should be focused not on culture, but on "politics in alliance with the minorities at the bottom" (Oh 2007, 13).

These criticisms raise proper questions about the current discourse on multiculturalism. It is regrettable, however, that they nonetheless fail to fully understand the key to the concept of multicultural society. Eom Han-jin (2006) describes Korea's popular discourse on multiculturalism as a "multiculturalism without culture," but his own analysis of the concept of culture itself seems insufficient.

Both popular and critical discourse on multiculturalism regard culture merely as a passive and secondary variant. They generally maintain that groups enjoy equal rights under the premise that a plurality of groups constitutes a multicultural society, thereby defining a matrix of ethnicity, gender, and class as forming a singular culture. This stance resembles state ideology in the nineteenth century, but the consensus of contemporary anthropology is that all groups that supposedly share a culture are not internally homogeneous. Therefore, each cultural group constantly reproduces and promotes its various and heterogeneous cultural elements through mutual competition. Then, diverse players within a group put their own cultures into action and compete for cultural dominance within the group. These kinds of competitive cultural practices are bound to bring changes to

the overall cultural landscape of the group.

This concept suggests something important in understanding today's multicultural societies. Namely, the individual cultures that a multicultural society intends to guarantee are not fixed entities with distinct and separate borders. In fact, an increased number of cultural free agents who travel across borders can define a desirable ideal for a multicultural society. The present discourse on multiculturalism, however, is based on the faulty premise that such cultures are static and homogeneous, and overlook their dynamic attributes.

It is also noteworthy that the Korean press and civil society organizations place excessive emphasis on the "politics of naming." They have suggested new names for "international marriage family" and "mixed blood," arguing that the terms themselves are derogatory. Undoubtedly, such terms "Kosian," which means children born from Asian migrants and Koreans and "mixed blood" are discriminatory, but the fact of discrimination cannot be eliminated by simply changing those terms. Migrants argue that the term "international marriages" carries the negative connotation of women who married U.S. soldiers during and after the Korean War. However, the original meaning of "multicultural family" is undermined or distorted when it is used to replace "international marriage families". What matters is not just a renaming of "international marriage" or "mixed blood" but a practical discussion to ameliorate discrimination.

In discussing multicultural society as the future prospect for Korean society, it should be emphasized that the leading players should not only be the Korean government and people, but the diverse migrants who reside in the country. The latter should be able to participate fully in group activities as legitimate players without being censored or discriminated against. In addition, the misperception that diverse subject groups are internally homogeneous must also be eliminated. As many actors within Korean society program and define their respective visions of multiculturalism amid diverse class and gender divisions or across urban and rural spatial distribution, so must migrant groups, which are divided among themselves, be guaranteed freedom in making their cultural choices.

Conclusion

This paper has pointed out that the current multicultural discourse in Korea is dominated by mere declarations of general principles and empty political rhetoric. I have analyzed the problems with this discourse based on an evaluation of the real facts and circumstances surrounding the ongoing multiethnic shift in Korea. The demographic changes engendered by increasing immigration and international migration are proceeding in a multi-layered fashion within a matrix of power structures and hierarchies. However, as noted in this paper, the current discourse and governmental policy on multiculturalism fails to take the real picture into consideration.

If multicultural discourse is to be a practical way of explaining the transformation of Korean society, it is essential to understand the nature of the diverse players involved in building multicultural communities and focus the discussion on ways to promote their active participation in the process of shifting to a multiethnic society. The kind of multicultural society envisioned and preferred by the government and mainstream Korean civil society is merely a new iteration of the traditional Korean one that has until now placed high value on cultural and ethnic homogeneity. But it is now forced to grapple with the ongoing wave of globalization.

This paper has also emphasized the need for proper understanding and employment of the concept of culture, which is the cornerstone of a multicultural society. The reason is that the current discourse on multiculturalism wrongly regards cultures as immutable, separate entities set apart by definitive boundaries. Moreover, the current multicultural discourse might serve to oppress heterogeneous subjects within a certain group, simply because it is believed that the group, rather than the individual, should constitute the multicultural subject.

Canada's multicultural policy has defined ethnic groups based on nationality and is being faulted for overlooking the Hindus' discrimination against Sikhs within the Indian group. In other cases, multicultural policy is criticized for encouraging the oppression of minori-

ties within a specific culture. In light of such flaws found in other places, it is evident that Korea's current discourse on multiculturalism is fraught with grave risks.

Therefore, the multicultural society that Korea is now trying to build must be developed through proper understanding of the concept of culture and sincere reflection on how to more dynamically guarantee the individuality of each actor who constitutes that multicultural society. The current state of Korea's multiculturalism must therefore be regarded as an urgent challenge, not yet as a cause for celebration.

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