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The Development and Characteristics of Multiculturalism in South Korea: Focusing on the Relationship of the State and Civil Society

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# CROSS-CURRENTS



## EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

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**Injin YUN (In-jin Yoon), “The Development and Characteristics of Multiculturalism in South Korea: Focusing on the Relationship of the State and Civil Society,” *Hanguk sahoehak*, vol. 42, no. 2 (2008).**

### **Abstract:**

Since 2000, there has been tremendous interest in multiculturalism and multicultural societies in South Korea. This is a reflection of the increase of foreign migrant workers, marriage immigrants, children of international marriage, overseas Koreans, and North Korean migrants, all of whom have increased the ethnic and cultural diversity of Korean society. Such interest has risen in response to the growing necessity for protection and integration of foreigners in a Korean society that has become increasingly multicultural.

In this article, the author distinguishes two multiculturalism discourses in Korean society—“state-led multiculturalism” and “citizen-led multiculturalism”—and examines their backgrounds, contents, strengths, and weaknesses. State-led multiculturalism is defined as an ideology and policy that is initiated by the government to seek national unity through the co-existence of multicultural cultural groups. It is referred to as “official multiculturalism” or “state-sponsored multiculturalism.” By contrast, citizen-led multiculturalism refers to multiculturalism that is initiated by minority groups such as aborigines or migrant groups and/or by scholars and the NGOs that support them. Citizen-led multiculturalism is regarded as “multiculturalism from below” or “grassroots multiculturalism,” in the sense that it aims to protect the distinct cultures and identities of ethnic minorities who often become marginalized and disadvantaged under the state’s unilateral policy.

To analyze the content of state-led multiculturalism, the author examined policies and laws related to foreigners and female marriage immigrants as proposed by the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, and the Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development. To analyze the contents of citizen-led multiculturalism,” the author examined the activities and viewpoints of NGOs that carry out multicultural programs for foreign migrant workers and female marriage immigrants.

The foundation for multiculturalism in Korea was first laid out by migrant workers’ advocacy groups that fought for the rights of migrant workers who entered Korea as trainees in the early 1990s and suffered from mistreatment and human rights violations because of their weak economic and political status. Through repeated protests and press releases, the migrant advocacy organizations increased social awareness of the miserable situation of migrant workers and pressured the government to make reforms in migrant worker policy. As the number of female marriage immigrants rapidly increased and their mistreatment became a central social issue in the mid 2000s, NGOs actively engaged in advocacy for women migrants by pressuring the government to reform immigration and naturalization policies that were disadvantageous to women migrants. They also provided shelters for battered women and legal and counseling services for women in trouble.

The mass media has also played a critical role in transforming marriage immigrants’ problems into a social issue. For example, the Korean Broadcasting System (KBS) 1 TV’s “Love in Asia” brought awareness to important issues of multicultural families and their much-needed support by reporting on international marriage couples and their children’s difficulties with language and cultural barriers, social discrimination and prejudice, and familial conflicts. When Hines Ward, an African-American Korean who plays American football, visited South Korea, his “mother’s country,” in 2006 after he received the Super Bowl MVP award, discrimination problems among children of international marriages began to get more attention from society. As a result, Koreans’ attitudes toward marriage migrants and their children became more tolerant and sympathetic, and multiculturalism became a “politically correct” ideology adopted by Koreans to repent their past wrongdoing and follow the models of advanced nations.

As multicultural discourse has gained public support, the government has taken a series of policy initiatives in response to this trend. President Roh Moo-hyun, a former human rights

lawyer who was elected through the support of progressive civil groups, had a special interest in the human rights protection of foreigners. As soon as he was elected in 2003, he ordered the Ministry of Justice to prepare comprehensive policies for dealing with foreign residents in Korea. The government adopted the Employment Permit System (EPS) in 2003 to solve problems inherent in the Industrial and Technical Trainee Program that had been criticized as a disguised exploitation. In 2007, the EPS became the sole means by which migrant workers were legally employed in Korea and protected by labor law. In 2008, the government inaugurated the Multicultural Family Support Act to help multicultural family members maintain a healthy family life and improve their quality of life. The Act provides information and education for social adjustment, job training, protection and support for victims of domestic violence, childcare and education, and multilingual services.

Although the government has taken proactive measures to protect rights and improve living conditions of foreigners in Korea, these measures are applied only to legal foreign residents, leaving illegal foreign residents unprotected. The struggles of foreign migrant workers, especially illegal migrant workers and the NGOs that support them, provided the backdrop and inspiration for multiculturalism and multicultural society discourses, but illegal foreigners have been left out of the government's active initiatives to protect the human rights of foreigners. Also, the government's multicultural programs are not multicultural in nature, but rather multiculture-oriented and very assimilationist in essence. They are geared to teach Korean language and culture to naturalized foreigners and their children, rather than to foster cultural diversity. These are the limits of the state-led or official multiculturalism.

By contrast, citizen-led multiculturalism aims at fulfilling more multicultural values and goals by providing services to both legal and illegal foreigners and by increasing cultural diversity and tolerance. NGOs carry out various activities and programs to secure the human rights of foreigners, empower migrant workers and marriage immigrants, and increase the capacity of a peaceful coexistence of Korean nationals and migrants regardless of their legal status. In this sense, citizen-led multiculturalism can complement the shortcomings of state-led multiculturalism.

Close examination of the history of multicultural discourses and immigration reforms in Korea reveals that the recent multiculturalism trend was not entirely led by either the state or

civil society but was, rather, led jointly by the two actors. It was the outcome of a policy alliance or network between the progressive government and civil society during the Roh Moo-hyun administration. The government adopted progressive visions and demands proposed by civil society and implemented them into concrete laws and institutions. Thus, when the capable state and civil society form policy alliances, they can make rapid reforms in immigration policy.