In the Making of a New South Korean Nationalism

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Abstract

Drawing from Shin Gi Wook's conceptualization of ethnonationalism, and Seol Dong Hoon's theory of hierarchical nationhood, this article seeks to examine the evolution of a new South Korean nationhood, analyzed over the past few decades. Military conflict, foreign intervention, political bifurcation, and globalization have been fundamental elements that shaped the past 70 years of evolving Korean identities in the Korean peninsula. This article scrutinizes the intersectionality of nationality, class, gender, and ethnicity between co-ethnic North Korean refugees, Korean Chinese (Chosŏnjok) immigrants, non-Korean migrant wives, and non-Korean workers. It is found that unlike the intellectual trends of post-nationalism advocated by former democratic and peace activists in South Korea, younger South Koreans instead show a tendency towards a new South Korean nationalism. To this end, modern South Korean society is still in the process of coalescence towards this new conception of nationalism.

Keywords: ethno-nationalism, hierarchical nationhood, co-ethnic relations, migration, Korea

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Introduction

As of 2019, South Korea hosts 2.5 million foreign residents, comprising of only 4.6% of its total population (KOSIS 2020b). However, the speed of immigration into South Korea has been relatively fast. In 2019, compared to 2018, the increase was 8.6% (see Figure 1 below). In terms of naturalized citizenship, South Korea mostly accepts foreign and nonethnic Korean spouses of Korean citizens, and their mixed-heritage children through birthright and kinship. These trends are slowly transforming Korean identity. Since the 2000s, the government has implemented new multicultural policies mainly targeting marriage migrants, leading to a sense of underlying racism and "hierarchical nationhood" within South Korea's multiculturalism (Seol and Seo 2014). This hierarchic approach extends even to co-ethnic groups, with North Koreans being treated differently from the Korean Chinese (Chosŏnjok) or ethnic Koreans from Central Asia (Koryŏin).

Source: KOSIS (2020b).

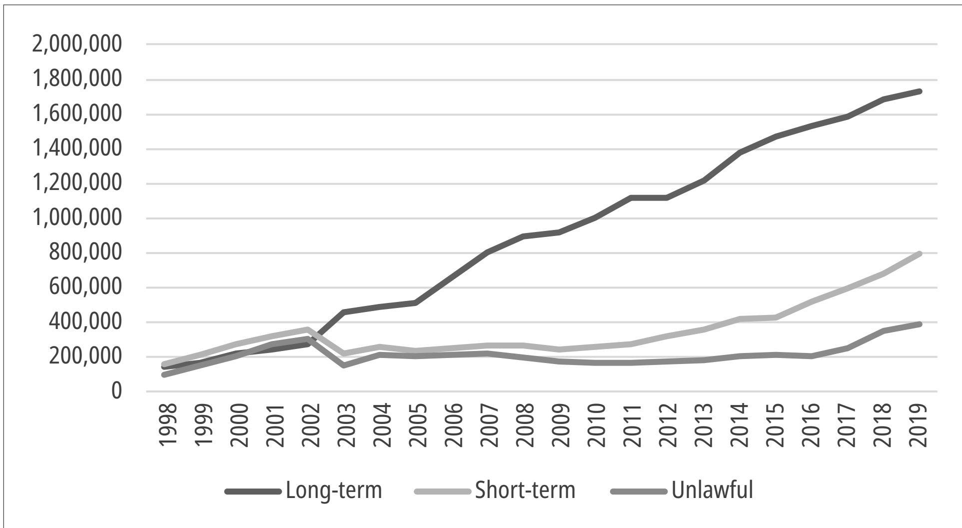

Figure 1. Foreign residents in South Korea

This article examines such a coevolution of multiculturalism and ethnonationalism in the Korean peninsula since the armistice of the Korean War in 1953. The following sections first explain the ethnocentric nationalism that presides in the lives of North Koreans, and the extent to which it has significantly influenced changes in South Korea over the past few decades with the influx of coethnic and nonethnic migrants through family, economic, and humanitarian pathways. It then examines the intersectionality of nationality, class, gender and ethnicity in each migrant cohort, and what it means for the transformation of Korean identity. The final section concludes with a critique of the contradictory reality of postnationalism advocated by former democratic and peace activists, in opposition to the new South Korean nationalism embraced by younger South Koreans.

Ethnonationalism

The Korean conception of nationhood is largely based on the idea of common ethnic characteristics— especially, a sense of common "bloodline" and ancestry, as well as an attachment to the territory Koreans have inhabited for thousands of years (Draudt 2016; G. Shin 2006, 5). Racial and ethnic features have been posited to be arbitrary systems of classifying human differences, used instrumentally to serve the agenda of the state (Barth 1969, 10–11; Hall 1997; Y. Lee 2009). By extension, their meanings become better understood in historical and geographical contexts. In Korea, the concepts of racial hierarchy (with whites/Caucasians and the Japanese designated superior to Koreans) were proliferated by the Japanese colonialists and their Korean collaborators. Kim Jae Kyun (2015) argues that the conceptualization of a global race hierarchy and racial identification, based on skin color and physical composition, were essential to the construction of the Korean ethnoracial identity. Enhanced and compounded into Korean social perceptions during the Japanese colonial

period, these concepts of racial hierarchy still remain today.

While the idea of the ethnically homogeneous, primordial nation served as the dominant narrative in public discourse during the colonial period, it continued as a unifying and mobilizing doctrine to achieve economic development during the Cold War competition between the two Koreas (N. Kim 2015, 738; Y. Lee 2009, 366; G. Shin 2006, 19, 33). The 1948 Nationality Act in South Korea defined Korean nationality as one based on ethnicity, with the designation of nationality also being patrilineal, giving birthright citizenship to children whose fathers were ethnically Korean (Korea Law Information Centre 2020). It was only in 1998 that an amendment to the Act allowed South Korean citizenship to be inherited through Korean mothers. Yet, the concept of national membership continues to be firmly rooted in family or kinship ties to Korean citizens (N. Kim 2016a, 1541). This ethnic identification is further changing today as nationality and class are added to play a significant role in defining subethnic identities within coethnic groups. The politics of sovereignty and the legal demarcation of the membership largely determines the politics of individual social identity in relation to the collective nation's self-understanding of what determines to be a member of the society. This strong ethnocentric nationalism has been the basis of the South Korean government's long-held resistance against granting citizenship to nonethnic migrant workers and the favoritism towards ethnic Koreans with foreign nationalities over other foreigners (Draudt 2016; Lim 2010, 67; S. Park 2017, 387).

The Kim Il-sung Nation in the North

Since the conception of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) in 1948, an extreme construction of ethnocentric nationalism has grown, and continues to persist, in North Korea today. Debatably, what some might call "micro-fascism" also has roots in Japanese racial identification (Jinwoong Kang 2012; Myers 2010). While South Korea has been moving toward a more ethnically diverse society, North Korea still

has strict travel and border policies under which no citizen or foreigner can freely travel in and out of the country. North Korean conceptualization of nationhood was initially and briefly based on that of Stalin, focusing on class struggles and the perception of the state as a bourgeoisie idea. At the same time, North Korea continued the postcolonial nationalism that was suspicious of the Japanese and Americans, while still embracing South Koreans as an object to liberate from the U.S. imperial forces. North Korean nationalism has since shifted to highlight the bloodline of the Kim family to justify the hereditary leadership succession from the 1980s (Chang 2002). This ethnocentric nationalism has also been used to justify national unification under the North's leadership, designating itself as the only legitimate power to rule the entire Korean nation. The state repeatedly used this rhetoric in reinforcing the idea of Chosŏn *minjok* (Korean nation), that initially included both North and South Koreans.

However, this state narrative of ethnocentric nation-building underwent a fundamental shift from the mid to late 1980s. The primary reason was economic. North Korea's economy veered on the edge of total collapse, spurred on by a dysfunctional socialist economic system, the end of Soviet aid, and a spate of extreme natural disasters, amongst various factors. Additionally, the regime began to face political challenges regarding the leadership succession from Kim Il-sung to his son, Kim Jong-il, and even from other socialist states. By the early 1990s, the regime promoted the idea of the Kim Il-sung *minjok* (nation) that only applied to North Korean people, excluding South Koreans in its re-imagination of the Korean nation (Choi 2016; H. Kang 2019; Kwon and Chung 2012; Yang 2011). The creation of the Kim Il-sung *minjok* was a reaction to the changing international environment, with Pyongyang facing highly insecure conditions for sustaining its *de jure* socialist system and political legitimacy. It was during this period that the regime decided to turn to a more isolationist ethnocentric vision of survival. Along with its isolationist policy, the regime relied on this exclusionary concept of nationhood, applicable only to those who followed Kim Il-sung and his Juche ideology (Jong-il Kim 2002).

The North's slogan, *uriminjok chaeil chuui* ("Our nation is the best") bluntly represented this ideological shift during the

post-Cold War era. This national chauvinism first appeared in 1986 (Jong-il Kim 1986) and was later further defined in 1989 (Jong-il Kim 1989). In 1986, Kim Jong-il (1986) stated:

> Our nation is known to the world as the nation of the upmost integrity and authority in the age of *chuch'e* since we worship our Great Leader Kim Il-sung. In this regard, we can say that the greatness of our nation will shine only when we revere the Great Leader.

At the time, the Soviet Union and other similarly socialist nations were failing. This quickly became a principal cause of concern for the survival of the Kim regime. The purpose of Kim Jong-il's "our nation is the best" aggrandizement was to convince the North Korean people that their socialist system would survive despite harsher living conditions, and to continue to trust and worship Kim Il-sung. By attempting to reinforce their pride and patriotism to their socialist system, he hoped to maintain a continued loyalty to the Party leadership. Moreover, Kim Jong-il and his propaganda division have long prepared his leadership succession and deliberately linked this "our nation is the best" rhetoric to a new Korean nationhood. While his father was alive, Kim Jong-il was running the propaganda division, preparing for his succession. Immediately after Kim Il-sung's passing in 1994, the narrative of a "Kim Il-sung nation" was launched. The junior Kim regime began to actively promote various narratives: of the eternal Great Leader Kim Il-sung; of the Great Worker's Party, and of the Great Juche ideology and the "superior socialist system" that would persist despite other socialist states who were falling apart (Jong-il Kim 1994).

However, in contrast to Kim Jong-il's promise, North Koreans soon came to realize that reality did not quite match the soaring expectations of state propaganda. As other socialist states collapsed, North Koreans began to go through the disastrous period known as the *konan-ŭi haenggun* (the Arduous March). By this time, many people living in the border areas who could, had left the country. Those remaining endured the mass starvation while still half-heartedly trusting their leader. By June 1997, with as many

as a million of North Korea's population of 20 million dying from famine, malnutrition, and accompanying diseases, Kim Jong-il once again stressed the importance of the Juche ideology. However, this time, in relation to preserving a true Korean nationhood, Kim (1997) added "our style" socialism to his justification for the regime's survival by differentiating the North Korean system from other socialist states that had failed. He completed the conceptualization of the Kim Il-sung nation in February 2002, in his speech, titled "For the Correct Understanding of Nationalism" (Jong-il Kim 2002). Kim appealed to his people:

> We must highly worship our great *suryŏng* forever for hundreds and thousands of years' generation after generation, and do everything in the *suryŏng* style. The founder of our nation was Tangun but the founder of socialist Chosŏn was the great *suryŏng* and comrade, Kim Il-sung. . . . It was *suryŏng* who has made our nation the most prestigious and the happiest nation on earth and who is the parents of the nation. Overseas Koreans now call us Chosŏn *minjok*, the Kim Il-sung nation. We must do well in order to raise our pride as the shining Chosŏn nation in the name of *suryŏng*. . . . We, the Chosŏn nation who have built the most superior people-centric our-style socialism, must carry on the reputation and pride we have and continue our "Chosŏn *minjok* is the best" spirit even more highly. (Jong-il Kim 2002)

When reading and interpreting North Korean rhetoric, one must bear in mind what is being said is not what the regime truly represents. Often, it is the opposite of reality and a projection of the regime's wishful thinking and purposeful imagination. The year 1994 was the end of the Kim Il-sung era and the beginning of severe challenges, beginning with Kim Jong-il's "Arduous March." Unlike his father, Kim Jong-il lacked charisma and political legitimacy. Kim Jong-il never had to fight against foreign forces, and his weak and short stature was a marked difference compared to his father. Kim Jong-il's public statements, therefore, should be better read as a denial of the reality that the state of North Korea then

teetered on the edge of chaos. His attempts to forge a new conception of North Korean nationalism, which supposedly reflected the pride and patriotism that North Korean people felt, instead indicated the extent of the regime's despair and frustration. Many North Koreans had genuinely revered the great leader Kim Il-sung—so much so that his presence had to be made eternal to provide further justifications for the hereditary leadership succession to Kim Jong-il. Kim Jong-il had to rely on his father's legacy as he had little personal achievements and characteristics to validate his inherited rule, beyond simply being the first son in the ruling family.

The majority of North Korean refugees and migrants said they had admired Kim Il-sung when they lived in North Korea (H. Kang 2019). However, when it comes to Kim Jong-il, many said that they lost hope in the leadership and the socialist system as a whole after he succeeded his father. Many have stated that they were "proud" of being part of the "Kim Il-sung nation" and were aware that the Kim nation only included North Koreans who respected Kim Il-sung and excluded South Koreans who did not (H. Kang 2019). To make up for the loss of South Koreans in the composition of the Kim Il-sung nation, the North has expanded the concept of the nation to include overseas Koreans as Chosŏn *minjok* from the 1990s. The reconceptualization of extraterritorial nationhood was designed to gather potential support and resources from overseas Koreans who may have been sympathetic toward the regime.

In its attempts to redefine the Korean nation and distinguish itself from the South, the Kim regime even reinvented the calendar to be based on Kim Il-sung's birth year, and even established a time zone that differed from South Korea. This new North Korean nation has created a central narrative built around Kim Il-sung's legacy as part of the anti-Japanese guerrilla movements. The revolutionary tradition of the anti-Japanese partisan has been an important political tool to justify the Kim regime's legitimacy (Haruki 1998). Its legacy has also been deeply embedded in all aspects of ordinary North Koreans' daily lives in politics, military, education, literature, and other cultural spheres through theatrical means (Kwon and Chung 2012).

After Kim Jong-il's death in 2011, his third son Kim Jong-un raised his father's status to the same level as his grandfather Kim Il-sung, as the "parents of the nation." Kim Jong-un defined the year 2012 as the centenary of the Juche ideology and military-first revolutionary mission—initiated by Kim Il-sung and completed by Kim Jong-il. He pledged that he would continue to advance the next tens of thousands of years of "Kim Il-sung's nation and Kim Jong-il's Chosŏn" (Jong-un Kim 2012). While the regime's top-down mechanism has mobilized the historical legacy to reimagine the North Korean nation, people have also internalized the concept in their daily practices over three generations of the Kim family leadership (Jinwoong Kang 2012).

Furthermore, as Kang argues, the power of the North Korean state has produced post-war "militant nationalism." The state enabled almost all of its citizens to actively participate in its militant nationalism by making them anti-Japanese and anti-American guerrilla fighters, which Kang characterizes as "micro-fascism" (Jinwoong Kang 2010). Brian Myers (2010) finds the roots of this militant nationalism in Japanese fascism and ideas of racial hierarchy. The international community's opposition to North Korea's nuclear program has offered the regime another reason to fight against the Americans, uniting people to defend the state from the constantly imagined enemies and threats of a nuclear war. The regime utilizes theatrical tools to mobilize and unite its people in reimagining the nation as militant fighters against foreign forces (Kwon and Chung 2012). Towards this purpose, for decades, the regime's propaganda division has orchestrated various mass games, military parades, theatrical performances, and recitals to spread the "teachings" of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il at local and national levels.

The South's Hierarchical Nationalism

While North Korea has been relatively more insulated from the rest of the world than South Korea, South Korea has undergone trade and travel liberalization, globalization, and

democratization over the past few decades. With the influx of foreign migrants as well as returned coethnic Koreans, South Korea is experiencing a reconceptualization of Korean nationhood.

Hierarchy among Coethnics: Nationality and Class

According to Korean Statistics, 2,524,656 foreign residents resided in South Korea in 2019, which comprised 4.6% of the South Korean population (KOSIS 2020b). Out of this, the majority (86.9%) were from Asia and 27.8% (701,098) were Chosŏnjok, followed by other Chinese nationals (15.9%). 83,890 were Koryŏin—many of whom were unlawful non-citizens. On the other hand, Korean Japanese and Korean Americans are referred to as *kyopo* (ethnic Koreans whose principal place of residence is overseas) having relatively a higher socioeconomic status as expats. Within South Korea's multiculturalism, Seol Donghoon (Seol and John Skrentny 2009; Seol and Seo 2014) calls this phenomenon of designating or ranking coethnic Koreans from different nationalities according to their socioeconomic status in society "hierarchical nationalism." In other words, the South Korean state and society treat North Korean defectors, Korean Chinese (Chosŏnjok), Koreans from the former Soviet Union (Koryŏin), Korean Japanese, Korean Americans, and South Koreans differently. Their legal status differs from automated citizenship (North Koreans) to temporary migrant workers or irregular migrants (Chosŏnjok and Koryŏin). While North Korean defectors are protected and relatively well-subsidized by the state under the Act on the Protection and Settlement of North Korean Defector Residents before they become full citizens, Chosŏnjok and Koryŏin are treated like other nonethnic Korean labor migrants. At the same time, the government actively seeks to attract Korean diasporas, including Korean adoptees, from developed countries to return to Korea.

Though nationhood is typically understood to be a horizontal concept, ethnic return migration in South Korea has demonstrated that the state and society can draw

hierarchical distinctions amongst persons of the same ancestry. Seol and Skrentny (2009) point out that while the government excludes Chosŏnjok from social benefits, it prefers them over other foreign migrant workers in manual labor sectors. Surveys on Chosŏnjok report experiences of discrimination against them, which reflect the society's bias against ethnic-Koreans who were from less developed socialist countries while the law provides more favorable visa conditions to Korean Americans. South Korea's hierarchical nationalism projects the geopolitical as well as socioeconomic realities of their states of origin onto individual coethnic migrants.

When it comes to nonethnic Korean migrants in South Korea, the two most representative foreign resident groups in the past two decades include marriage migrants and labor migrants (KOSIS 2020b). The intersectionality of ethnicity, nationality, class, and gender plays a role in forming a dynamic understanding of a new Korean national identity, accepting the former as new members of Korean nationhood through kinship and family ties while rejecting the latter as dispensable cheap foreign labor forces.

Gender, Ethnicity, and Class in Multicultural Families

As of 2020, one in ten marriages (9.9%) in South Korea were international marriages (KOSIS 2020a). The majority of them are between Korean men and foreign women from developing former socialist countries such as China or Vietnam. This latest trend contrasted with pre-1990 statistics, when the majority of South Korean international marriages were between Korean women and foreign men from developed countries, especially from Japan or the United States (K. Kim 2017, 75; Lim 2010, 64; H. Lee 2008). The numbers of marriages between Korean men and foreign women approximately doubled between 1991 and 1992 (K. Kim 2017, 75). Around 60% of foreign women who married Korean men were from China after South Korea established diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1992 and subsequently people-to-people exchanges increased (K.

Kim 2017, 75). Furthermore, the Korean government actively encouraged marriages between Korean men in rural areas and Chosŏnjok women by relaxing immigration restrictions and subsidizing match-making companies that helped these men find foreign wives (Lim 2010, 66). In 2001, international marriages had become 5% of all marriages in South Korea (N. Kim 2016b, 188). This percentage increased rapidly to 11.4% in 2004 (Lim 2010, 65) and remained around 10% throughout the 2010s (KOSIS 2020a). The nationalities of foreign brides used to be predominantly PRC Chinese, but that has changed to include women from Vietnam, Cambodia, Mongolia, the Philippines, and Uzbekistan (K. Kim 2017, 76). Vietnam overtook the PRC in 2016 to become the biggest source of foreign brides for Korean men (see Figure 2).

Source: KOSIS (2020a).

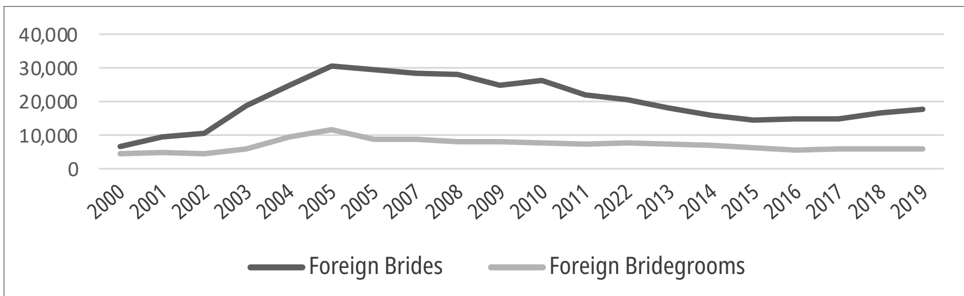

Figure 2. International Marriages

This increase has been mainly driven by economic and demographic factors that have led to a shortage of brides in rural areas (A. Kim 2009, 83, 85). Rapid urbanization has caused many young women to migrate to urban areas for education and work, while men have tended to remain in rural areas to inherit family assets and care for their elderly parents. The harsher lifestyle and lower socioeconomic status of these men have made it difficult for them to find Korean wives (J. Ahn 2013, 43–44; A. Kim 2009). Others argue that traditional male preferences have led to sex selective abortions and gender imbalance in rural areas (A. Kim 2009, 83). Local governments have responded to this demand by launching "bachelor farmers' marriage" campaigns and subsidizing commercial match-making agencies to facilitate international marriages between Korean men and foreign women (H. Lee 2008, 108;

Lim 2010, 67–68; Jiyoung Song 2015).

In the match-making industry, foreign brides are highly sexualized and objectified so that Korean men could choose—by nationality—from an online database of photos of women's faces and upper bodies (Jiyoung Song 2015). After the wedding, these foreign brides again face the expectation of assimilation to Korean culture and language. At the same time, migrant wives are portrayed as a solution to the demographic pressures of a falling birth rate and aging population, in comparison to labor migrants who are constructed as a threat to ethnic homogeneity (Jiyeoun Song 2016). In a way, the Korean conception of patrilineal descent helps these foreign wives produce at least half-Korean children and contribute to retaining the current population level (Lim 2010; Watson 2012). However, under the patrilineal principle, a foreign father and a Korean wife produce a child that is perceived as being more significantly tied to the father's ethnicity (Lim 2010), and thus integration programs are less targeted towards these families (Watson 2012). Despite the definition of marriage not making any reference to the gender of the foreign spouse, support programs have been almost exclusively targeted towards female marriage migrants.

The government provides various support programs for migrant wives to assimilate, and for multicultural families to be able to adapt and flourish in South Korean society. Since 2006, Marriage Migrant Family Support Centers have been built to provide marriage migrants with Korean language and culture classes, employment support programs, individual and group counselling, and social events (J. Ahn 2013; N. Kim 2016b; S. Park 2017). The Ministry of Gender Equality and Family oversees the programs which aim to support marriage migrants in the early stages of their marriage, pregnancy, and education of their children, and assists them with entering the labor market (J. Shin 2012). The media "eulogizes" marriage migrants who successfully adapt to the Korean way of life, transitioning into "exemplary Korean wives or daughters-in-laws" (J. Shin 2012). The reproductive function of migrant wives is inherently reflected in legislation which only covers those with children who hold Korean citizenship, therefore

implying their migrant wives' legal status is tied to a family unit of a married couple of a man and a woman and their biological child(ren) (Jiyeoun Song 2016).

While marriage migrants face problems with ethnocentrism, racism, and patriarchal gender dynamics, their mixed-heritage children also encounter prejudices against their "mixed" ethnicity and the origination of their "foreign parents." In the past, racial discrimination against children of American soldiers and Korean women stemmed from a combination of factors such as the Korean ethnoracial patrilineal conceptualization of belonging and a "patriarchal and hypermasculine sense of national identity" (Lim 2010). These children were seen as being foreign (generally, American) even though they grew up in Korea and spoke Korean. In addition, there was a stigma attached to them, of the "shame" of Korean women being "conquered" by foreign men for sexual pleasure (Lim 2010). In contrast, while children of Korean fathers and mothers from developing countries are relatively more accepted as Korean than children of foreign fathers, they are seen as inferior to other Korean children of both ethnoracial Korean parents. The underlying racial bias is that the pure Korean "blood" is diluted by a lesser race from a poor country. This prejudice against mixed-heritage children is created first through ungrounded racial biases, but also by hyper-materialism embedded in modern Korean thinking about where countries sit in a global hierarchy of development and economic status. C. Lee (2017) calls it the "origin-coding" and "color-coding" hierarchy where mixed-race children are perceived in symbolic order and placement, which determine the level of prejudice, racism, and exclusion they are subject to. Therefore, children face different forms of prejudice based on a multitude of factors: where their foreign parent was from; whether or not that country is a developed or developing nation; and whether or not the child has different physical characteristics or skin color. They are then relegated to a status that falls between a Korean and a foreigner. This causes many mixed-race children to find significant barriers in identifying with a social and national belonging and, consequently, in constructing a Korean identity.

Ethnicity, Class, and Skin Color

Since the 1980s, South Korea has made a transition from a labor exporting country to a labor importing country. Among the foreign residents in South Korea as of 2019, 18.8% (444,880) held the diaspora visa (F4), 11.8% (280,321) unskilled employment pass (E9), and 10.6% (250,381) visiting employment pass (H2) (KOSIS 2020b). While these numbers are significantly higher than those of marriage migrants, these migrant workers are not fully integrated in the state's multicultural policies. The government began systematically managing the labor migration program from 1992 with the introduction of the Industrial Training System (ITS). Under this program, Korean companies could invite workers from overseas on a trainee status with few labor rights attached to the system (Kim and Koo 2016; Lee and Kim 2011). In response to the public criticism of the ITS, the government introduced the Employment Permit System (EPS) in 2004 as an attempt to guarantee labor rights of temporary migrant workers who were predominantly from China, but also included people from Vietnam, Indonesia, Bangladesh, and the Philippines (A. Kim 2009, 75–77; Lim 2010). Ethnic Koreans such as Chosŏnjok were given preferential treatment in both the ITS and the EPS, and received greater access to more desirable and higher paying jobs in the service and construction industries (Lim 2010, 60).

Despite severe labor shortages and pressure from manufacturing firms to change immigration policies in the 1980s, the Korean government kept to the policy maintaining a low level of labor migration due to its "negative effects" on social cohesion and ethnic homogeneity. For example, in an interview with a Ministry of Labor official in March 1990, he expressed unease about importing unskilled foreign labor, because of the possibility of workers from "less developed countries" weakening ethnic homogeneity through marrying local Koreans (Kim and Koo 2016, 625). Symbolic and normative concerns were crucial in shaping the government's reluctance to accept labor migrants. The government maintained a strategy of instituting incentives for domestic labor force reserves to enter small and medium firms (Kim

and Koo 2016, 625; Lim 1999). It was not until the mid-2000s that the state started responding to such systemic problems and normative expectation from the international community (Lim 2010; S. Park 2017). As international institutions stressed trade liberalization and multiculturalism as international norms, they became a "means, indicator, and object of national development" both in the economic and symbolic senses within a global hierarchy (N. Kim 2015, 729).

When the ITS was first introduced in 1992 to allow companies to invite foreign laborers for up to one year, domestic trade unions strongly opposed it to protect its own workers. When foreign laborers were invited as trainees, rather than legal workers that could be protected under Korean labor law, they were exposed to various human rights and labor rights violations (Lee and Kim 2011, 437). Unpaid or delayed wages, long working hours, lack of holidays, and uninsured industrial accidents were rampant. Many were subject to abusive behavior by their employers such as confiscated passports, physical violence, verbal abuse and sexual harassment (Lee and Kim 2011; Y. Lee 2009). Furthermore, trainees were often paid less than undocumented workers, causing many to leave their designated workplace and seek employment as undocumented workers (J. Ahn 2013, 38; Lee and Kim 2011, 438; Lim 1999). The problem was so endemic that by 2002, 80% of migrant workers became undocumented (B. Kim 2009, 82). Due to their abundance, these undocumented workers were subsequently in a more vulnerable position that could be subject to further abuses.

The media has previously covered these abusive behaviors and poor working conditions that migrant workers faced (Y. Lee 2009). Domestic labor rights activists ran campaigns to support migrant workers so that they could have the legal protection of basic labor rights under South Korean law. Due to these pressures, under the progressive Roh Moo-hyun government (2003–2008), major changes were introduced. The EPS was introduced in 2004 and the notorious ITS ended in 2007. Lee and Kim (2011, 429) assert that the South Korean government, even after succeeding in the 1987 democratization, has inherited the practice of

state-led economic developmentalism from the previous authoritarian regimes. Free market, capitalistic economic systems typically place a high emphasis on driving economic growth and enhancing national competitiveness—but often at the expense of individual human rights. The post-1987 democratic governments faced the pressures to overcome the 1997 financial crisis and continue economic growth, while respecting international human rights in the eyes of their more educated democratic citizens. The introduction of labor migration and the subsequent protection of labor rights for migrant workers have enabled the state to balance the tension between these pressures. At the same time, trade unions of full-time skilled workers, who were protective of their own interests and negligent of part-time or foreign labor workers, rose to become a major political power. Hyung-A Kim (2020) referrs to Korea's first generation of skilled workers in the heavy and chemical industries sector as militant "Goliath Warriors," following their dramatic transition from the 1970s-era "industrial warriors" and ultimately becoming a "labor aristocracy" with guaranteed job security, superior wages, and even job inheritance for their children.

Unlike marriage migrants who are actively promoted by the state to be part of the changing liberal cosmopolitan Korean identity, labor migrants who have no family ties to ethnic Koreans are left outside the imagination of a new Korean nation. This highly ethnocentric family-oriented idea of Korean identity is closely associated with a global hierarchical order of development and modernization. While Korea's limited experiences and interactions with diverse ethnic and cultural groups create misunderstanding, unease, and fear among its citizens, Korea's strong racial bias has its roots in their Japanese colonial education. Japan used this racial hierarchy as a justification for its colonial rule over Korea and imperial ambition to expand to other Asian regions (Abe 1983). In this rather linear and hierarchical developmental model, cheap foreign labor from developing countries to a developed world is an inevitable process of globalization and freer flows of labor. It is also a global phenomenon that the state utilizes labor migrants as a temporary, dispensable foreign workforce, while

not necessarily guaranteeing their transition to become permanent members of the community or contribute to a formation of national identity. Labor migrants are treated as “the object of judicious control rather than that of active integration” (Lee and Kim 2011, 445). If labor migrants were to become Korean citizens, they would need to pass certain conditions such as residence, income, language skills, and good character, all of which are international standards for labor migration. The EPS, for example, was designed to prevent workers from permanently settling in Korea by allowing a maximum time period of 4 years and 10 months, short of the five years of continuous residency required to obtain a permanent residency status (Lim 2012).

The Korean perception of race and ethnicity is different from other developed countries’ public attitudes towards foreign residents, especially labor migrants, in that it has been reinforced by historically grounded racism against darker skin. The Korean prejudice against dark skin is stronger than that against certain nationalities or professions. Reported cases of racial discrimination against skin color include public cases of a black American being rejected from a job as a native English teacher in private language institutions or an Indian-American being denied access to a nightclub (S. Lee 2020; S. Kim 2019). According to a 2020 survey of 207 foreign residents in South Korea, 67.6% responded that skin color is associated with racial discrimination, and 66.3% said black people are most discriminated against because of their skin color, followed by other Asians (Ahn, Yoon, and and Bae 2020). The same survey found that among those surveyed, the grounds for discrimination against foreigners are highest with physical appearance (including skin color) at 57%, followed by language (49.3%) and nationality (42.5%). Although the sample is small and the respondents are not a representative of foreign residents in South Korea, the fact that a majority point out (darker) skin color and physical appearance as the most relevant factor for racial discrimination is noteworthy. A 2016 academic survey of 1,000 foreign residents also found similar results, with skin color and ethnicity being the most relevant source of racial discrimination, followed by nationality, language, and residential conditions (Jeong, Park,

and Jeon 2017). This prejudice against darker skin is even applied to their own fellow Koreans. A person with dark or freckled skin implies that this person is involved in outdoor manual labor, being exposed to the sun, and in low-paid agricultural or construction sectors. This is viewed in contrast to pale and fair skin being associated with higher paid white-collar jobs for more educated people. Therefore, dark skin is not just associated with ethnicity but also with a person's profession and low socioeconomic status. Why skin color is so important for Koreans should be understood in these historical, structural, and cultural contexts.

Postnationalism and a New South Korean Nationalism

In the previous sections, it was explained that North Korea reinvented the self-identification of North Koreans as the Kim Il-sung nation, deliberately differentiating themselves from South Koreans from the mid-1980s until today. In South Korea, there has been a parallel development, not by the state but by public intellectuals. Hong Seokryul (2007) and Kang Jongin (2016) identified three trends in postcolonialism in South Korea that are worth noting. The first is the "new-right" neoconservative postcolonialism by Lee Young-hoon and others (Park et al. 2006), based on liberal civilization theory seeing North Korea as a barbaric state that has not entered the modern developed world, as compared to South Korea. This deterministic view rejects what they see as excessive nationalism and collective egalitarianism that has driven the political agenda for a Korean national unification by South Korean nationalists. Therefore, for this group, unless North Korea follows South Korea's steps and joins the liberal international order, a reunification is not desirable. In order for this to be achieved, the Kim regime should be overthrown by an external power.

The second group is led by Choi Jang-Jip, Kim Dong-Choon, and others who used to belong to resistance democratic

activist-intellectuals against the former authoritarian regimes in South Korea. They now call for a critical approach to ethnocentric Korean nationalism and a partial withdrawal from this form of identification (Choi 1996, 2006; M. Kang 1987; D. Kim 2006). This group proposes a concept of “post-division” instead of the dominant “peace” discourse, with the latter being deemed too broad and representing only a partial understanding of the unique division system and realities Koreans face today. The concept of “post-division” is chosen, rather than “peace,” as it implies an inclusion of the universal principles of democracy and human rights, while strongly advocating to overcome the structural distortion and violence caused by the national division. More importantly, an appeal to “post-division” does not presume a national reunification as the final goal that all Koreans must achieve. Instead, it sets people free from this seemingly impossible national mission, and focuses firmly on establishing democratic norms and resisting political violence within the Korean peninsula.

The third group is led by postmodernists who resist any type of ethnocentric nationalism applied to two Koreas. Lim Jie-Hyun, for example, denies that the North and South Koreas share anything in common as they have been differentiated over three generations of the national division, living under highly contrasting political, economic, and social systems (Lim 2001, 2002). This group agrees with the second group to use the term “post-division” instead of peace, as the immediate political agenda where the differences and diversity between the two Koreas are respected (and tolerated), instead of morally forcing Koreans for an undesirable national unification, driven by ethnocentric nationalism. For this group, North Korea—and even the regime—is not an object to destroy and absorb into a South Korean system by force. It is rather a neighbor whose differences South Korea must accept and with whom they should try to form a “political community” or a union.

Postnationalists recognize that during South Korea’s rapid industrialization and Western-centric modernization, the state utilized nationalism to generate a moral force from its citizens to achieve economic development for all, while also producing extreme wealth for a few. However, after

democratization and globalization, the emerging Korean middle-class and former democratic activist-intellectuals experienced declined enthusiasm for nationalism or national unification—both, when perceived hypothetically, and when subject to reality. As former democratic activists such as Kim Dae-jung, Roh Moo-hyun, and Moon Jae-in gained power in mainstream politics, the state's drive for national unification has also weakened. These new political elites replaced this goal with peace and reconciliation on the Korean peninsula and pursued a pro-engagement policy toward Pyongyang. In consideration of this political future, several former activist-intellectuals established debates on postnationalism that deny the necessity and desirability of national reunification. Serious debates about nation, ethnicity, diversity, and unification took place within this intellectual circle, which has a long history.

Outside these intellectual circles, young and cosmopolitan South Koreans increasingly feel distant from their fellow Koreans living on the other side of the DMZ. Emma Campbell (2016) interviewed 159 South Koreans in their 20s between 2009 and 2014 during the conservative Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye administrations. She concluded that a new South Korean nationalism, or what she calls global cultural nationalism, had emerged. According to Campbell, young South Koreans took strong national pride in the economic achievement of South Korea and identified themselves more with the cultural capital and "savoir faire" of nonethnic expatriates from the United States or Europe than with North Korean defectors. At the same time, they saw North Korea as a poor country left behind in global competition, and North Koreans almost as a different ethnic group in terms of stylistics of language, lifestyles, and customs. Campbell pointed out there was a growing number of South Koreans who refused the idea of a national unification as it might undermine the *status quo* of South Korea and create great risks or uncertainty for South Koreans. She ended with a positive note that this new South Korean nationalism is more open to accept nonethnic immigrants as citizens, and concluded that South Korean membership and national identity was increasingly associated with educated middle-

class liberal values rather than ethnicity.

Campbell's conclusion is not representative of all South Koreans. The data analysis might have been selective of a particular group at the time of the interviews. The 159 young South Koreans Campbell interviewed were living under the conservative government during the time when the South Korean navy ship, *Cheonan*, was believed to be sunk by a North Korean torpedo, killing 46 seamen and the North shelling of a South Korean island, Yeonpyeongdo, in 2010. Political and media narratives on North Korea have been distinctly hostile. According to a survey conducted by the Institute of Peace and Unification Studies at Seoul National University, the threat perception on North Korea by 1,200 South Korean interviewed has increased from 67.3% to 78.3% after the Yeonpyeongdo Incident (P. Kim 2017). The 2020 survey found that 35.3% of South Koreans in their 20s opposed to unification with North Korea, a jump from 17.6% in 2018 (IPUS 2020). The reasons given were due to high economic burden on South Koreans. It is presumed that many young people have felt that the government subsidies and incentives for North Korean defectors to settle in South Korea were unfair to struggling working-class South Koreans.

Regardless of whether they are postnationalist intellectuals or new South Korean nationalists, what is clear is that South Koreans have become less enthusiastic about a national unification. A growing number of South Koreans seek a peaceful environment on the peninsula through a post-division system, which includes relaxing military tensions between the two Korean states and increasing interactions and communications between the two Koreas. While the North's nuclear weapons program remains the main obstacle between Pyongyang and Washington, South Korea is stuck in between the two, creating confusion about its political and ethnic identities.

Conclusion

Strong ethnonationalism remains a key feature in constructing a Korean identity. It has been a highly effective tool for political elites to unite people for national liberation movements during the colonial period, and again for national development in both Koreas during the Cold-War competition between the two Koreas. Seventy years of bifurcated systems have divided Koreans physically, politically, and mentally. With North Korea's limited interactions with the rest of the world and highly restricted immigration, it has experienced virtually no flow of foreign visitors and residents into it. Its borders remain tightly closed to immigration, while its northern borders are becoming increasingly porous to emigration since the devastating famine in the 1990s. The regime has internally adapted to create its own national identity built around the legacy of Kim Il-sung.

In the South, on the other hand, democratization and globalization have opened its borders to accept foreigners and allow its own people to move in and out of the country freely. The flow of foreigners and the number of foreign residents into the country have grown exponentially. Both the state and the society have had to adapt quickly to integrate well with more ethnically diverse communities. In this process, South Korea's existing perceptions about their coethnic groups, such as North Korean, Chosŏnjok, and Koryŏin, have been challenged—all the while, grappling with the assimilation of other ethnicities, and correspondingly, their skin color, nationality, social class, and gender within a traditionally conservative and hierarchal society. The evolution of Korean ethnonationalism in both Koreas is inherently complex and fraught with long-standing obstacles that look to persist and modern challenges that constantly shift societal dynamics. The nature of it largely depends on each state's relations with the rest of the world and coethnic Koreans with varying nationalities and classes. Nonetheless, it is an ongoing process—of slow, but ultimately meaningful and necessary progress.

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