*What is a Korean?* The Challenges and Prospects of "Multiculturalism" in Korea

By Timothy C. Lim

## What is a Korean?

*What is a Korean?* When I posed this question to a group of students at Chonnam University in the city of Kwangju, I was met with many smiles and more than a few giggles. To these students, there seemed little or no reason to ask such a question. The answer was obvious, so my question seemed funny, if not absurd. If pressed, though, most of the students might have replied that "Koreanness" is an organic and essential, as opposed to a social and contingent, identity. Or at least this is the reasoning tacitly embedded in the notion that one's identity is based on blood, which is perhaps the most common way that Koreans identify the core element of Koreanness. Most Koreans, of course, also recognize that there are deep cultural and social aspects to Korean identity. In this view, Koreans generally see "race" and culture as one. To be truly Korean, then, one must not only have Korean blood, but also speak the language *and* embody the values, the mores, and the mind-set of Korean society. This helps explain why ethnic Koreans—from China, Russia, Japan, the United States and other countries throughout the world—do not always fit into Korean society. They *are* different, "real" Koreans recognize, even if they share the same blood and speak the same language. Indeed, sometimes even the children of expatriate Koreans find it difficult to be fully accepted when they return to Korean society.

By itself, this is not a bad thing. Nor is it unusual. Virtually all societies endeavor to create, and even require, a common or shared identity. The source of this identity may be blood (or race), ethnicity, culture, language, a shared history, and/or something else. It may also be shared commitment to a political or social idea. It does not necessarily matter what the source is, as long as it binds members of national community together. In this sense, all national identities are, as Benedict Anderson tells us, "imagined." That is, they are reified, collective myths that define the boundaries of belongingness. Such collective myths are essential to any society, for they help to create and sustain national unity and purpose. They are what help make societies and their countries strong. By contrast, it is easy to see what can happen in societies in which a shared identity is weak or nonexistent—the "ethnic" and separatist violence that racked the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s is testament to this. Myths based on a highly exclusive sense of homogeneity and ethnic or racial purity, however, can be dysfunctional and even dangerous, especially in societies undergoing significant social change. The reason is clear: they create extremely narrow and inflexible identities that forever marginalize and subordinate certain groups of people, or even entire communities, which do not meet the criteria for "membership." Such subordination, at best, undermines the ideals of human rights; at another level, it legitimates and institutionalizes the discriminatory treatment of out-groups. At worse, the marginalization and subordination of certain groups based, at least in part, on an ascribed identity can lead to widespread social and political conflict. Such was the case in France when "ethnic riots" engulfed the working-class suburbs around Paris in 2005. An exclusionary national identity, therefore, can be a major source of social *disunity*. At present, the exclusionary nature of national identity in South Korea has not been a source of widespread social tension or conflict.

Korea has been fortunate in this regard if only because out-groups in Korean society have, until recently, been very small. However, this is starting to change.

**A Demographic Shift in South Korea**

Demographically, in fact, Korea is not the same society it was even a decade ago. In 2006, the country has at least 536,000 and as many as 722,000 "foreign residents,"[1] the majority of whom are foreign migrant workers (both legal and unauthorized). International migrant workers come from a diverse range of countries: China, Bangladesh, Nepal, Myanmar, Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Vietnam, Mongolia, Russia, Nigeria, Ghana, and so on. While international migrant workers are ostensibly temporary residents of Korea, it is worth noting that many have lived and worked in Korea for more than a decade. In this regard, it is likely that there will be some permanent or long-term settlement among this group. Significantly, too, a large number of these new residents are co-ethnics, that is, they share the same "Korean blood." Most co-ethnics, known as *joseonjok*, come from the Yanbian Autonomous prefecture of China; others come from Russia and former Soviet republics such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan (they are known as *koryoin*). But, as I suggested above, shared blood cannot hide their dissimilarities from the Korean archetype. Indeed, for the most part, *joseonjok* and *koryoin* are treated as (very) "poor cousins": they are tolerated, but are not given equal standing with other Koreans. Even some with relatives in South Korea are treated as little more than interlopers. In a shelter in the Kuro district of Seoul, for example, dozens of older *joseonjok* are relegated to living on handouts in dark, overcrowded rooms. Most or all were "invited" by their South Korean relatives to come to Korea—since this one of the few ways to gain legal entry into the country—but once they arrived, their "rich cousins" essentially abandoned them. Were it not for the shelters (and the work of individuals such as Kim Hae-Sung, who runs the Kuro shelter as well as a hospital for migrant workers and many other similar facilities), they likely would be living—and dying—on the street. The binding power of blood and family ties, it seems, has very clear limits.

Another increasingly, and perhaps more important, source of diversity can be found in the dramatic increase in international marriages: in 2005, according to the Korean National Statistical Office, nearly *one of every seven* marriages in Korea, about 14 percent (or 43,121 marriages), was between a Korean and foreign national. This represents a more than two-fold increase from just two years earlier when the number of international marriages was 19,214. Compared to 1990, however, the increase is astonishing. In that year, there were a mere 619 marriages involving foreign and Korean nationals. Proportionally, the number of international marriages is even stronger in rural areas where fully one out of every three marriages involved a foreign—and almost exclusively female—partner. Most foreign brides are from China and Southeast Asia, especially Vietnam and the Philippines. In the case of the Philippines, Reverend Sun Myung Moon's Unification Church has played an important role in recruiting women—so-called Moonie Brides—for marriage to Korean men. These marriages, unsurprisingly, do not usually involve a long courtship or mutual love; instead, they are "quick and dirty" arrangements, often involving a young bride and middle-aged man. There are also large broker fees involved, which gives the Unification Church (and other churches) an incentive to arrange as many marriages as possible. The situation for Vietnam is not much different. Here, Korean "matchmakers" typically post pictures of Vietnamese women on a website and then arrange meetings once a man makes his choice. Sometimes groups of men are flown to Vietnam to make their "selections" in person. The fees range from $10,000 to $20,000. This process, as the figures

above indicate, has quickly raised the cumulative number of “foreign brides” in Korea. According to Korea’s Ministry of Government Administration and Home Affairs, foreigners settled in Korea through marriage now account for more than 12 percent of all foreign residents.

These trends—both international marriages and international worker migration—show no signs of abating. If anything, both trends are likely to accelerate and expand. Moreover, given Korea’s astoundingly low fertility rate of 1.08, the lowest in the world by far, it is almost certain that, in both absolute and relative terms, the numbers and influence of non-Koreans in Korean society will continue to increase significantly in the coming decades. Today, non-Korean and foreign residents make up over 1 percent (and as much as 1.5 percent) of Korea’s total population. Although still small by international standards, in a defiantly “pure and homogeneous” society, the figure is far from insignificant.

Even more, as the cumulative number of international marriages grows, Korea will have more and more children of “mixed blood.” By the standards of Korean society today, these children are not fully Korean; indeed, they have been largely treated as second class or semi-citizens. Until recently, for example, “mixed-race” males were barred from joining the Korean military, even while military service is compulsory for virtually all “pure blooded” Korean men (today, “mixed-race” males may join the military on a voluntary basis). This, in turn, helped to sanction even more discriminatory treatment, since military service is required for government jobs and benefits, while in the private sector those with military service are given “preferred” status. The second-class status of “mixed blood” children is also demonstrated, albeit inadvertently, in official government statistics. In the Ministry of Government Administration and Home Affairs report noted above, for example, children of international marriages are included in Korea’s “foreign” population. Yet, most of these children are *legally* Korean; it is telling, therefore, that despite their legal status as citizens, the Korean government continues to classify these children, their mothers, and other naturalized Korean citizens as “foreign residents.”

The phenomenon of “mixed-race” children, I should note, is not new. Ever since the end of the Korean War, American soldiers have had “Amerasian” children with Korean women. But the numbers have been fairly small. According to the Pearl S. Buck International Korea (PSBIK) foundation, there are fewer than 5,000 Amerasian children in Korea. The situation, though, has changed dramatically in recent years: it is estimated there are now between 25,000 and 30,000 “Koasian” children (that is, the offspring born to Korean *men* and women primarily from China and Southeast Asia). But it is not only a matter of numbers. The fact that the majority of Korea’s “mixed blood” children now have a Korean *father* is potentially very significant in a society characterized by patriarchy, a point I will come back to below.

**“Getting Ready For a Multi-Ethnic Society”?**

Koreans are not blind to these changes. This is especially apparent in the media. From the most conservative to the most progressive news sources, editorial writers and columnists have been acknowledging the country’s seemingly inexorable loss of homogeneity and its move toward “multiculturalism.” Consider, for example, this editorial headline from the *Hankyoreh* (one of Korea’s most progressive papers): “Get Ready for a Multi-Ethnic Society.”[2] This editorial was a response both to the phenomena of international marriages and foreign worker migration; in addition, it reflected the undeniable reality of increasing cultural and ethnic diversity in Korean society. At the same time, the message was very limited: “getting ready” for a multiethnic society, it appears, simply meant providing “better oversight of the international marriage

agencies", and giving foreign spouses more help in "adjusting socially, through Korean language and cultural education." There was no hint that the emergence of a multi-ethnic society actually required a change in, still less a transformation of, Korean identity—that is, of what it means to be Korean or to belong to Korean society.

More recently, however, the deeper question of Korean identity has been raised in the Korean media and elsewhere, albeit in a largely accidental and indirect manner. In fact, the real trigger for national "soul searching" about Korean identity came from a very unlikely source, namely, the success of Hines Ward—an American football player who has a Korean mother and an African-American father. After winning the Most Valuable Player (MVP) award in the 2006 Super Bowl, Ward was quickly embraced by the national media as a *Korean* success story. Hundreds if not thousands of stories were printed and aired about Ward and his Korean heritage, and he now appears frequently in television advertisements in Korea. The tacit—but clearly unintentional—message underlying these stories was that neither pure blood nor culture is a necessary attribute of Koreanness. After all, Ward's blood is "mixed" and he grew up in the United States where, as a young man, not only did he learn almost nothing about his Korean heritage or Korean culture, but he also explicitly rejected his "Korean side." Still, when I asked the students at Chonnam University whether Hines Ward is Korean, many did not quite know how to answer. But, they clearly understood the implications of my question—i.e., they immediately understood that questions of identity or belongingness are not as clear-cut as they sometimes appear to be. No one was smiling.

Admittedly, the ability of the "Hines Ward phenomenon" to open and sustain a deeper debate on Korean identity has been extremely limited. I would even say that questions of identity barely pricked the consciousness of the vast majority of Koreans. On the other hand, many Koreans did recognize the apparent hypocrisy of the country's embrace of Ward and its long-standing rejection of so-called Amerasians and other "mixed-blooded" Koreans. This, in turn, has led to some efforts to make life better for "half-Koreans," foreign migrant workers, and other foreign residents. In May 2006, for example, President Roh Moo-hyun announced a new "process of amending immigration laws to help create a more relaxed and accommodating environment for foreigners who come to Korea."[3] A month earlier, the Roh administration also proposed a new law prohibiting "discrimination against racially-mixed people." These are well-intended measures, but the problem is readily apparent: such measures fail to address the underlying source of discrimination, marginalization, and subordination, namely, a national identity that implicitly, but unequivocally defines differences and diversity as undesirable and, therefore, inferior. Interestingly, this point was underscored by an insightful editorial in the *Korea Herald*, which argued that the anti-discrimination law was flawed because it equated inter-racial parentage with a physical disability. As the editors put it, "These policy makers seem to believe that like people with physical disabilities, the mixed-race people who have suffered from open and hidden discrimination in this society need social props to help them shed handicaps in finding opportunities in life."[4]

The question remains: Is Korea ready for a multi-ethnic society? On the one hand, there are positive signs. More and more Koreans are cognizant of the issue and many believe that something must be done. In addition, as the discussion above clearly shows, Korean society *is* more heterogeneous than it has ever been and there is every indication that it will become much more so in the future. Sheer weight of numbers, then, may force Korea to become "ready." On the other hand, the concept of Korean identity as it has developed historically has left little room for acceptance of social heterogeneity, still less the wholesale transformation of Korean identity.

**~~What is a Korean?~~ Who Belongs to Korean Society?**

On this last point, it is important to emphasize that a redefining of national identity does not mean that the concept of Koreanness based on blood and culture must be entirely discarded. In the case of Korea, this is not at all likely. Rather, a redefining of Korean identity can be based on widening the scope of "belongingness." Thus, instead of asking, "What is a Korean?" the more appropriate question may be: *Who belongs to Korean society?* This latter question suggests that the key issue facing Korean society is the ability to not only tolerate or recognize the reality of increasing social heterogeneity, but also to embrace ethnic and cultural pluralism as a social good, as a new national ideal. This is the premise behind "multiculturalism," which has acquired a strongly negative connotation among some groups in the United States. This is unfortunate, if only because the controversy surrounding the term obscures a basic point: in societies undergoing significant social and demographic change, which is certainly the case in South Korea, respect for cultural and ethnic diversity (i.e., multiculturalism) is perhaps the best method for building or sustaining national unity. This is especially true if such respect is built on a shared foundation of fundamental values applicable to all members of society. Viewed from this perspective, my answer to the question—"Is Korea ready for a multi-ethnic society?"—is an emphatic yes. The alternative is the continued privileging of a highly restrictive form of identity that necessarily excludes and subordinates increasingly large numbers of new residents. In today's world, this is really no alternative at all.

None of this is to say that the road to multiculturalism will be easy in South Korea; indeed, given the immense power of a Korean identity premised on the oneness of blood and culture, the road to a multicultural society will likely be extremely rough, although not impassable.

**The Rough Road to a Multicultural Society: Challenges and Prospects**

From a comparative perspective, it is easy to get a sense of both the challenges and prospects Korea faces. The challenges are clear enough. One need only look around the world to see dozens of societies struggling with ethnic and cultural diversity and with the question of national identity. Even the United States, which is often held up as an exemplar of diversity (and multiculturalism?) has gone through—and continues to experience—tumultuous debates over American identity and the criteria for "belongingness." In the 19th century (and into the 20th century), these debates centered on the division between nativists and liberals. Both shared the assumption, according to Martin Spencer, that that an American cultural identity existed, but nativists believed that new immigrants were inassimilable and that "their customs and manners would be inimical to maintaining the political institutions of the country."[5] In this respect, nativists believed that (non-Anglo) immigrants could never belong to American society. At the same time, immigration was considered necessary for America's economic development; thus, the absorption of more and more culturally distinct immigrants was encouraged.[6] To nativists, this created a profound dilemma. For, while new immigrants were unwanted, they were needed. Even more, most new immigrants were not temporary sojourners: once they came to the United States, they tended to stay. This, to nativists, was the real problem and the basic threat to the American identity. Liberals, on the other hand, were unconvinced that American national identity could be so easily subverted—no matter how many new immigrants settled in the United States. And while they were clearly not advocates of multiculturalism—instead, early liberals believed in assimilation—they understood that an inclusive and expansive American identity had

the capacity to strengthen the country. To liberals of the time, in short, there was no dilemma, since the core values of American identity were assumed to be unshakably firm.

In South Korea, we can see much of the same logic at work in the incorporation of foreign migrant workers since the early 1990s. That is, for the most part, foreign migrants are unwanted, but most Koreans recognize that they are necessary for the country's economy. Foreign workers occupy a particularly important role in small- and medium-sized factories, which are typically the domain of low paying, low skilled, and 3-D ("dirty, difficult, and dangerous") jobs. From the very beginning of large-scale in-migration, however, there has been a general anxiety within Korean society that culturally distinct and ethnically diverse immigrants would pose a threat to Korea's social and cultural fabric. This is one reason why co-ethnics from China were first encouraged to fill the economy's many vacancies in the 3-D sector. Not surprisingly, however, their treatment as "poor cousins" created serious tensions, which led many Koreans to conclude that blood was not so thick after all.

Significantly, though, there has not been a nativist movement per se in South Korea. Perhaps this is because, with the exception of the Asian financial crisis in the late 1990s, no significant stratum of Korean society has been threatened directly by foreign migrant workers. (Or, at least, no political party has found it beneficial to scapegoat "foreign immigrants" for the country's economic ills.) The absence of a nativist movement, however, may only mean that the basic thrust of nativism—i.e., the assumption that certain new immigrants will inject, into mainstream society, alien political, economic or cultural values and behaviors that threaten prevailing norms and values—is largely taken for granted within Korean society. Indeed, this is most likely the case. In this regard, the obstacles to the development of a multicultural society would appear greater in Korea than in the United States. After all, if the whole society—more or less—tacitly or explicitly accepts the presumption that immigrants are inherent threats, then the space for change, for the establishment of new sense of Koreanness, must be very small indeed. The apparent lack of space for social change, though, should not be taken for granted. In fact, since Korea first gained independence, the country has witnessed tremendous social, political, and economic change. Remember, too, that just two generations ago, few observers would have given South Korea any chance to become one of the largest economies in the world and a major competitor in some of the most advanced consumer markets. And, just 15 years ago, few Koreans could have imagined that the country would be host to hundreds of thousands of foreign workers.

Korea, in short, has shown tremendous capacity for change. This said there is nothing automatic or inevitable about the transition to a multicultural society. *If* it happens in South Korea, it will be largely because of strong and constant pressure exerted by groups and individuals. Some of this pressure, of course, will come from the new immigrants themselves as they press for greater recognition of their rights within Korean society. But Korean "liberals" must also play a key role, as they have already done in the struggle for migrant worker rights.[7] Another source of pressure—albeit from a different perspective—is likely to come from a bastion of conservatism in Korean society: rural Korean men who have married and had children with "foreign" brides. In the past, and because of a strong patriarchal bias in Korea, children of international marriages were easily ignored or dismissed. This was especially true prior to 1990, when the mother of a "mixed race" child was almost always Korean while the father was from a foreign country. (In fact, until September 1997, children of international marriages were legally required to take the father's nationality, which further justified and, even more, institutionalized discriminatory treatment since most of these children ended up as "foreigners" in their own

land.) In the future, however, the large majority of "mixed-race" children will have a Korean father, and it is likely that these fathers will demand equal treatment and equal opportunity *as* Koreans for their offspring. It is worth noting, too, that these children will constitute a significant and growing proportion of all children in the rural areas—it is estimated that by 2012, international marriages will account for one out of every four elementary school students in Korea's countryside.

To get a better sense of the prospects for change, it would be useful to consider one more comparison, namely, Australia. For nearly a century, beginning in the 1880s, Australia deliberately and assiduously attempted to create a mono-cultural, homogenous "white" society—an intention well reflected in what came to be known as the "White Australia" policy. The objectives of the White Australia policy, according to James Jupp, were assimilationist and clearly (although tacitly) racist: "The Aboriginal population was expected to die out, with those of 'mixed race' … assimilating into the majority population to the point of eventual invisibility."[8] Non-Europeans, moreover, were effectively forbidden to settle in the country. The policy was "successful" insofar as it created, for over three generations, an "absolute orthodoxy of national existence."[9] Yet, today, Australia is considered to be a shining example of multiculturalism. While the process of change, which began in the late 1960s, is too complex to detail here, suffice it to say that it was a product of political will. And, although the pressure for change, at least according to some scholars, came from outside Australia in the form a new geopolitical reality that forced the country to acknowledge its reliance on Asia, the mechanisms that created a multicultural society in Australia were purely domestic and almost mundane in their application. The government, in effect, simply repudiated the White Australia policy and adopted a "color blind" approach in its immigration policies.[10] It also advocated multiculturalism as a national ideal "and sought to uphold and develop an overarching framework of Australian values in which the rights of individuals from minority group backgrounds to maintain their ethnic identity was assured."[11] Of course, Australia's turn toward multiculturalism is not perfect and I do not wish to gloss over the difficulties. As with any society, Australia has had and continues to have problems stemming from "ethnic relations." Still, the point remains: Australia made a transition from a highly exclusionary, race-based national identity to one that is expansive and inclusive. It did so, moreover, without weakening the society or country. Indeed, the transformation to a multicultural society has made Australia stronger, both domestically and in terms of its position as "part of Asia."

**Conclusion: "In the middle of every difficulty lies opportunity"[*]**

South Korea has a tremendous opportunity. The government and its people have the opportunity to not only accept the reality of increasing social heterogeneity, but also to embrace a new multicultural vision. This will not be easy, for Korea's sense of national identity has deep historical roots; the belief in the oneness of blood and culture is embedded in the psyche of many if not most Koreans. As in Australia, however, it is possible to uproot even the most ingrained "orthodoxies." The first step is to recognize that ethnic and cultural diversity is not a threat to Korean identity and national strength, but a potential and potentially potent source of new creative energy. This is particularly important in the current era, an era in which increasing global competition has put more and more pressure on all societies to innovate and grow in new directions. Even more, a mono-cultural, race-based based national identity that subordinates and

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[*] Albert Einstein

marginalizes other ethnic and cultural groups has become a dangerous anachronism. It not only breeds divisiveness and social tension, but also, and more importantly, can barely be justified in a world where human rights has become an accepted norm of global society. Still, it should not be shame or guilt that motivates Koreans to move toward a multicultural society; instead, it should be the desire to create a stronger society and country through a greater and more inclusive concept of Koreanness.

[1] Recent estimates on the number of foreign residents in Korea vary considerably. The figure of 536,000 is based on a figure given by the Ministry of Justice (during a seminar on Korea's immigration system in June 2006), and reported in the *Korea Herald* ("Forum calls for creation of agency for foreign residents," June 9, 2006). A few months earlier, however, the same paper gave an estimate, also based on government sources, of 722,000 (see "Designating 'expats' day," *Korea Herald*, March 31, 2006).

[2] "Get Ready for a Multi-Ethnic Society [Editorial]," *Hankyoreh*, June 29, 2005.

[3] "Roh eases immigration policy for foreigners," *Korea Herald,* May 26, 2006.

[4] "Law for the mixed-blood?" *Korea Herald*, April 11, 2006.

[5] Martin E. Spencer, "Multiculturalism, 'Political Correctness,' and the Politics of Identity," *Sociological Forum*, v. 9, n. 4 (December 1994).

[6] Ibid., p. 550.

[7] For a discussion of this issue, see my 2002 article, "The Changing Face of South Korea," in *TKSQ* (Fall/Summer).

[8] James Jupp, "From 'White Australia' to 'Part of Asia': Recent Shifts in Australian Immigration Policy Toward the Region," *International Migration Review*, v. 29, n. 1 (Spring 1995), p. 208.

[9] Neville Meaney, "The End of 'White Australia' and Australia's Changing Perceptions of Asia, 1945-1990," *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, v. 49, n. 2 (1995), p. 171.

[10] Ibid., p. 182.

[11] J.J. Smolicz, "Australia: From Migrant Country to Multicultural Nation," *International Migration Review*, v. 31, n. 1 (Spring 1997), p. 173.