

Minorities in the Republic of Korea

As a response to the rapid growth in South Korea's migrant population, academic and policy-related discussions on multiculturalism are becoming increasingly significant. However, the term is used in a rather different way than in Australia, Canada or Europe. It refers to a specific category of people, namely marriage migrants, rather than expressing a social value or a foundation of government policy. This is a new text for the fifth edition by Chulhyo Kim with revisions by Stephen Castles, 2013.

Over the last twenty years, South Korea has seen a rapid increase in migrant population¹. The number of migrants increased almost nine fold: from 85,995 in 1992 to just over a million in 2012 (Korean Ministry of Justice, 1993; 2013). The foreign share in the total population of South Korea increased from 0.2 per cent in 1992 to 2 per cent by 2012 (Statistics Korea, 2013). The largest group of migrants in 2012 were low-skilled workers, making up more than 47 per cent of all migrants (479,426), and among them 69 per cent (330,928) were male. About 15 per cent were marriage migrants (148,498), of whom 86 per cent (127,540) were female. More than half of all migrants are from China (525,689), and the majority of them are ethnic Koreans (341,770). Most other migrants are from South East Asian countries such as Vietnam, the Philippines, and Indonesia. The number of irregular migrants peaked at 308,000 in 2002 (Castles *et al.*, 2012), then, it decreased to 178,000 in 2012 (Korean Ministry of Justice, 2013).

The South Korean government sets an annual ceiling for incoming migrant workers. However, high salaries and the strong influence of Korean culture throughout Asia have increased aspirations to migrate to South Korea. The recruitment process under the Employment Permit System (EPS) is costly and highly competitive. The EPS also restricts the industrial sectors for foreign employment to manufacturing, construction, agriculture and fishery (Ministry of Employment and Labor, 2010), where employers generally prefer male employees. Service sectors such as catering, cleaning, domestic work and care-giving are exclusively permitted to members of the Korean diaspora under the 'Visit and Employment System'.

¹ The definition of 'foreign residents' in Korean official data includes all foreigners including short-term visa holders. The statistics here is adjusted to make the data closer to the internationally recognized definition of migrants. The statistics include long-term visa holders (longer than 90 days) and short-term visa holders who overstay their terms of period.

This helps to explain why many women from other Asian countries can only come as marriage migrants - that is as spouses of Korean men. In the mid-2000s, many local government authorities subsidized marriage migration by providing grants to men – often in rural area – who could not find wives. Such men generally used the grants to pay brokers, who arranged trips to countries like Vietnam, Laos or the Philippines, where they could choose brides from a pool of applicants. The spouses often had very different expectations of the marriage, which led to conflicts and relationship breakdowns (Kim *et al.*, 2008; H. Lee, 2008). At present, marriage migration seems to be declining, and fewer local authorities are subsidizing it. Marriage migration gives rise to ‘multicultural families’, which are seen as problematic by many Koreans, because they go against the belief in ethnic homogeneity. A central policy problem is thus to ensure that foreign mothers are able to bring up their children to speak the Korean language and to conform to Korean cultural values (Bélanger *et al.*, 2010).

The Korean version of multiculturalism is thus highly controversial and is often criticised as being confined within the framework of a nationalism based on a strong belief in racial and ethnic homogeneity (K.-K. Han, 2007; Watson, 2012) or the patriarchal social order that still underlies social policy (Kim, 2007; H.-K. Lee, 2008). South Korea’s multicultural policy concentrates on providing supports to ‘multicultural families’, and is often regarded as ‘cultural paternalism and cultural fetishism’ (Kim, 2011).

Despite the growth of the immigrant population, South Koreans are still a long way from embracing multiculturalism as a principle for government policy. Ethno-centric nationalism is still the dominant ideology throughout Korean society. Korean nationalism developed through a series of historical experiences in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, especially the invasion of the kingdom by Japan and the ensuing colonization; the de-colonization after the Second World War and the division of the nation into two states by the world powers; and the civil war as a major proxy conflict of the Cold War. The result is a continuing one-nation-two-states system. Koreans sought to overcome their sense of deprivation through a belief in ethnic homogeneity or ‘pure blood’ as the source of their nation’s ‘superiority’. This idea was fostered by independence leaders during the colonial period, and then further reinforced by authoritarian rule as a driving force for national development. Following the achievement of economic growth and institutional democracy by the 1990s, the ideology was reproduced as a form of ‘national pride’, which still, however, maintained the essence of a defensive mentality. Recent

increases in multicultural discourses in South Korea should be understood in this historical context (K.-K. Han, 2007).

Although the data show that the majority of migrants are low-skilled workers, they are generally not considered as a constituent group of multicultural policy but rather as ‘disposable labour’ (Amnesty International, 2009). Low-skilled migrant workers are controlled by the ‘rotation principles’ (Seol, 2010) of the temporary labour migration scheme. The sole purpose of the scheme is to fill labour shortages without influencing labour market structure or leading to a need for integration programs. Thus, support for the settlement and integration of migrant workers is not a concern of the South Korean government’s multicultural policy, although there are some measures for the protection of basic human rights (G.-S. Han, 2007).

Rather, South Korea’s ‘multicultural policy’ is limited to assisting female marriage migrants in successfully playing their roles as wife, mother and daughter-in-law in an ethnically Korean family. Marriage migrants in South Korea are seen as brides bought by Korean men through matchmaking brokers from destitute families in developing countries. Many of the Korean men are from poor or rural backgrounds (H.-K. Lee, 2008; Lim, 2010). Such marriages started to increase from mid-1990s. In the mid-2000s, increasing domestic violence and divorce among ‘multicultural couples’ became concerns for policy makers and civil society groups. Later the concerns extended to the fear of ‘multicultural children’ being ghettoized. The term ‘multicultural family’ was initially proposed by civil society groups, because the previously used term ‘international marriage couple’ had derogatory connotations, having been used in the past to refer to couples comprising a US soldier and a Korean entertainer. The term has now been taken up by the government to refer to welfare policy for a specific group of disadvantaged people.

In 2008, South Korea introduced the Act on Support for Multicultural Families, designed to form the basis of support for ‘stable family living’ (Article 1). This Act is indeed the only law that provides a legal definition of ‘the multicultural’ in the South Korean legal system, by defining a ‘multicultural family’ as a family comprised of a Korean national and a foreigner (or a Korean national naturalized through marriage) who has a marital relationship with the former (Article 2) . The South Korean version of multiculturalism is far from the celebration of the presence of diverse cultures in society. Moreover, it may do little to change entrenched ethno-

centric attitudes. Reportedly, the term 'multicultural kids' is now used as a synonym for 'mixed-blood kids' among some school children.

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