DEBATING MIGRANTS IN KOREAN MULTICULTURALISM

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ABSTRACT
The concept of multiculturalism has become a keyword of contemporary Korean society. The influx of migrants has made Korea could not escape becoming an ethnically diverse nation and a multicultural society. This study aims to understand the concept of Korean multiculturalism through migrant workers and marriage migrants by examining their life in Korea including what kind of issues the migrants have been encountered and how was the effort of Korean government in tackling those issues. It found that the government occupied an important position in leading multiculturalism in Korea as it was the one who promoted Korea's moving towards multiculturalism particularly by leading migrants coming into Korea. Indeed, the incoming of migrants has diversified Korea's homogenous culture, but migrants seemed to only serve as a "solution" for responding to the demand of cheap labors, the bride's shortage, and care provider deficiency. Multiculturalism supposedly recognizes and accommodates all diversity, yet Korea has not acknowledged and accommodated migrants as minorities in its society.

KEYWORDS: Globalization, Migrant workers, Marriage migrants, Multiculturalism, Korean multiculturalism

INTRODUCTION
Globalization with the advance of technology and the transformation of international economy has increased migration all around the world. This global migration has made almost every country in the world unable to resist multiculturalism which highlights the diversity within the society (Ahn, 2013, p.31; Seol, 2010, p.603). Though the meaning of the term multiculturalism has been disputed and should be formulated under the local situation, in a multicultural society, the notion of recognition is more than acceptance. It means that the right to be different should be acknowledged, and thus, the minorities are supposed to have the rights to be different as both majority’s cultures and minority’s cultures are recognized and accommodated as well as protected by the state particularly when they receive threat regarding their existence (Frideres & Kim, 2010, p.684). Along with the inflow of migrants, South Korea (hereafter Korea) is not an exception as this one of the most homogenous nations in the world cannot avoid paying attention from the emerging of multiculturalism in its land (Kang, 2010; Lee, 2008; Lim, 2010; Seol, 2010; Watson, 2010). The number of foreigners in Korea reached
2.26 million in 2022, marking a record-high since the government started to conduct the census of foreign nationals in 2006 (The Korea Times, 2023) that made a country with its ethnic homogeneity as one of its key tenets of its national identity encounter the increasing ethnic diversity as the first step toward becoming a multicultural society.

To understand multiculturalism in Korea, it needs first to discuss the influx of migrants. Starting in the late 1980s, migrant workers are coming to Korea to fulfil the demand of cheap labor for Korea’s economic development (Watson, 2010, p.339). Meanwhile, along with the Korea’s economic rapid growth, Korean women become more educated and prefer late marriage or single life without marriage. This situation created a problem particularly for single men in rural villages to find wives. Accordingly, the trend of importing bride began especially since the early of 1990s (Kang, 2010, p.261). As migrants can be considered as the key factor of Korea’s multiculturalism, this study aims to define the meaning of multiculturalism in Korea through migrants by focusing on migrant workers and marriage migrants. Here, it examines how migrants live their life in Korea to determine Korea’s multiculturalism. In order to answer the research question, it is necessary to understand the reason why migrants have come to Korea. Then, it investigates what kind of issues the migrants have been encountered to address the way of migrants living in Korea and how was the effort of Korean government in tackling the migrants’ issues. Finally, it examines how the migrants being regarded in Korea to understand the Korea’s concept of multiculturalism. To begin, it is important to discuss how the term "multiculturalism" being constituted in the literature.

**Defining Multiculturalism**

The meaning of the term "multiculturalism" has been disputed. In a period of time, multiculturalism was considered to positively accept and institutionalize ethnic diversity. Whilst in another time, particularly after the events of 9/11, multiculturalism started to be critiqued whereas some would deny the discussion of "difference" and others would regard multiculturalism as an alternative in organizing diversity (Mansouri & Modood, 2021, p.2). Nevertheless, several definitions of multiculturalism have been proposed. According to Stuart Hall who is known as the "Godfather of Multiculturalism", we need to differentiate between multi-cultural and multiculturalism to understand multiculturalism. There are three concerns to notice when we conceptualized multiculturalism, which are collective or group identities, race and ethnicity, and identity politics (as cited in Johansson, 2022, p. 8-10). On the other hand, Mansouri & Modood (2021) argued there are five key concepts of multiculturalism, namely difference, equality, ethno-religious groups, national identity, and dialogue. The first concept "difference" has two aspects, which are difference from the outside (the difference that is imposed on people) and difference from the inside (the difference that people feel about themselves). The second concept "equality" also has two aspects, namely non-discrimination and the respectful inclusion of "difference". The third concept "ethno-religious groups" includes religious identities and groups as an important aspect. The fourth concepts "national identity" regards multiculturalism as something that can influence national citizenship and national identity. The last concept is dialogue which emphasize the necessity of dialogue in the cooperation under condition of diversity (Mansouri & Modood, 2021, p. 5-7).

Kymlicka’s (2018) review as a leading multicultural theorist identified multiculturalism in relation to the recognition and accomodation of minorities. He pointed out that state needs to implement policies or laws that encourage minorities' participation in society. In other words, multiculturalism must not only inspect the minorities' cultural interests, but also tackle with how the state asserts its authority over...
populations and territories (p.90). Meanwhile, Bloemraad, Korteweg & Yurdakul (2008) claimed that the term 'multiculturalism' can be applied to a demographic description of a society, an ideology that respects ethnic, racial, cultural, and religious diversity, or a policy adopted on governing diverse societies (p.159). In contrast, Yang (2019) reported that multiculturalism is supported for covering up in imperfection in assimilationism and it has emerged as the "support" for a democracy policy which is aimed at dealing with social injustice and bias in relation to different beliefs and practices (p.291). In brief, multiculturalism is a concept whereas its meaning interpreted differently according to the context and the author.

Reason of the Incoming of Migrants

During the initial phase of its rapid economic growth especially in 1960s and 1970s, Korea was known as a migrant exporter country. In later stage of its industrialization, Korea went through migrant transition which was similar process that other developed countries usually have underwent (Lim, 2010, p.54). Korea became a migrant importer country since late 1980s. As its economic got more developed, Korean people became more educated and these Korean college graduated became more selective in choosing jobs. For instance, they particularly dismissed the 3-D (dirty, dangerous, demeaning) jobs which commonly related to dangerous work environment, long working hours, and low wages (Denney, 2015). Meanwhile, Korea’s economy was still growing and its SMEs (Small and Medium Enterprises) sectors which majority included in 3-D jobs were still demanding large labor force, and thus, they had difficulties in finding workers. This job mismatch situation has made the SMEs seeking for alternative labor force and migrant workers appeared as an effective solution (Seol & Han, 2004, p.45). The role of migrant workers in meeting the urgent demand for labor force in 3-D jobs could be regarded as a supporter and an impact of Korea's economic growth.

The idea of migrant (workers) import was supported by the Korean government. First, they created a trainee program approach to invite low-skilled migrant workers coming to Korea. Industrial Technical Training Program (ITTP) was created in 1991 as the response to the demand from the Korea Federation of Small and Medium Business (KFSB). Under ITTP, the Korean companies were allowed to train their foreign employees/migrants. Here, the migrants were not defined as “migrant workers”, but as “trainees” who were denied the workers’ three primary rights of unionizing, collective bargaining, and collective action. These trainees might stay in Korea for six months and extended for additional six months (or one year in total), but later increased up to maximal two years. However, it turned out that these trainees in reality did not receive any training and instead were forced to work immediately in the low-skilled, menial jobs in the SMEs sectors (Lee, 2009, p. 777-780; Lim, 2010, p.55; Seol & Han, 2004, p.45). These migrants suffered unfair treatments as they had to work as the regular worker, but they have been denied enjoying their rights as one.

ITTP received later on a lot of critiques for exploitation, discrimination, and abusing the “trainees” migrants. Responding to the critique, the Korean government created a new modified trainee program, namely Work-After-Trainee-Program (WATP). Under WATP, the trainees were eligible to elevate their legal status as “workers” after two years of training program that was known as 2+1 system (two years as a trainee and one year as a worker). By getting the “worker” status, the migrant workers were guaranteed the same labor rights that their Korean colleagues have enjoyed under the Labor Standards Act, the Minimum Wages Act, and other labor-related laws. Nevertheless, the WATP was still having many human rights abuses issues likewise ITTP. Therefore, Employment Permit System (EPS) was implemented and it attempted
to fix the issues from previous policies. The EPS abolished the trainee system and guaranteed the migrant workers to have similar rights as Korean workers such as the fix wages, working hours, bonus, and several welfare benefits according to a standard labor contract (Lee, 2009, p. 780-784; Seol & Han, 2004, p.47). Considering its active role in bringing the migrants worker into Korea and in imposing different regulations on migrant workers, the government seemed fairly responsive to the issues concerning migrant workers’ adaption to Korea’s work environment.

Most of the migrant workers are coming from Asian countries. The largest is China with more half of them are Joseonjok (ethnic Korean in China). The other are coming from Philippines, Vietnam, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Thailand, Mongolia, Uzbekistan, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Russia, India, Nepal, Kazakhstan, Myanmar, and Iran, including Goryeoin (ethnic Korean in former Russian federation). Korea preferred migrants with material and cultural-ideological linkages with the country, and thus, Korea were not only importing migrants from any countries such as poor countries with an abundant labor force (Seol & Han, 2004, p.46). Further, the government emphasizes on “rotation principle” in inviting these migrants, namely it only grants entry to migrants who pledge to return home after restricted period of time. This is the government’s strategy to prevent migrant workers to settle in Korea (Seol, 2010, p.601). These preventing migrant workers to settle in Korea and prioritizing migrants from countries with material and cultural-ideological linkages were an attempt to minimize the probability of cultural clash due to the interaction between Korean society and these migrants with different cultural values.

As previously stated, besides migrant workers, there has been influx of marriage migrants and it was encouraged by the Korean government as well. International marriage happened in Korea was previously a female phenomenon, where some Korean women got married with foreigners coming from countries such as Japan and the United States (Lee, 2008, p.107). Then, it shifted to male phenomenon when the trend of importing marriage migrants emerged initially in the late 1980s and became popular in the early 1990s. It was an attempt to solve the “rural bachelor’s marriage problem” that became a national concern because of declining rural community in Korea, even though later the difficulty of finding brides was also experienced by urban men (Lee, 2012, p.177; Lee, 2008, p.108). The “rural bachelor’s marriage problem” arose when rural men having difficulties to find a spouse due to shortage of brides that caused by changes in marriage patterns coincided with economic structural change. The situation was that rural women have been migrating to the city and women have delayed getting married or have made decision to stay single as they have become more educated and prioritized more their carriers (Lee, 2012, p.182). As a consequence, these Korean men tried to look for the spouse from outside of the country or the “marriage migrants”.

Furthermore, the marriage migrants seemed not only serve as the solution for the problem of brides’ shortage, but the purpose has been expanded. In Korea, family has important role in caring for individuals or “family-based care system” and women play the key role as the care providers. Therefore, these marriage migrants were not only expected for playing the role of wife, but also the role of mothers and the daughters-in-law for the husband’s families. They were anticipated to become the responsible one for caring for older adults such as parents-in-law along with childcare and household chores (Lee, 2012, p.192; Um, 2013, p.156). Moreover, considering the term of reproductive labor that defined as “various forms of unpaid and paid labor activities performed to reproduce human beings both physically and socially such as doing household chores, caring for children, adults, and elderly, and maintaining the cultural and social ties of family members” (Um, 2013, p.157), these marriage migrants could also be considered as
reproductive labors. Thus, it seemed that marriage migrants were regarded as one solution for many problems in Korean families, namely finding wife, get offspring plus unpaid caregiver.

At first, the marriage migrants were mainly Joseonjok or Korean Chinese out of considerations for the advantage features they shared, namely the same language, appearance, and culture. However, due to the high rates of divorce, separation, and escape among these Korean Chinese brides, because they could get easier access into the Korean labor market, the popularity to take Korean Chinese as marriage migrants has decreased. Then, the Korean marriage market included also women from other Asian countries such as Vietnam, the Philippines, Mongolia, and from former Russian federation countries (Lee, 2012, p.178). Not like migrant workers who their rights were restricted to family reunification and legal citizenship, marriage migrants are eligible for long-term settlement and naturalization (Choo, 2013, p.449-450; Um, 2013, p.158). Thereby, marriage migrants were presumably more welcomed than migrant workers to inhibit Korea.

**Migrants’ Issues and the Korean Government Effort to tackle them**

As indicated in the previous section, the way migrants living their life in Korea was not without obstacle. In the regards of migrant workers, their grievances were predominantly work-related issues such as injuries during work, the difficulties in adapting to the work, payment arrear, and long working hours such as more than 50 hours a week (Choi, 2018, p.332). These migrant workers were vulnerable to suffer discrimination, exploitation, and abuse. For instance, they tended to earn lower wages comparing their Korean coworkers while doing more dangerous work or taking care of undesired work (Seol & Han, 2004, p.48). They were regarded as little more than cheap and expendable commodities that easily to be replaced (Lim, 2010, p.55). To tackle the issues of migrants’ discrimination, exploitation, and abuse, the Korean government has taken some effort particularly through formulation of the policy regarding migrant workers as discussed earlier different regulations have been implemented, namely ITTP, WATP, and EPS.

There are three reasons why migrants particularly migrant workers facing the discrimination in Korea. First is racism. When Koreans meet foreigners, they tend to differentiate physical distinction based on the economic development of the foreigners’ home country. They incline to have positive impression toward white skin, because white skin is usually from developed country, while they incline to have less negative impression toward dark skin by assuming dark skin people comes from the developing countries. Second is xenophobia. Korean xenophobic sentiments rooted from the colonial experience and cold war. It is related to the racism whereas Korean has created contradictory sentiments towards foreigners, namely admiration towards people from developed countries, while despise towards people from underdeveloped countries. Third is traditional concept of industrial relations that based on hierarchical status. Here, the status of employers and employees are regarded not equal, with the former in higher position than the latter. According to the hierarchical job order, migrant workers take the lowest position as migrants tend to receive the undesired 3-D jobs (Seol & Han, 2004, p.48). To deal with these distinct issues, it needs certainly cooperation from various parties, namely companies, agencies, and both governments (the Korean government and the government of migrants countries. It thus needs more than the government’s effort even though government could take the main role.

With respect to marriage migrants, their issues can be classified into three types. First is the issue concerning citizenship and legal status. It relates particularly to the case
of denizenship and the legal status of divorce. For some marriage migrants who did not want to be naturalized, they would have difficulties in their daily lives such as they could not open a bank account. To overcome this issue, the government established denizenship in 2002 and marriage migrants who have lived in Korea for more than 2 years can apply for it. Previously, in the case of foreign wives who want to divorce within 2 years of marriage, they were forced to leave their children and to return to their home country. However, the government later changed the policy and since 2003, a divorced foreign wife is allowed to apply naturalization if her husband is dead or missing or she can provide a prove that she was divorced due to her husband’s imputation (Lee, 2008, p.113).

Second is the issues regarding economic difficulties and exclusion from the social security system. Many of the marriage migrant families lived under the poverty line and the marriage migrants were also not registered in the medical security system, because most of them assumed that foreigners were not eligible for medical insurance. Third is the issues regarding suspicion of fake marriage (Lee, 2008, p.114). The marriage migrants were often facing suspicion from the in-laws, neighbors, and other Koreans that their reason to get married were for material gain and legal citizenship. As a consequence, some of them received unjust treatments such as their passport hidden and they were prohibited to meet other co-ethnic migrants (Choo, 2013, p.454). Often, they were also trapped in a situation of “dual authenticity bind”, namely they needed to establish the legitimacy of their reasons for marrying and their reasons for divorce (Choo, 2013, p.461).

Certainly, there are marriage migrants who have sincere reason that they came to Korea in order to build a happy family. However, they might later have to run away because they felt disappointment and dissatisfaction, or even suffered domestic violence. Conversely, some of marriage migrants might have aim only for material gain, but then changed their mind to remain together with their families (Lee, 2008, p.114). Moreover, some marriage migrants claimed that their family problem were just a usual problem that every family have to deal with as one of them stated, “We are a normal family, just like any other. I don’t know why people want to single us out. We have struggles, but don’t all families?” (Choo, 2013, p.461).

To tackle these marriage migrants’ issues, the Korean government announced, “Korea is moving towards a multicultural society” (Lee, 2009, p.767). It established the Foreigners’ Policy Committee under the Prime Minister for the deliberation and coordination of matters concerning policies on foreigners and it implemented policies regarding foreigners’ entering, dwelling, and settling in Korea such as the Grand Plan 2006 policy. For the social incorporation integration of the migrants, the government required them to learn Korean language and culture as the condition for social integration (Lee, 2008, p.116). For example, in one situation, a volunteer Korean language teacher said to a marriage migrant, “You are not foreigners anymore. You have to learn Korean and think of yourselves as Koreans. Otherwise, you would live as a foreigner all your life, and that would apply to your children also” (Choo, 2013, p.462). The solution offered by government for these marriage migrants’ issues here is seemed only to change these marriage migrants to become a Korean, and thus, it does not embrace the differences within the Korean society.

CONCLUSION

The previous sections have shown the reasons why migrants have come to Korea, the issues that migrants face in adapting to Korean society, and the government’s response to tackle the issues. It is apparent that the government held a preeminent position in leading multiculturalism in Korea. For instance, the government was the background how
migrants as the key factor in Korea’s multiculturalism being brought into Korea. It was the government as well that promoted the idea of Korea’s moving towards multiculturalism. However, the government did not clearly define what it meant with multiculturalism. Thus, this study identified the concept of multiculturalism by considering how the migrants being regarded in Korea.

This study has found that indeed the incoming of migrants has diversified Korea’s homogenous culture, but migrants seemed to only play role as a “solution” for problems in Korea. For example, migrant workers are regarded as the “solution” for meeting the demand of cheap labors, while they are not accepted as a part of the society as they are prevented to settle down. Clearly, they seemed only considered as an expendable commodity that easily to be replaced. In terms of marriage migrants, they seemed to be more accepted than migrant workers because they played role as a part of family such as a wife, a mother, and a daughter-in-law, but they are certainly regarded also as the “solution” for bride’s shortage and care provider deficiency. Moreover, they required to learn to be “Korean” so that they could be accepted in Korea or being a part of Korea. Supposedly, multiculturalism celebrates diversity by recognizing and accommodating all cultures including minorities, Korea does not acknowledge and accommodate migrants as minorities in its society. Therefore, considering how migrants being regarded, Korea’s concept multiculturalism can be assumed as ‘receiving the migrants to function as they should and accepting the (marriage) migrants that means transforming them to be a “Korean”’.

REFERENCES

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