

The New Wave of Korean Multiculturalism

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Abstract. South Korea had advocated *a single race* or *racial purism* till the late 90's, and showed a closed and negative attitude toward foreigners. However, South Koreans evolving attitude to foreigners from the 2000s is an interesting fact that they raised the slogan of *multiculturalism*. Furthermore the multiculturalism in South Korea is now widely applicable over the government, academia and ordinary citizens.

Some studies explain the backgrounds of multiculturalism at the demographical or economical point of view, and they disregard an important existing factor which is the social point of view. This paper discusses the social situation of South Korea, such as the citizen activity and administrative solidarity relations which caused South Korea's Multiculturalism Policy.

1. Introduction

More and more people move in line with the acceleration in the globalization. Advanced countries including the US, Canada, Australia and Europe have concerned how to integrate the immigrants to their societies.

Up to now, various concepts including the salad bowl, mosaic, multiculturalism and relativism have been newly proposed and sometimes focused on. However, the ideal concept of the social integration has not been proposed yet. Rather, people in a lot of countries cannot help taking exclusive attitudes to foreign residents due to economic recessions and terror compared to the past and many governments have shown negative attitudes to the immigrant integration. Against this backdrop, the author focuses on a movement in the social integration in Korea.

The author has critically analyzed how the multiculturalism depended from contrast debates from the liberalism and communalism in the US has been accepted and developed in Korea and Japan. However, the paper intends to focus on the general aspect including the movement toward the new social integration and the elements in the background as a prior stage rather than covering the analysis by the author.

2. *Multiculturalism* in Korea

2.1 Multicultural phenomena in Korea

Korea was under the colonial occupation for about 40 years and has experienced internal clashes between the North and the South until it achieved the rapid economic growth in 1960s and 70s. The Korean people overcame the suffering by protesting the legitimacy of the *single race*. The unity by

such nationalism largely contributed to the economic development of Korea today but has been criticized by the exclusiveness¹ against other cultures from local and foreign viewpoints.

In this situation, the foreign laborers after 1980s and marriage immigrants after the 90s have been emerged as a new ethnic minority and hampered the unity of Korea pursued by the government. The keyword of *multi-culture* has been discussed in a wide range from government officials to scholars and NGO officials and the media has highly focused on the concept². The transition to the Multicultural Korea was proposed as a national agenda [Yoon 2009; Lee 2007]³ and each governmental ministry has provided at least one policy related to the multiculturalism. In particular, there are more than 200 multi-cultural family support centers under the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family nationwide. In addition to providing the education on the culture and lifestyle in Korea for the foreigners, the centers freely provide employment support for the social independence and dispatch the immigrants as teachers for the multi-cultural families and expert translators to seek the changes in the consciousness from Korean people [Ministry of Gender and Equality, 2006]. Not only Korean spouse, but also the family is under support for the marriage immigrant. Even experts are surprised at such changes for a short period of time for 10 years and the analysis of the cause and the background are still on the way.

2.2 Statistical changes in Korea

Prior to the consideration, the paper touches upon the current situation of the multi-culture in Korea.

According to the Ministry of Justice, about 932,000 foreign citizens from 184 countries were classified as long-term residents in 2012. The number rises to 1.42 million when short-term visitors are included. Those deemed long-term residents account for around 1.8 percent of South Korea's total population of roughly 50 million. It means foreign citizens increased about 8 times of 172,000 in 1992. By nationality, people who own Chinese (include Korean-chinese) nationality account for approximately 55% of total foreigners, Vietnam is second (11.5%) and USA (4.9%) is third.

International marriages in Korea have tripled since 2003 with the number of foreign wives numbering 148,498 in 2012. Most of these marriages are unions between a Korean male and a foreign female from China, Japan, Vietnam, the Philippines. In 1990, 1.2 percent of all marriages in Korea consisted of one foreign national, and by 2012, that had risen to 12.8 percent.

The *Ground Vision 2050* released by the Korea Research Institute for Human Settlement in 2007 September forecast that the portion of the foreigners in Korea would reach 9.8% or 4.09 million by 2050 [Song, 2007: 91].

2.3 Consideration on the cause

However, questions may be raised from such statistical changes. It is true that the population of the immigrants has surged but is the figure of about 2% enough to influence the multi-ethnicity and multi-rationalism? Also, the concept of the *multi-culture* may be questioned because about 30% of the foreign residents in Korea is ethnic Koreans with the nationality of China who may speak Korean to

¹ Even until 1995, the ethics textbooks stated that it was a virtue to use 'local products' and it was general to describe a child who used Japanese or American products as a thoughtless kid in novels or comic books.

² Chung parodies the excessive interest and discussions about the multiculturalism, saying 'The ghost of the multi-culture has been emerged' [Chung 2008: 118].

³ Office for Government Coordination, April 20, 2007, Press release, "PM Han fully handle the multi-culture society through fully support for the immigrants"

some extent and more than 60% of residents in Korea is from North Asia whose appearance or cultural background is similar, accounting for 70.5% of the marriage immigrants [Kim, 2007].

However, the focus is not *whether it is proper to mention a society for the multiculturalism*, but it is the current status how the Korean government or society recognizes the *multiculturalism*. It is meaningful to focus on why the government claims *multicultural* society, not the assimilation policies so far and why and how the policy is discussed under the current situation whether the society or the academic communities accept such policies as the *multiculturalism*.

It may be guessed that the multiculturalism in Korea has been consciously introduced in the context of the Korean society rather than being introduced in an urgent situation.

3. Human rights movement expansion

The multiculturalism in Korea is frequently called *government-led multi-culturalism*⁴ due to the aggressive attitude of the government. Compared to other areas or tasks, it is true that the response and policy-making by the government are performed in the early stage and the activities are desirable. However, strictly speaking, the opinion is not clear where the Korean multi-culturalism is *the government-led multiculturalism*.

The realization of the multiculturalism by the policies may be performed by the government, the central entity in the policies and it is not meaningful to focus on the aspect. In particular, the impact of the civil society largely influences the multiculturalism may be overlooked. The civil society which discusses the situation of the multi-racing features in Korea and the responses of the person in the policies are concurrently implemented and Lee calls this as *the government and NGO-type multiculturalism* [Lee 2007: 241].

Here, the study points out how the civil activities in Korea are linked to the increase in the marriage immigrants and human rights issues of the foreign laborers and the fact that there exists close ties between the civil activist groups and the government in the process.

3.1 Development in the civil organizations

Yamanaka & Kim (2008) discover the fact that the Korean civil society has actively engaged in the discussion on the multiculturalism due to the democratic movements in the 1980s. The authors explain that the know-how for systematically and effectively utilizing the issues in the politics with the capabilities from the democratic movement in 80s. Certainly, the achievements in the minority policies in Korea are largely driven by aggressive human rights activities for the disabled, women and foreign laborers and these movements are expanded by the burgeoning civil organizations during the democratic movements.

The civil activist groups have surged in the late 80s with the democratization and the economic growth and the 2003 Korea Civil Organization Review states that 722 of 890 civil organizations in the survey were established after the democratic movement in 1987, accounting for 81% [Korea Civil Organization Review, 2003].

The democratization in Korea was restored from the military government by the activities from the students. In this period, the core civil organizations which systematically resisted the military government and systemically expanded the democratic movements held powers as major officials

⁴ Many scholars including Kim and Oh have used the term [Kim 2007; Oh 2007].

in the following leftist governments. Former presidents Daejoong Kim and Moohyun Roh raked in the votes for being highly praised of resisting the military government and focusing on human rights protection.

The organized civil movements in the late 1980s pursued evolving changes ranging the politics, economy, society and culture of Korea and the Korean governments have retained the politics by accepting their requests. In particular, the civil society has proposed more requests to clear the social unfair since the civilian government and brought massive changes in the politics and the administration [Park, 2002; Seo, 2000].

The civic groups after the 80s have cooperated with labor unions to mainly expand civil movements on the labor issues and gradually recognized unpayment of wages, verbal and physical violence to the foreign workers as severe social issues. In reality, it may be indicated that the civil groups which achieved their goal of the democratization after the establishment of the civilian government have to turn their eyes to the new minority issues including foreign workers, women and the disabled.

From the late 80s through 90s, the immigration policies at the government level have not been prepared and the immigrant workers who voluntarily came to Korea were under severe human rights infringement by their employers or companies. Facing these situation, the groups which support the immigrants have increase as a new area of the social movement.

Another thing to focus on is that most of various activities to upgrade the human rights and systems for the immigrant workers are held by Christian mission groups, NGOs or churches [Kim, 2008:50]. The survey on the status of the groups supporting the immigrant workers by the Christian Institute for the Study of Justice and Development in 2000s [Song, 2007] states that 79 of 90 respondent groups are related to the religions. This accounts for 87.8%, followed by civil activist groups (5, 5.6%), medical volunteer groups (4, 4.4%) and legal service groups (2, 2.2%) [Choi, 2008: 68].

The way of thinking, *fair to the God* by the Christian groups focuses on the *justice* or *fair* rather than the economic benefits for the immigration of the labor or special features in the foreigner groups.

In this period, the civil activist groups provide counseling for the urgent human rights violation issues faced by the workers and focuses on providing emergency care. The groups supporting the immigrant workers have reported the exclusiveness in the Korean society toward the foreigners by discovering poor human rights conditions [Han, 2003: 76]. By the continuous efforts from the groups, the *Act on the Employment of Foreign Workers, etc.* was established in 2003 and the industrial apprentice system was integrated into the employment license system in 2007. By then, the civil activist groups emphasized demonstrations in the plazas, aggressively providing opinions to the government and raising the issues through the media. Even though the employment license system has limitations, it is remarkable considering that the previous industrial apprentice system was not covered by the labor act.

3.2 Human rights infringement to the marriage immigrants

In the 1990s, the rural population has decreased and males in the rural villages have not found their spouses due to well-educated women and late marriage.

The intermediary services have been provided by the local government or lawmakers due to the concerns over decreasing tax revenues or lowering the voting rates by decreasing the population.

Then, not only males in the rural villages, but also males with relatively low social status including urban self-employers or in the service field have been covered by the immigrant marriage.

Meanwhile, more cases of the human rights infringement have been discovered with the increasing number of marriage immigrants. The news media covers the domestic violence on the marriage immigrants, fraud by the intermediaries or fake marriages to achieve the nationality and the civil activist groups have found more activities as the threat for the human rights violations have increased.

There are various reasons of the immigrant marriages and they may not be simply classified [Kim et al., 2008: 32]⁵. Generally, however, there are many cases of marriage between poor Korean male and the female from Southeast Asian countries due to economic reasons [Seol, 2006]. This economic gap degrades the status of the marriage immigrants. Because in many cases, the Korean male provides the economic compensation for the female or the intermediary, the man tends to think *I buy the woman*, intrinsically holding the risk of the human rights violation.

The civil activist groups have focused on providing counseling for the domestic violence or sexual harassment and shelters as an emergency plan like the immigrant workers. However, the groups have gradually realized that the issues are fundamentally different from those of the laborers. The groups supporting the foreign workers focused on the males. In the consciousness that the existing immigrant support center may not respond the marriage immigrants, a lot of shelters are built for the women and the civil group called *the Human Rights Center for the Marriage Immigrants* was established [Han, 2006]. Like the groups supporting the foreign workers, the number of groups supporting the marriage immigrants has increased and expanded nationwide. Major supports provided by such organizations include human rights counseling or legal support for the people under the domestic violence, residential status of the marriage immigrants, shelters, nurturing support for the mothers and Korean language schools. These efforts have been widely performed and the Korea center for the marriage immigrants prepared the draft for the *Supporting policies for the marriage immigrants to be integrated into the society* through the cooperation with government-affiliated organizations and became the basis for the *supporting marriage immigrants to be in the society*.

3.3 Cooperation with the government

The Ministry of Justice takes actions at the government level for the increase in the international marriage and the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family engages in the issues of the marriage immigrants by establishing the shelters for the foreign women suffering from sexual assault and human trafficking. In particular, related to the *legislation on the management of the intermediary service* proposed by lawmaker Chunjin Kim to the health and welfare committee of the National Assembly and it is remarkable to announce the *Survey of the status and the legislation for healthcare / welfare supports for the marriage immigrants* from December 2004 to June 2005 [Seol et al., 2006].

Various issues are found in the family with the marriage immigrants during the survey but 60% of the respondents are excluded from the social protection because they are foreigners despite their economic and social conditions. Concerns that the marriage immigrants without holding the

⁵ The intermediary service accounts for 31% of the matchmaking but the trend has changed from the religious groups or the service to the introduction from a family member or acquaintance.

nationality of Korea shall be included in the social welfare system and the multi-cultural policies are reviewed.

The initial legislation focuses on helping the marriage immigrants adapt themselves to the society, is headed to the integration into the Korean society and contains the elements of the assimilation. However, it is remarkable that the government proposes specific supporting plans. The policy passes through the *Framework Act on Treating Foreigners in Korea* of 2007 and *the Act on Supporting Multi-cultural Families* [Kim, 2007]. In the aspect that the migration policies focus on the multicultural families, concerns exist that the legal system overlook the basic human rights for the refugees or illegal immigrants. However, it is remarkable that the law is established right after declaring that the multicultural society comes.

There needs to investigate the accumulation in the experience through the democratic movement by the civil activist groups, as well as the close ties between the groups and the government which continue the issues raised by the groups. Former presidents Kim Daejoong and Roh Moohyun protested the *human rights-friendly government* and had cooperative and competing relations with the civil groups [Lee, 2007]. Abovementioned, both people played their best roles in the democratic movement and established long reliable relations with the civic activist groups.

The Kim government did not implement the clear multicultural policies but paved the road for the growth of the civil activist groups and claiming the human rights.

Mr. Roh had close ties with left-wing civil organizations prior to the inauguration and listened to the opinions from the groups with the basis of them. The Roh administration reported *leveling out the discrimination against the minorities* as a major national agenda in his inauguration in 2003 and tried to get rid of the discrimination against 5 groups (women, the disabled, foreigners, etc.) [Lee, 2007: 236].

4. Consideration

This is the review of the social status and government responses as a background for the multi-culturalism. It is found out that the discussion is affected by the civil activist groups and government policy directions, in addition to the social phenomena like the globalization or movement of the population. These elements make the Korean multiculturalism unique but at the same time, impose limitations.

First, the supporting groups for foreigners fail to break the hierarchical relation between the main stream and the anti-mainstream. As mentioned above, the movements supporting the immigrant workers succeed in widely announcing the discrimination against the workers. Meanwhile, however, the image of the immigrants is settled as the *subjective* one needed for help. The human rights campaigns focusing on reflecting the attitudes toward the foreign workers so far expand the paternalism toward the workers. Also, there are many immigrant workers with negative feeling because the movements which point out the discriminative viewpoints and seek out the improvement become the other and make the workers under sympathy [Han, 2007: 76].

Second, due to the government intervention, the multi-cultural policies have strengthened but weakened the proper functions of the civil groups, holding the possibility for the intentional labeling due to the political favor. Close ties with the government contain the danger of the limitation with any forms imposed on the activities of the civil groups. The government interest in the multi-culturalism is expanded to the economic support for the civil groups and these causes to surge the number of new civil organizations starting to support the immigrants in addition to the existing groups trying to solve the multi-cultural issues [Kim, 2008: 56]. The problem is, with the increase

number of civil groups diverging the direction to the multi-cultural support to utilize the financial supports from the government, there are a lot of numbers with insufficient expertise and fails to establish the reliability between the groups and the beneficiaries. Also, Park points out the competition among the civil activist groups over the financial supports, causing to diminish the sector of the civil society [Park, 2006: 215].

5. Conclusion

This reviews how the multiculturalism in Korea has been affected by the social conditions and academic discussions and has become the social context in Korea. Due to the increase number of marriage immigrants in the 90s, the discussions on the multiculturalism have been expanded by overlapping the aggressive intervention from the government, civil activities and active academic discussions.

The multi-cultural policies actively implemented since 2000s show the relation between the civil activities nurtured after the democratic movement and the government with the background of the organizations. Fundamentally, the multiculturalism does not just stay in the systematic ideologies formed by certain academic groups or schools. Rather, it emphasizes the social activities by various minority groups and their corresponding policies, requiring distinguishing 3 levels of the ideology, movement and policies and their interactions in case of analyzing the multiculturalism. [Yui,1999: 2].

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