

# International Migration and Multiculturalism in Asia and South Korea: With a Focus on the Korean Experience<sup>1</sup>

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## Asia on the Move

Asia has become one of the most significant and "globalized" regions in the world not only in terms of the cross-border movement of capital and goods, but also in terms of the movement of people. It accounts for some 28% of the world's international migrants. It is also the leading source of family and authorized economic migration to most of the world's immigrant-receiving regions and countries. The nine largest immigrant-exporting countries (Bangladesh, China, India, Indonesia, Myanmar, Pakistan, the Philippines, Sri Lanka and Thailand) together contribute between one half and two thirds of all documented immigrants and refugees to the international migration stream (IOM, 2005: 103). Over 20 million Asian workers are estimated to be living outside their native countries. In addition to migrant workers, visitors and tourists, students who study abroad, and marriage migrants cross national borders at an increasing rate and establish complex networks of interpersonal relationships. As a result, Asia has become a transnational space for the economy, culture, family, community, and identity.

## Trends and characteristics<sup>2</sup>

The various subregions of Asia have been characterized by specific migratory movements. Traditionally, South Asia is identified as a subregion of origin of migration,

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<sup>2</sup> Information on trends and characteristics of international migration in Asia was obtained from the 2003 OECD report on trends in international migration.

East Asia as a subregion of destination and South-East Asia as a subregion of both origin and destination. At the same time, however, migration flows have developed in different directions, particularly within the various regions, so that it is difficult to maintain the traditional characterizations. In East Asia, for instance, migration from China, although unauthorized, has become important in Japan and South Korea, and Koreans continue to enter Japan. South Asia cannot be considered just a subregion of origin, in view of the substantial migration from Bangladesh and Nepal to India.

Asia contains a vibrant and changing mix of countries of destination, countries that send and receive workers, and countries of origin. Of course migration within and from the region as a whole is not new — the 19th century was marked by great waves of migration of indentured labor especially from South Asia and parts of China to the West, while the current population mix of large parts of Southeast Asia is the result of at least a century of migration patterns, largely from within Asia.

However, recent migration has been rather different in terms of its nature and its duration. The movement of more educated and skilled professional workers has been dominantly to developed countries, either to the United States, or Western Europe or even to Australia and New Zealand. By contrast, the movement of unskilled or relatively less skilled workers has displayed a much more diverse pattern, with a large and growing extent of intra-Asian region migration. This reflects the basic features of economic migration patterns from and within Asia: that they are structural and demand-driven, rather than determined by the supply conditions of labor.

While almost all the countries of developing Asia have some amount of labor surplus and therefore are in a position to export workers, the ability of these countries to send workers elsewhere has depended essentially upon the willingness of other countries to receive them. This, in turn, has dictated the pattern, whereby the richer countries which are preferred destinations have increasingly chosen to accept only those workers who fill existing gaps in their own labor markets or add to the pool of highly educated workforce in general.

#### Issues of international migration in Asia

International migration in Asia generates such diverse issues as brain drain or brain circulation, return migration, feminization of migration, female trafficking, marriage migration, and remittances. Those issues cause significant changes and transformation of both sending and receiving countries.

#### 1) Brain drain or brain circulation

Brain drain refers to the migration of highly-educated skilled scientists and technologists from developing countries to developed countries like the United States. In the past, theorists of international migration focused on the one-way movement from developing countries to developed countries in search of better employment opportunities and higher standards of living. Nowadays, however, international migration is longer a unidirectional movement. Rather, it is a bidirectional flow. Millions of international migrants return home every year, many remaining permanently, while others emigrate again. Some return because they are required to do so by host countries, others return because they have accomplished their goals as migrants and still others find that the costs of migration outweigh its benefits. Migrants who return home often bring expertise and savings. Some use their savings to start businesses that contribute to job creation, even if on a modest scale. Some pass their expertise along to others as teachers or trainers. Some form part of a new critical mass of skilled workers that may launch new ventures in their countries and promote economic development.

As a result of bidirectional direction of migration, in some parts of the world, the old dynamic of "brain drain" is giving way to "brain circulation." Most people instinctively assume that the movement of skill and talent must benefit one country at the expense of another. But thanks to brain circulation, high-skilled immigration increasingly benefits both sides. Economically speaking, it is blessed to give and to receive.

#### 2) The Feminization of Asian Migration

Women constitute almost half of all immigrants in Asia. In several countries, considerably more women than men are emigrant workers: In 2005, for example, over 65% of the nearly 3,000 Filipinos that left the country every day for work or residence

abroad were women. In 2002, two women left Sri Lanka for every male emigrant. Between 2000 and 2003, 79% of all migrants leaving Indonesia to work abroad were women. The 1997 financial crisis in Asia led to the emigration of many women from poorer countries. By 2000, an estimated two million Asian women were working in neighboring countries. A large number of female migrants from Asia have also been arriving in industrial countries, such as Canada and Australia, for family reunification.

<Table 1> Female migrants as percentage of all international migrants

Region	1960	1970	1980	1990	1995	2000	2005
Asia	46.4	46.8	44.6	45.2	45.2	45.4	44.7
Eastern Asia	47.4	48.6	46.8	49.1	50.1	52.8	53.5
South-central Asia	46.4	46.9	45.9	47.6	48.0	48.0	47.9
South-eastern Asia	45.4	46.9	46.1	46.1	46.3	47.6	48.6
Western Asia	46.9	44.9	40.7	39.9	39.8	40.1	38.8
Source: World Migrant Stock: The 2005 Revision Population Database							

Many of Asian female migrants become domestic workers in other Asian countries as well as in other regions, especially the Middle East and Europe. The ILO reports that in 2003 there were 200,000 foreign domestic workers in Hong Kong (SAR, China) and 155,000 in Malaysia. One third of the labor migrants within the region are women, the great majority of whom work in domestic services or entertainment, sectors often not covered by national labor laws.

Throughout the 1990s, many of these women also ended up working in the largely unregulated sex industry, which accounted for an estimated 2~14% of the GDP in four South-East Asian countries. The industry is fueled by dire poverty, discrimination and unemployment in Asia. In South-East and East Asian countries that admit migrants exclusively for temporary labor, the share of women in labor migration flows has been increasing sharply since the late 1970s.

Among female migrants from Asia who move to work, low-skilled women predominate. They are concentrated in a relatively small number of occupations. However, highly skilled Asian women also migrate for work abroad, although many end up doing menial labor. For instance, many Filipino women who have tertiary level education have become domestic workers overseas. The demand for nurses is a major pull factor, especially to meet shortages in wealthier countries. In 2003, an estimated 85% of employed Filipino nurses were working abroad. In Singapore, 30% of the nurses registered in 2003 were born outside the country.

### 3) Female Trafficking

One third of the global trafficking in women and children occurs in South East Asia, where there are an estimated 230,000 victims. The Greater Mekong Subregion, comprising Cambodia, Yunan Province of China, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Myanmar, Thailand, and Viet Nam, are major trafficking areas, as is Indonesia. Thailand, in addition to being a destination country, serves as a source and transit hub for trafficked persons to other Asian countries, Australia, the United States and Western Europe. South Asia has the second largest number of internationally trafficked persons, estimated at 150,000. India and Pakistan are major countries of destination for trafficked women and girls and are also transit points into the Middle East. ILO estimates that once victims are in destination countries, traffickers net \$32 billion a year – half generated in industrialized countries and almost one third in Asia.

### 4) Marriage migration

Due to a high demand for foreign brides, migration for marriage is increasing in Asia. In many East and South-East Asian countries, the increase in women entering the workforce – coupled with a trend towards delaying or forgoing marriage and childbearing altogether is leading to a demand for more ‘traditional’ brides in order to maintain the household. In Taiwan Province of China, brides now represent about half of the total migrant population. Since the 1990s, nearly 100,000 Vietnamese women have married Taiwanese men. There is also a surge in the numbers of women migrating to

South Korea to marry local men. Significant numbers of Filipino women have married men in Japan, Australia, North America and Europe.

#### 5) Remittances

Remittances are a major part of the economies of the South Asian countries. The Sri Lankan Government has stated that overseas remittances “have now become the backbone of the country’s economy.” About a million overseas contract workers from that country (60% of them are female domestic workers) sent home \$1.2 billion in 2002. Of the roughly \$6 billion remitted annually to the Philippines in the late 1990s, migrant women transferred one third. Bangladeshi women working in the Middle East sent home 72% of their earnings on average.

#### 6) Transnational communities

Governments understand that their citizens working abroad can be development assets and are strengthening ties with them. Collective remittances by migrant associations that support small-scale development projects are already improving life in communities of origin, often with the support of local and national authorities. As consumers, migrants contribute to the expansion of trade, tourism and telecommunications in their countries of origin and destination. And migrants often become entrepreneurs, either in their countries of destination or at home, once they return, spawning businesses that can generate wealth and create jobs.

In addition, migrants promote foreign investment in countries of origin, as investors themselves, and also by reducing barriers to trade and tapping their business connections. Networks linking scientific and technical personnel at home with their migrant counterparts abroad enable the transfer of knowledge and of productive and technological know-how.

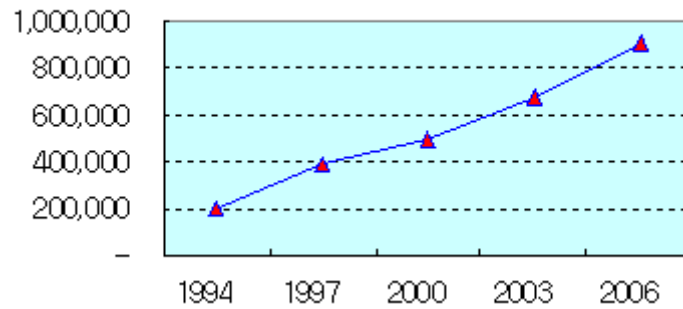
Combining elements of traditional immigrant culture with distinctly high-tech practices, these organizations simultaneously create ethnic identities within the region and aid professional networking and information exchange. These are not traditional political or lobbying groups—rather their focus is the professional and technical advancement of their members. Membership in Indian and Chinese professional

associations has virtually no overlap, although the overlap within the separate communities—particularly the Chinese, with its many specialized associations—appears considerable. Yet ethnic distinctions also exist within the Chinese community. To an outsider, the Chinese American Semiconductor Professionals Association and the North American Chinese Semiconductor Association are redundant organizations. One, however, represents Taiwanese, the other Mainland Chinese.

Whatever their ethnicity, all these associations tend to mix socializing—over Chinese banquets, Indian dinners, or family-centered social events—with support for professional and technical advancement. Each, either explicitly or informally, offers first-generation immigrants professional contacts and networks within the local technology community. They serve as recruitment channels and provide role models of successful immigrant entrepreneurs and managers. They sponsor regular speakers and conferences whose subjects range from specialized technical and market information to how to write a business plan or manage a business. Some Chinese associations give seminars on English communication, negotiation skills, and stress management.

### Trends in international migration in South Korea

Until the 1980s, South Korea was mainly an immigrant-sending country. The South Korean government encouraged emigration to reduce population pressure in the nation and gain remittances sent home by Koreans abroad. Since the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games, however, South Korea experienced a sharp decline in emigration but a rapid increase of foreign visitors and residents. During the past decade, the number of foreign visitors to South Korea increased 64% from 7,506,804 to 12,312,871 in 2006 and the number of foreign residents increased 135% from 386,972 in 1997 to 910,149 in 2006. In August 2007, the number of foreigners residing in South Korea reached 1 million, representing 2% of the total South Korean population.



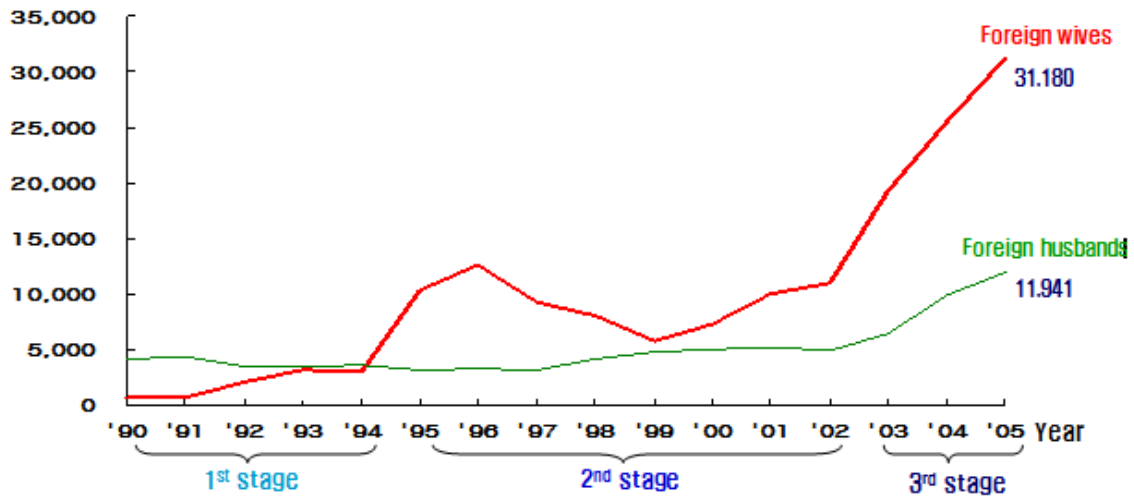
<Figure 1> Number of Foreigners residing in South Korea, 1994-2007

The increase of foreign residents has been driven mainly by two different flows: foreign migrant workers and marriage migrants. Foreign migrant workers began to enter South Korea in the early 1990s and continued to increase since then. There was 142% increase of foreign migrant workers from 1995 to 2005 (140,000 in 1995 to 345,000 in 2005). In December of 2006, their number reached 450,000, and 180,000 of them were unauthorized workers who often overstayed their visa expiration date. The largest sending country is China and half of Chinese migrants are ethnic Koreans (or Korean Chinese). Other sending countries include the Philippines, Vietnam, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Thailand, Mongolia, Uzbekistan, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Russia, India, Nepal, Kazakhstan, Myanmar, and Iran.

Married immigrants began to enter South Korea since the 1990s. In the early 1990s these foreign women were the brides of Korean farmers who could not find local Korean women willing to marry Korean men in the countryside. In the early stage of marriage migration, the Unification Church played an important role in introducing foreign women to rural areas in Korea. Later, provincial governments that wanted to boost the population size of their districts sponsored international marriage between Korean farmers and foreign women. Commercial marriage brokers or agencies mushroomed to capitalize the boom of international marriages. While there was little regulation, international marriage between Korean men and foreign women increased rapidly from 34,710 in 2002 to 104,749 in 2007. The cumulative number of international marriages during the 1990-2007 period is 364,000. The rate of international marriage is more striking than its absolute number. International marriage accounted for 11% of

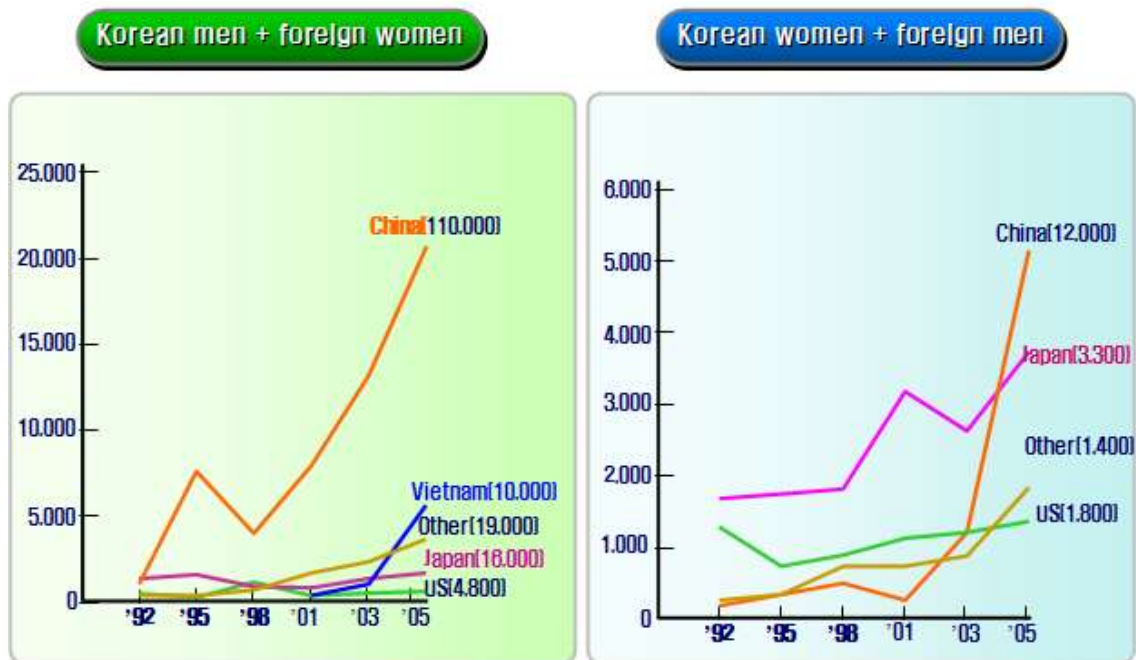


total marriages in Korea in 2006, and in rural areas its rate reached some 33%. In April 2006, 30,727 children were reported to be children of multicultural families, and 7,000 of them were in school.



<Figure 2> Number of international marriages in South Korea, 1990-2005

Foreign brides come mainly from developing countries of Asia. China and Vietnam have been the two main source countries, but marriages with Japanese and US women have increased gradually. Also, there was a shift from marriages with Japanese and US men to marriages with Chinese men during the past decades.



<Figure 3> Source countries of international marriage

As a result of international migration, ethnic communities began to form, especially in industrial areas where migrant workers are concentrated. The most well-known example is the Borderless Village in Ansan, Kyonggi Province where foreigners from various nationalities and local Koreans develop symbiotic relationships. Also, transnational family and social and economic linkages between South Korea and neighboring Asian countries emerged out of international marriages. The increase of naturalized Koreans and their multicultural children provided an impetus for change of Koreans' concept of national identity that used to depend on blood lineage and cultural homogeneity. Initially migrant worker problems involved labor supply and human rights issues. Now other issues related with social integration are important: marriage, family, naturalization, citizenship, education, health and medical service, welfare, community, assimilation, and identity.

The above discussions point to the fact that South Korean society has entered the first phase of multiethnic and multicultural society and the current process seems irreversible. If the current trend continues, the proportion of foreigners residing in South Korea will increase to 2.8% in 2010, 5% in 2020, and 9.2% in 2050 (Song, 2007: 91). In the increasingly multiracial/ethnic society, people's values and social policies

need to be multicultural enough to accommodate new members and achieve social integration and unity out of diversity.

### Multiculturalism discourses in South Korea

Starting from 2000, issues of multiculturalism and multicultural society are actively discussed and debated in Korean society. Today's multiculturalism discourse reflects increasing racial and cultural diversity of Korean society as a result of increasing international migration. It can be also viewed as an active response of Korean society to constant problems of mistreatment and human rights violations of foreign migrant workers and married immigrants who have difficulties in adjusting to Korean society and culture. Multiculturalism is viewed by some progressives as a new model of social integration amidst cultural diversity.

It is difficult to define multiculturalism because it includes a wide range of values and ideologies. However, it generally refers to a belief or a doctrine that all citizens in a society can proudly maintain their own cultural identities and simultaneously have a sense of belonging to the society. It also refers to government policy initiatives to implement such ideals and values. Basing on the Canadian experience, Troper (1999) defined multiculturalism as a set of several different, but related, phenomena; (1) the demographic reality of a Canadian population made up of peoples and groups representing a plurality of ethnocultural traditions and racial origins; (2) a social ideal or value that accepts cultural pluralism as a positive and distinctive feature of Canadian society; and (3) government policy initiatives designed to recognize, support, and some might argue—manage cultural and racial pluralism at federal, provincial, and municipal levels.

From demographic standpoint, Korean society is said to enter the first phase of multicultural society and multicultural society and the current process seems irreversible. If the current trend continues, the percent of foreigners in Korea will reach 9.2% in 2050, making Korea a truly multicultural society.

From the viewpoint of cultural tolerance, values and behaviors of South Koreans are far from multiculturalism. As an ethnically homogeneous state, Korea has

been traditionally unfamiliar with the problems of ethnic minorities. Koreans' strong pride in ethnic homogeneity helps them think that "being different" is "being wrong" and develop prejudice and intolerance toward foreigners and minorities. In August 2007, UN Committee on Elimination of Racial Discrimination warned the danger of the prevalent notion in Korean culture of "pure bloodness" that causes various forms of discrimination against so-called "mixed-bloods" in all areas of life, and recommended the Korean government to take appropriate policy initiatives to eliminate racial discrimination and prejudice. Although Koreans' attitudes toward foreigners and minorities have improved significantly during the past decades, but Koreans still treat foreigners differently according to the development level of countries of origin. It appears that Koreans are tolerant and considerate only when foreigners do not compete with Koreans and threaten Korean culture and social system.

From the policy standpoint, the Korean government makes rapid progress in some areas but in other areas it maintains a rigid and oppressive stance toward foreigners and minorities. It takes measures to support undocumented workers, married immigrants and children of interracial marriage who are often called "Kosians", but its policy is geared to facilitating assimilation of foreigners to Korean culture and society rather than recognizing and protecting their unique cultures and identities.

Thus, Korea's multiculturalism is still at the toddler stage where people's consciousness and policy and system do not follow the pace of demographic changes. It is yet to see if Koreans' consciousness and the government's system will become truly multicultural or remain ethnic inside and multicultural outside.

### State-led multiculturalism

The South Korean government has taken a series of policy initiatives to respond to the multicultural trends of Korean society. It legislated the Discrimination Prohibition Act for a comprehensive and effective response to discrimination in accordance with the recommendations of the National Human Rights Commission in 2006. That Act would include specific references to discrimination on the basis of race being considered an illegal and prohibited act. In addition, as part of efforts to meet the

growing demand for supporting the adjustment of foreigners to Korean society, the Basic Act on the Treatment of Foreigners in Korea had been passed and had come into operation in July 2007. The legislation included provisions such as extending support for married immigrants and their children to help their social integration, assisting education of the Korean language and culture, as well as providing childcare. Moreover, foreigners who had obtained Korean nationality could, for three years, also enjoy the benefit of a range of measures and policies to assist their social integration.

With regard to the situation of foreign migrant workers and industrial trainees, a number of important steps had been taken to promote the human rights of migrants. The Industrial Trainee System had been phased out and finally abolished as of 1 January 2007. Accordingly, the Employment Permit System, which had been adopted in 2003, and had been in effect since 2004, had become the sole gateway for foreign workers employment in South Korea. The abolition of the previous system was expected to provide an opportunity to solve various problems, such as the infringement of foreign workers' human rights and the illegal use of foreign workers.

With regard to refugees, the Korean government had been making efforts to improve the refugee recognition procedure and refugee relief policies. For example, to protect the human rights of refugee applicants, the government was working on legislatively prohibiting the forced repatriation of applicants whose refugee status determination procedure was not yet complete. Moreover, a legal framework would soon be laid down to create refugee support facilities and to allow employment for refugee applicants and for those permitted to stay on humanitarian grounds, if they met certain minimum requirements.

Regarding protective measures to victims of racial discrimination, foreigners were entitled to the same rights as Korean nationals with regard to protection, remedies and compensation in the case of acts of discrimination. Foreigners were also provided with foreign language interpretation services and notified of available services. In addition, starting from 10 May 2007, undocumented foreigners were granted permission to stay and even work in Korea until any procedure for remedy, such as the provision of medical treatment or compensation for industrial accidents, was completed.

As for human rights education, starting in 2009, human rights education would gradually be included as a topic of study in a wide range of school subjects at the primary and middle school level. Teaching of the value of human rights would be incorporated in a comprehensive and systematic manner. Also, training programs on the prevention of human rights violations were now being offered to law enforcement officials dealing with foreigner-related matters.

As for measures to assist children of married immigrants, in May 2006, the government had established and initiated an Educational Plan for Children from Multicultural Families. The government also intended to establish, in 2007, a multicultural education support committee, composed of regional stakeholders, including city/provincial offices of education, universities, local governments, non-governmental organizations and mass media organizations. A base centre for multicultural education would also be set up. In addition, the government would build an information sharing system among central and local governments, and between cities and provinces, to find effective ways to support the children of married immigrants.

In May 2006, the government established the Basic Direction and Promotion System for Policy on Foreigners, which laid out general policy guidelines for the marriage of migrants and their children, migrant workers, professional foreign manpower, permanent foreign residents, Koreans of foreign nationality and refugees. The legal basis for that policy was the Act on the Treatment of Foreigners in Korea, which had been operational since 18 July 2007. That Act stipulated basic treatment for foreigners in Korea, which enabled them to better adapt to Korean society and to fully demonstrate their ability. Also, the Act aimed at contributing to development and social integration through the promotion of mutual understanding and respect between foreigners and Korean nationals. For the effective implementation of that Act, the Ministry of Justice would establish a five-year implementation plan and other concerned ministries would establish and operate their own implementation plans.

It was also significant that the Immigration Bureau of the Ministry of Justice had been restructured and expanded to the Korea Immigration Service. Within the Korea Immigration Service, the Planning Evaluation Division had been established and it was charged with formulating and evaluating basic and operational plans. The Social

Integration Division had also been established to take charge of social integration of foreigners.

The Korean government's policy initiatives are quicker and more comprehensive than we can find in other neighboring East Asian countries. There are several reasons for the Korean government's swift actions. First, there is popular support for policy for married immigrants and their children. South Koreans regard married immigrants and their children as Korean nationals who deserve the government's protection and support for successful integrated into Korean society. Second, there has been close relationships between the government and the civil society during the Kim Dae Jung and Roh Moo Hyun progressive governments. The governments adopted somewhat liberal ideas of multiculturalism proposed by NGOs and progressive scholars. Third, President Roh Moo Hyun had strong personal interests in human rights of minorities and played a pivotal role in establishing progressive immigration policies and laws.

However, if we look more carefully into the Korean government's multicultural policy, it is evident that it does not orient toward multiculturalism as we can find in Canada and other advanced western countries. It is more like multiculture-oriented policy and very assimilationist in essence. It is similar to Japanese policy of multicultural coexistence.

### Citizen-led multiculturalism

I propose citizen-led multiculturalism as a counterpart of state-led multiculturalism. State-led multiculturalism is regarded "multiculturalism from below" and "grass-root multiculturalism" in a sense that it aims at protecting distinct cultures and identities of ethnic minorities who often become marginalized and disadvantaged by the state's unilateral policy. It evaluates the state's multicultural ideals and policies from the perspective of aboriginals, immigrants, and ethnic minorities, and seeks policies and programs appropriate for their conditions and needs. Also, it can provide

community-based service to the target group because it is implemented at the level of local community where main actors of multicultural society are concentrated. For these reasons, state-led multiculturalism can correct shortcomings and problems that may occur when the state implements uniform and standardized multicultural policy in the name of national interest and the public goods. Main differences between state-led multiculturalism and citizen-led multiculturalism are highlighted in <Table 2>.

<Table 2> Comparison of State-led Multiculturalism and Citizen-led Multiculturalism

	State-led multiculturalism	Citizen-led multiculturalism
Main actor	Government (Central and local governments)	Immigrants and NGOs and citizens
Direction	Multiculturalism from above	Multiculturalism from below
Goals	Social integration and national integration	Protection of human and cultural rights of minorities
Problems	Suppression of minorities by the majority group	Radical and difficult to obtain social consensus

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