

Challenging Homogeneity in Contemporary Korea

Immigrant Women, Immigrant Laborers, and Multicultural Families

By MinSoo Kim-Bossard

South Korea (“Korea” afterward) has been widely known as a homogeneous nation. The government, political leaders, and popular culture frequently promote the notion that Koreans share a single racial, ethnic, and cultural identity. Yet this perception is at odds with reality. During the last three decades, the number of foreign residents in Korea has exponentially increased, making significant changes to the demographic landscape of the country.¹ After only a 22 percent rise between 1980 and 1990, there was a 2,000 percent surge from 1990 to 2007, going from under 50,000 to over one million foreign residents in the country. According to Korean Immigration Service statistics, this number increased to over two million in 2016.

Maintaining Korea’s population levels has become a critical issue of national significance in recent years. Many of these immigrants have arrived in response to the Korean government’s policies promoting immigration as a way to address concerns over the falling birthrate and aging population of the country.² According to *Statistics Korea*, the Korean birthrate (the number of children a woman is predicted to have in her lifetime) has dropped over the past few decades to a little over one child per woman in 2016, in part because more and more Korean women began prioritizing their education, careers, and personal aspirations over having a family.³

Moreover, the rural regions of South Korea are facing a greater challenge, and this has been a national concern. Many younger Korean people have left their rural hometowns looking for jobs in the cities, accelerating the nationwide trend of population aging and diminution. A number of Korean bachelors living in the countryside were having difficulties finding spouses locally beginning in the late 1980s.⁴ Because the population in rural Korea has decreased rapidly over the last couple of decades, many bachelors have been encouraged to find their spouses overseas. This process was initially facilitated by the Korean government, and over the years, for-profit marriage agencies and brokers got involved in the process.⁵ Consequently, the percentage of families with an immigrant spouse is considerably higher in rural regions than it is in urban areas.

Despite this seemingly “proimmigrant” government stance, immigration to Korea by people who seek marriages or employment has generated much debate nationwide about the notion of Korea being a *danilminjok* (single-race nation). These discussions are reflected in many media reports about immigrants and their family members, as well as policy documents from a variety of government branches. The common belief that Korea is—and should remain—homogeneous still prevails and is expressed through stereotypes and discrimination against immigrants in marriage and in work. Immigrants, particularly those who come from countries poorer than Korea, are frequently marginalized in workplaces, schools, and local communities. These immigrants are often considered “cultural outsiders” whose foreign births mark them as fundamentally different or even inferior.⁶

The rise in people migrating to Korea for marriage and employment has brought about the need to examine the relationship between the recent demographic transformation and the prevalent idea that Korea is a homogeneous nation. In other words, there exists a tension between efforts to recruit people for tasks that Koreans are unable or unwilling to perform on the one hand and attempts to maintain homogeneity as a Korean national ideal on the other. Reflecting on the changes in the demographic landscape, my discussion focuses on the following three questions: How have

marriage and labor immigration to Korea transformed the demographics of the society? What is the relationship between marriage and labor immigration, and public debates about Korean racial, ethnic, and cultural homogeneity? What are labor and marriage immigrants’ own perspectives on their experiences in Korea?

Marriage and labor immigration is one of the key demographic trends in contemporary Korea that provides insight for understanding cultural beliefs and attitudes deeply rooted in Korean traditions in relation to increasing diversity in the country. Immigration to Korea is therefore a site of contention, where conscious and unconscious negotiation for the nation’s identity takes place. This process has critical implications for reconsidering the place of Korean ideals of homogeneity and national identity in today’s global trend of population mobility.

Defining Marriage and Labor Immigration in Korea

Before I go further in this essay, clarification is needed regarding my use of the terms “marriage immigration” and “labor immigration.” The notion of immigration itself is fluid and complex, as more and more people are crossing national borders and one’s country of residence may not correspond to one’s country of citizenship. With this complexity in mind, marriage immigration and labor immigration in this essay are categorized as two subsets of immigration that take place in Korea. *Gyeolhon ijumin* (marriage immigrants) in Korea are commonly understood as women from East and Southeast Asian countries moving to Korea with a spousal visa. As previously mentioned, marriage immigration was facilitated by the Korean government, as well as agricultural associations in rural areas that organized marriage tours abroad as part of the “Rural Bachelors Matching Drive” (*Nongchon Chonggak Jangga Bonaegi Undong*) to address concerns about the aging and diminishing population.⁷

It is important to point out that the literal meaning of the term “marriage immigration” could potentially include men and women from any country who move to Korea to marry a Korean national. However, “marriage immigration” in Korean public discussions usually refers to the marriages of an East Asian or Southeast Asian national, including China, Việt Nam, and Philippines. Women from China, especially ethnic Koreans, benefited from the Korean immigration system that provides easier access to ethnic Koreans for a visa and/or permanent residency.⁸ In addition, women from Việt Nam were preferred as new members of rural communities, as it was believed that Vietnamese people share the values of an agricultural society and an extended family system, similar to Korea.⁹ Immigrants from these countries are often perceived to have a lower education level and a lower socioeconomic status than their Korean counterparts.

It is significant to note that some negative perspectives on all mixed-race marriages persist due to the history of the Korean War and the collective memory of Korea’s invasion by foreign powers. Yet the economic power of the immigrants’ home countries plays an important role in shaping a couple’s social status in Korea.¹⁰ For example, *gukjegyeolhon* (international marriages) frequently means marriage between Koreans and “Westerners,” and is considered to lift one’s status (or “marry up,” in contrast to marriage immigration, which carries a stigma).

Iju nodongja (labor immigrants), meanwhile, often refers to men and women from East and Southeast Asian countries who take on the jobs considered to be the dirtiest, most difficult, and most dangerous (“3D”) in Korean society, such as those in construction and fishery industries.¹¹ Many

Foreign Husbands and Wives Married to Koreans Living in South Korea as of 2015

Rank	Nationality	Husbands	Wives	% Female
1	Việt Nam	894	39,953	97.8
2	China	4,689	30,969	89.0
3	China (Ethnically Korean)	7,190	15,940	68.9
4	Japan	1,220	11,641	90.5
5	Philippines	328	11,039	98.0
6	Cambodia	45	4,510	99.0
7	United States	2,440	752	23.4
8	Thailand	75	2,746	97.4
9	Mongolia	104	2,280	95.5
10	Uzbekistan	75	2,066	96.5

Top ten countries from a list of 104 countries. Source: Chosun.com at <https://tinyurl.com/ydzynarf>.

of these economic sectors are in need of more laborers, as Korean workers have not filled those jobs. For labor immigrants, mostly men, gender plays a key role in the types of jobs they find. Interestingly, even though men greatly outnumber women among labor immigrants, women still represent the majority of workers in the service and entertainment industries, including catering, cleaning, and domestic service.¹² There have been numerous news reports on discrimination, violence, and abuse against labor immigrants, stemming from language barriers, a lack of legal protection, and stigmas against foreigners.¹³

Considering the history of recent demographic changes in Korea, it is undeniable that immigrants play important roles in contemporary Korean society. At the same time, the widespread prejudice toward marriage and labor immigrants as people who are not racially, ethnically, and culturally Korean frequently emerges in the form of stereotypes, discrimination, and even violence. In the next section, I discuss the relationship between marriage and labor immigration, and Korean racial, ethnic, and cultural homogeneity.

Why Does Immigration Matter in Korea? Examining Public Beliefs

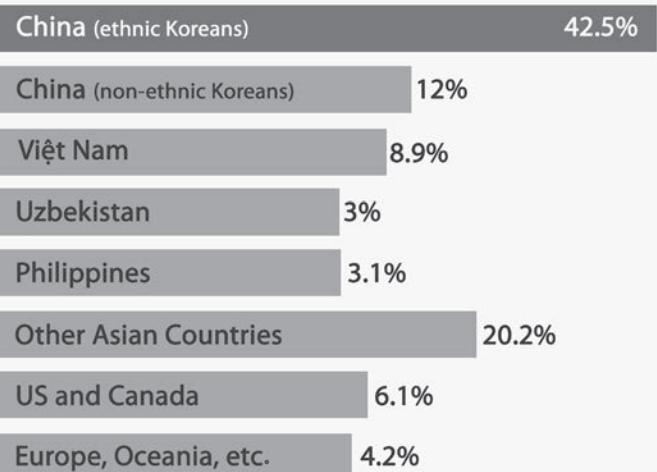
The central position of kinship in Korean society is undeniable. As Professor Bonnie Tilland argued in Part I of the *EAA* special section Demographics, Social Policy, and Asia that family and kinship in Korea play a key role in maintaining the values of the society.¹⁴ Marriage immigrants serve the role of mother, wife, and daughter-in-law. Marriage immigrants from East and Southeast Asian countries contribute to maintaining the hierarchical and patriarchal values of traditional Korean society.¹⁵ Fulfilling the ideals of family by getting married and having children functions as a sign of a productive citizenship, as well as an important rite of passage into adulthood in Korean society.¹⁶

In response to the declining birthrate, Korean government agencies have become pro-natalist, actively promoting marriage and procreation in their policies. For instance, local government offices promote childbirth by offering an array of benefits, such as tax reduction, priority in housing, and discounts in other home expenses, such as electric bills.¹⁷ The rhetoric of patriotism has become associated with having children, as an increasing number of schools are finding it difficult to fill their classrooms.¹⁸ In this sociocultural atmosphere, marriage immigrants from East and Southeast Asian countries play a key role in maintaining and satisfying the traditional Korean value placed upon family. The aging labor force and the rising cost of labor are other important factors that have led to the increasing number of immigrants in the country.¹⁹

Unfortunately, it is not difficult to find media reports about discrimination and violence against labor immigrants, and comments on the reports expressing hostile sentiments toward immigrants. A news article reported in 2017 that many Korean families living in a region of the country highly populated by immigrant families move so that their children do not attend schools with a high percentage of children of immigrants.²⁰ Similarly, it is not unexpected to hear about how immigrants and their children face discrimination in local and national communities, such as bullying in school. The irony is that while the immigrants contribute to the national economy, they are looked down upon as “less than Korean,” adulterating the racial, ethnic, and cultural homogeneity of the nation. The challenge for Korean people is to overcome the stigma they place on foreigners, particularly upon those from lower-income countries, and the deficit-oriented thinking toward those they consider “others.”

Foreign Residents of South Korea by Nationality

Data: Statistics Korea as of May 2016 (15 years and older)



Foreign residents of South Korea by nationality. Source: The article “A Country Where, without Foreigners, the Factories Would Close” on the *Hankyoreh* website at <https://tinyurl.com/ydytamy7>.

In addition, the recent demographic changes in Korea have led to the emergence of many new terminologies. *Damunhwa gajung* (multicultural families) is a term that has been introduced to replace derogatory terms used to describe children who have one Korean parent and one immigrant or foreigner parent, such as “mixed-blood” or “mixed-race” children (*honhyeol*). The term was initially suggested by a civic organization in the early 2000s, but it was popularized when the Korean government started using the term in its policy report in 2006.²¹ Even though the intention of introducing this term was positive, “multicultural families” has taken up an undesirable meaning, drawing a line between children who have two Korean parents and those who do not.²²

One unexamined assumption behind the term is that a typical Korean family is “monocultural,” consisting of only one cultural background: the Korean culture. The construction of “multicultural families” as a new public belief not only overlooks the diversity that has existed in local

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and national communities—including linguistic and culinary diversity, facilitated through historical, political, and social changes in the country—but it associates the Korean people with the notion of a “single-race nation.” In other words, the recent demographic changes in Korea brought about efforts to emphasize the racial, ethnic, and cultural unity of the nation. This is in line with anthropologist Kyung-Koo Han’s argument that geographical, socioeconomic, and historic diversity and discontinuity are often disregarded for a nationalist belief to have meaning in a society.²³ In other words, racial, cultural, and ethnic homogeneity is highlighted at the expense of recognizing diversity within the country throughout Korean history. In this context, what is largely missing from the public discussion are the voices of marriage and labor immigrants themselves. Considering the historical overtones that emphasized the significance of the homogeneity of the “single-race nation,” the perspectives of marriage and labor immigrants need to be made more visible in communal discussions so that public beliefs about non-Korean “others” can be diversified.

Voices of Marriage and Labor Immigrants

The media coverage and government reports in Korea frequently associate unruliness with marriage and labor immigrants. There have been discussions of numerous “social problems” associated with immigrants in Korea, which generally put the blame back on them. These issues include a high divorce rate, domestic and workplace violence, and children from the immigrant families struggling in school.

Even though neither the marriage and labor immigrants’ individual voices nor the reasons why they move to Korea can be generalized, a Korea-centric perspective on immigration leaves out the complexities immigrants navigate on a daily basis, and the knowledge and experiences they bring with them. Between 2013 and 2015, I conducted a series of ethnographic interviews with marriage and labor immigrants, an immigrant’s Korean spouse, and Korean social workers who support immigrant families in three cities of different demographics. One of the immigrants I interviewed in 2013, Ying Yue, a marriage immigrant from China, was aware of this unchallenged stereotype circulating in society. Calling attention to bad press in the aftermath of a recent regional festival celebrating the cultures of immigrants in local communities, she remarked how the immigrants were blamed for trashing the site: “it is not because it was a festival for immigrants, but because it was a festival.”

The marriage and labor immigrants I met between 2013 and 2015 grappled with a range of thoughts about themselves, their families, and their futures. In the same 2013 interview, Ying Yue spoke of the importance of recognizing the courage that immigrants had to move to a new country hoping for a better life. Gouba, a labor immigrant from Myanmar, shared how difficult it had been to work with Korean people, as he had been treated like “an animal” during his early years working in Korea, bombarded by profanities from his Korean supervisors. Some immigrants dealt with the disappointments about current life circumstances and difficulties they needed to navigate, wondering what would have happened if they did not immigrate, struggling to find their place as individuals, parents, and productive members of the community.

Despite many challenges, marriage and labor immigrants in Korea seek out and benefit from various opportunities that living in a new country affords them. One example of the immigrants achieving their “Korean

dream” is by making financial contributions to their families back home. Sociologist Danièle Bélanger and her colleagues discuss in their article “Marriage Migrants as Emigrants” the significance of the remittances that Vietnamese marriage immigrants living abroad sent to their families back home. Conceptualizing the immigrant women as “emigrants” can help challenge the assumption that immigrant women are passive beings or that they have fallen victim to human trafficking.²⁴

The importance of gaining job opportunities through immigration is something that emerged in my interview with Ngoc, a marriage immigrant from Việt Nam. Even though she had struggled with going from one short-term job to another when I met her in 2013, she transitioned into a more stable job in the service industry in 2014, which made her feel like she could be successful if she worked hard. She said that other immigrants she spoke with from Việt Nam were eager to find a job and start making money, which concerned her because she believes that it is important to learn the Korean language and grow more knowledgeable in order to become a good parent.

Conversely, work opportunities could weigh the immigrants down. Gwangcheol, a Korean social worker I interviewed, shared how some immigrants were under the pressure of meeting their parents’ expectations by sending money back to their home countries. He mentioned that this stress, being perceived as a source of improving the family’s livelihood, could affect immigrants adjusting to their new lives in Korea because this could create tension within their immediate families in Korea.

In addition, marriage immigration could create opportunities for travel and work, not only for the immigrants themselves, but also for their family members. Cultural anthropologist Caren Freeman explains in her book *Making and Faking Kinship: Marriage and Labor Migration* between China and South Korea, how international marriages between an ethnic Korean living in China and a Korean national can legally provide the parents of the Korean–Chinese spouse an opportunity to apply for a visitation visa to travel to Korea, which could be abused for seeking illegal employment. In this sense, marriage and labor immigration to Korea could have an impact on both the sending and the receiving communities, as marriage immigration and labor immigration are closely intertwined.

Raising children was another important factor immigrants took under consideration before deciding to move to Korea. When I asked Ngoc what brought her to Korea, she shared that she liked the idea of raising her future children in a better environment—somewhere not too far away from her home country and in a country with a “better” climate. During our last interview in 2015, Gwangcheol pointed out that children from marriage and labor immigrant families could help bridge the different countries their parents come from, as the children can become familiar with the languages and cultures of both countries. While Korea as a society is still grappling with social stereotypes and stigmas about “others” within local and national communities, the benefits of raising multilingual children, such as those from marriage and labor immigrant families who can navigate multiple cultures, have entered the public conversations.

There have been efforts to ameliorate public beliefs about immigrants and their lives in Korea, reflecting the perspectives of marriage and labor immigrants. One example is school textbook revisions carried out by the Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development (current Ministry of Education). According to *Educational Support for Children from Multicultural Backgrounds*, published by the Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development in May 2006, social studies textbooks were revised to reflect the increasing diversity in the country, deleting the prior assertion that Korea is a “single-race nation.”

This is an important step, as young children will be exposed to ideas that reflect the transforming demographic landscape of the country. Still, there is much work to be done to improve the social overtone and attitudes toward immigrants, examining the power dynamics between the long-held beliefs about Korean people and the “cultural others.”

Conclusion

In this essay, I have provided an overview of marriage and labor immigration prevalent in Korea and of “multicultural families” that have transformed the demographic landscape of the country. Marriage and labor immigration is one of the major forces that influences the demographics of contemporary Korea and its national identity in this era of rapid globalization. Marriage and labor immigrants in Korea help fulfill the ideal of getting married and becoming parents on individual and familial levels, and they also address the population shortage by joining the workforce and becoming caretakers for elderly and disabled Korean family members on the national level.

Besides the direct contribution marriage and labor immigrants make, the immigrants serve as an impetus that generates important conversations about homogeneity in Korea. A national culture can either prize, tolerate, or denigrate differences. Media coverage, government reports, and scholarly discussions on marriage and labor immigration to Korea are as much about qualities of Korean society at large as they are about immigrants and their multicultural families, because race, gender, and socioeconomics are tightly entangled in the recent demographic transformation.

As I close this essay, my suggestion is that changing attitudes toward “cultural others,” particularly from countries of lower economic standing in the global economy, is necessary because Korea will continue to experience an increase in racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity through immigration.²⁵ Given how long homogeneity has been part of the conversation about Korean identity and history, I do not think it is possible to simply move beyond the notion of a “single-race nation.” Rather, messy and tense dialogues about diversity among immigrants in Korea can potentially bring about a gradual transformation in the society. ■

NOTES

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