

**Book Review**

**John Lie ed., *Multiethnic Korea? Multiculturalism, Migration, and Peoplehood Diversity in Contemporary South Korea* (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, Berkeley, 2014), pp. vii, 329.**

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The question raised by the title of John Lie's *Multiethnic Korea? Multiculturalism, Migration, and Peoplehood Diversity in Contemporary South Korea* is an intriguing one that structures the entire edited collection. The present, or impending, reality of a multiethnic society and how it will shape Korea's future is a source of anxiety for a country that has long regarded itself as ethnically and culturally homogenous. Lie's Introduction (Chapter 1) serves as a nice primer, providing a historical overview of the construction and persistence of the myth of ethnic homogeneity. The overarching issue explored throughout the entire text, then, "is no longer whether South Korea is multiethnic [*tainjong*] and multicultural [*tamunhwa*], but rather what it means concretely to talk of South Korean diversity and Korean cultural identity."<sup>1</sup> *Multiethnic Korea?*, as Lie acknowledges, does not represent a comprehensive study on the titular topic, nor is it a narrow, in-depth study of one theme. Instead, one of the key strengths of the book lies in its organization, as it is centered around three interrelated topics: the politics of an emergent multiethnic/multicultural society, the precarious place of migrants, and the articulations of ethnic and cultural, or peoplehood, diversity.

The second chapter by Timothy C. Lim, which opens Part I, examines the context of "late migration" and its impact on Korea's multiculturalist

turn. Lim diverges from the more conventional scholarly argument that the Korean state's embrace of multiculturalism is mostly "fictitious." He identifies a "potentially profound discursive shift," in which multiculturalism carries implications beyond empty rhetoric.<sup>2</sup> The role of non-state actors such as NGOs and the migrants themselves is crucial in challenging the state-centric discourse of multiculturalism. Lim stresses that multiculturalism must be understood as a fluid concept with contested meanings, a point taken up in the next chapter by Nora Hui-Jung Kim. Kim's discourse analysis of media responses to Korea's transition reveals that while "Korea may be becoming a multiethnic society" it is not a multicultural one.<sup>3</sup> Multiculturalism is based on celebrating diversity by preserving cultural differences, an approach that ultimately seeks to promote what Kim, quoting Will Kymlicka, encapsulates as "ethnocultural justice."<sup>4</sup> For Kim, Korean multiculturalism is aimed at eradicating cultural differences by assimilating marriage migrants within the Korean-defined ambit of the multicultural family [*tamunhwa kajöng*], while excluding migrant workers.

In this way, multicultural families form an integral part of what Euy Ryung Jun conceptualizes as the "*tamunhwa* apparatus" and the ambivalent state-society partnership that has emerged as a response to Korea's growing multiethnic society.<sup>5</sup> The discourse of multiculturalism in Korea is inseparable from the discourse of multicultural education; specifically, the *tamunhwa* project is geared toward what Jun calls the creation of "new citizen"<sup>6</sup> subjects whose multicultural and cosmopolitan sensibilities will enhance Korea's national competitiveness in the global market. By observing the faculty and students from Seoul National University of Education tasked with the speedy adoption of a multicultural curriculum in 2009, Nancy Abelmann, Gayoung Chung, Sejung Ham, Jiyeon Kang, and Q-Ho Lee, the authors of the fifth chapter, illuminate the on-the-ground workings of a multicultural apparatus characterized by general feelings of confusion. The ethnographic study's findings lead them to what they posit as "makeshift multiculturalism."<sup>7</sup> This term connotes the still unformed character of a multicultural policy whose progressive possibilities must be balanced out by more practical

bureaucratic demands.

Part II spotlights the individuals who are often excluded from official multicultural discourse. Hae Yeon Choo analyzes the function of Protestant churches in the area of advocacy and assistance for North Korean and Filipino migrants. Her comparative ethnographic study of “needs talk” shows “the everyday interactions in the churches as a space that transforms migrants into a deserving constituency of the Korean nation-state.”<sup>8</sup> Despite their co-ethnic status, North Korean defectors are often stereotyped by the church leaders as lacking a work ethic, a serious weakness that the churches seek to remedy by transforming the defectors into “proper capitalist subjects with a strong work ethic who [are] able to assimilate to South Korea.”<sup>9</sup> In Chapter 7, Jin-Heon Jung further explores the uncertain positioning of North Koreans in South Korea’s multicultural policies, by tracing the shifting identity politics of North Korean defectors. Between the 1960s and 1980s, Jung suggests, these defectors were treated as anticommunist heroes, while in the 1990s they began to be seen as burdens to the nation. He delves into how contemporary North Korean subjectivities are being articulated through the interactions between North Korean migrants and South Koreans within the Evangelical Protestant megachurches. These spaces prove to be important contact zones in which Northerners “claim their distinctive life trajectories, seek a social network, and thus configure a new sense of belonging.”<sup>10</sup>

Yet another co-ethnic group that warrants greater attention is Korean adoptees, the subject of Eleana Kim’s contribution. Kim offers an overview of how adoptees have been re-signified according to historical conjunctures; a complex process shaped not only by the state but also by NGOs and adoptee activists. Beginning as abject war orphans in the immediate postwar period before their reclamation as “latter-day *minjung* [populist cultural nationalism built around the common people]” in the 1990s,<sup>11</sup> Kim argues that adoptees in today’s globalized Korea are increasingly required to conform to “neoliberal values of entrepreneurship and self-regulation.”<sup>12</sup> All of the authors note the active role played by civil society in the construction of Korean multiculturalism. This is, in fact, a rather striking phenomenon among

East Asian countries.

In Chapter 9, Keiko Yamanaka offers a comparative study of Korean and Japanese policies toward low-skilled workers. Korea adopted Japan's immigration model of low-skilled, industrial trainees on contract. Subjected to low wages and workplace exploitation, migrant workers were framed as the "new *minjung*, victims of globalization" in the mid-1990s, resulting in a "strong commitment to immigrant rights within Korea's civil society," which brought an end to the trainee program.<sup>13</sup> Japan, on the other hand, lacked such a vibrant civil society, prompting municipal governments to introduce new programs to better accommodate their foreign residents.

The final section takes an in-depth look at multicultural and multiethnic groups living in contemporary South Korea. It begins with Nadia Y. Kim's study of multiracial children of Koreans and Black U.S. soldiers and African migrants; two groups, she notes, have largely been absent in popular and academic discussions of multiculturalism in Korea. Underlying this omission, she asserts, is the common Western Darwinist view of the world organized as "White top, Asian middle, and African bottom."<sup>14</sup> Kim also notes the problematic tendency of avoiding the "explicit and conceptual language of 'race' and 'racism'" in contemporary scholarship and substituting it with the term "multicultural."<sup>15</sup> Neglecting ethno-racism while highlighting ethnic nationalism inadvertently results in the reification of difference, which privileges co-ethnics and people with lighter skin. Children with black parentage, or *honhyöl* (transliterated as "mixed blood"), comprise the Korean Amerasians who "are persistently relegated to non-Korean identities, yet 'almost Korean,'" asserts Sue-Je L. Gage in Chapter 11.<sup>16</sup> Gage defines "Korean Amerasians" specifically to include "anyone with U.S. American paternity and Korean maternity born in South Korea since 1945 without U.S. citizenship."<sup>17</sup> Amerasians have long been associated with the tainted "dirty work" of Korean sex-workers and African-American GIs in camp towns, but "globalization and multiethnicization in Korea have created new expressions and perceptions of identity."<sup>18</sup> Gage values the subversive potential of *honhyöl* as "challengers to and resisters of the mythico-history of 'pure blood.'"<sup>19</sup> If dark-skinned

Amerasians are often pushed to the bottom of Korea's multicultural hierarchy, Minjeong Kim's ethnographic research of Filipina wives in rural Korean households—the main target of multicultural programs—reveals serious limits to governmental policies. Kim's analysis of private patriarchy (in contrast to public), the control of women at home, sheds light on “the tension between multiculturalist rhetoric and ethnocentric patriarchy on the interpersonal level.”<sup>20</sup> If, as other contributors have suggested, multiculturalism does not represent a genuine embrace of cultural diversity, Kim claims that the Korean state almost exclusively targets marriage migrants precisely because their assimilation into the patriarchal family unit does not “threaten Korea's ethnic identity under the power of patriarchy in the private sphere.”<sup>21</sup>

In the last chapter, Jack Jin Gary Lee and John D. Skrentny situate Korean multiculturalism comparatively, in relation to other East Asian developmental states. Their analysis demonstrates broad similarities, including the “structural (non) incorporation” of guest workers and the incorporation of marriage migrants and their multicultural families. This marks a significant divergence from the Euro-Western model of liberal multiculturalism.<sup>22</sup> Lee and Skrentny propose that immigration and multicultural policies be understood as part “of the more general approach to statecraft”; namely, the developmental state model that prioritizes economic growth.<sup>23</sup> In lieu of a concluding chapter, this comparative study allows readers to better examine “the groundbreaking yet still limited nature of Korea's multiculturalism.”<sup>24</sup>

Multiculturalism first emerged as a buzzword in Korean society in 2006. Yet, the exact nature of what the term entails has often been obscured by the “cause célèbre,” spotlighting extraordinary individuals such as American football player Hines Ward, who was born in Seoul to a Korean mother and an African-American GI father. Despite the abundance of books and articles published on this and related topics in Korean, book-length, English-language studies remain hard to find. *Multietnic Korea?* is essential reading for scholars interested in the broad field of Korean Studies and, indeed, thanks to its accessible, jargon-free language, any critical reader who is interested in unpacking the contemporary “multicultural” landscape of Korea. Although most of the

chapters are oriented toward the social sciences, their applicability may be extended to the humanities, particularly as multicultural residents are becoming a visible presence in the Korean media. Each chapter is insightful as a stand-alone piece, but their significance grows when considered in relation to each other, especially as the contributors tend to cite each other, engaging in productive dialogues. Since Korean multiculturalism is still very much in the making, this reader is excited by the prospect of future scholarly contributions generated in response to the provocative questions raised by *Multiethnic Korea?*

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> John Lie, ed., *Multiethnic Korea? Multiculturalism, Migration, and Peoplehood Diversity in Contemporary South Korea* (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, Berkeley, 2014), 21.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 190.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 218.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 214.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 246-47.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 245.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 271.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 247.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 278.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 279.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 314.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 322.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 303.