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Ethnic nationalism and multiculturalism in Korea: Tensions in a changing society

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Abstract
The fast demographic change in South Korea has involved ethnic nationalism and multiculturalism in direct conflict. The Korean national identity is historically based upon minjok ideology, which has set a focus on ethnic homogeneity, lineage and cultural purity. Nonetheless, it has been argued that this long-held narrative has been compromised by the beginning of the 2000s due to immigration, marriage migration, foreign labour and the existence of multicultural children. This paper focuses on the role of ethnic nationalism in forming the attitudes of the people, state policies, and social relations in modern Korea, as well as how emerging multicultural realities are being negotiated by different social actors. Based on the theoretical views of nationalism and multiculturalism, the research examines policy and representations and case studies to demonstrate contradictions between the rhetoric of multiculturalism and the practices of assimilation. The article claims that Korea is at a crossroads in that the continued existence of ethnic nationalism is further making the shift to a more inclusive civic existence difficult. The implications for social cohesion and future identity formation are brought out in the findings.

Keywords: Ethnic nationalism, multiculturalism, korean identity

Introduction

The dynamic social environment of South Korea suggests a strong conflict between the deep-rooted ethnic nationalism of the country, called minjok, and the fast rise of the multicultural society. In much of its history, Korean identity has manifested itself through concepts of a common descent, cultural continuity, and linguistic cohesion, coupled with centuries of Confucian social order and strengthened during the course of the Japanese colonial rule and the reconstruction after the war. It was these experiences which reinforced the conviction that the Korean nation is united by blood lineage and by homogeneity (Kim, 2009) [1]. That notwithstanding, since the early 2000s, South Korea has gone through deep-seated demographic and social changes. The decreasing rates of fertility, the lack of labour, and economic globalisation created a significant increase in immigration of foreign labourers, students who came to study in different places, marriage migrants who arrived to visit countries like Vietnam, China, and the Philippines, and an industrial flow of North Korean defectors who seek opportunities to get resettlement. Only these varied groups have resulted in a noticeable and even increasing multicultural dimension in the society of Korea. Nevertheless, even with these demographic realities, conventional structures of ethnic homogeneity still affect state policies, school structures, media images, and attitudes of people, resulting in the lack of compatibility between the multicultural nature of policies in Korea and the focus on cultural assimilation. This crisis is the issue that lies at the heart of the current research. Though South Korea is turning into a demographically diverse society, the national identity system of South Korea still emphasises ethnic purity, making the process of integration and inclusion complicated (Shin *et al*., 1999) [2]. This study aims to look at how ethnic nationalism has influenced the making of Korean identity in the past and how the socio-political nuances of forms of transitioning to multiculturalism in the country are complex (Kim, 2017) [5]. Developing these themes, the research will offer a comprehensive insight into the forces that have made the contemporary Korean society and will shed light on how the national identity, social fabric, and cultural integration are bargained with in the times of rapid demographic change.

The paper will analyse the dynamic and sophisticated relationship between ethnic nationalism and multiculturalism in modern-day South Korea and will be a critical analysis of how these conflicting interests influence national identity, social cohesion and state policy. In virtue of its historical ideology, minjok, Korean identity has traditionally focused on ethnic homogeneity, on joint descent, and cultural solidarity. Nevertheless, the high rates of immigration, marriage migration, labour of foreign immigrants and even the appearance of the North Korean defectors have brought new social facts that disrupt this traditional story. The paper will examine the impact of ethnic nationalism persistence on the perceptions of migrants, as well as the design and application of multicultural policies and the lived experience of the other communities. It shows the discrepancies of the official multicultural policies and the persistent emphasis on assimilation, cultural conformity, and ethnic purity. In its historical follow-up, the paper, by focusing on the reaction of the society and evaluating the new issues, aims to make an input in wider discussions on identity building, nationhood, and inclusiveness in the East Asian cultures. In conclusion, the paper postulates that South Korea is at a saving point in which the work of ethnic nationalism versus multiculturalism will determine the nature of the country in the future.

Research Objectives

1. To trace the historical development of ethnic nationalism (minjok) in Korea and examine how it has shaped the construction of Korean identity over time.
2. To analyse the demographic, social, and policy factors contributing to the rise of multiculturalism in contemporary South Korea.

3. To assess the tensions and contradictions between Korea's ethnic homogeneity narrative and its emerging multicultural realities.
4. To evaluate the impact of ethnic nationalism on the social integration, representation, and lived experiences of migrant groups, marriage migrants, foreign workers, and North Korean defectors.
5. To explore how South Korea's multicultural policies, public discourse, and societal attitudes negotiate the balance between preserving national identity and promoting cultural diversity.

Perspectives on Nationalism

Nationalism has been one of the central themes in explanations related to the way in which nations form identity, how they understand belonging, and how they negotiate social cohesion, and Korea is providing a more fertile environment in which such dynamics can be studied. In general, researchers identify two major trends in nationalism, including ethnic nationalism and civic nationalism. Ethnic nationalism, which traditionally developed the identity of the Koreans, focuses on the common bloodline, their cultural heritage, kin and history characterising the past. This school of thought considers the country as an organism based on shared ancestry, and thus, ethnicity is the most important signifier of membership. Civic nationalism, on the other hand, describes national membership by common political values and by citizenship, investment and engagement in politics, culminating towards dedication to the state and facilitating a broader and adaptable definition of national identity (Chang, 2015) [3]. The two theoretical orientations come in handy to understand how the concept of minjok, or the belief in a unified and homogenised Korean people, was created and developed throughout the colonial era of Korean society under Japanese occupation, as well as the post-war period. Ethnic nationalism still stood inherited in education, cultural discourse, and political language due to colonial oppression, division of nations and outside threats, which underscored ethnic nationalism as a source of unity and resistance. But nowadays, civic nationalism is becoming increasingly relevant in academics as well as policy discussions as South Korea undergoes a more diverse society with immigration and marital immigration as well as globalisation. According to scholars, the future identity that Korea will have will rely on the capacity of the state to balance the emotional call of nationalistic ethnicism and the practical need of civic inclusion. However, tension is not completely gone because in most cases the multicultural policies are alongside a high degree of social inclination to ethnic purity and assimilation. The realities of these views can be used to explain why Korea cannot easily redefine national identity in a multicultural age and to emphasise the theoretical discussions of nationhood, belonging, and identity in the formation of modern societies.

Multicultural Change in Korea

The Multicultural change in South Korea is one of the most important social changes in modern history that occurred on the basis of the rapid demographic changes, economic requirements, and cultural dynamics. Starting in the early 2000s, Korea has been undergoing a slow but consistent immigration rate as a result of fertility decline, shortages of labour and globalisation. This gave rise to the entry of foreign labourers in South and Southeast Asia, the rise of greater numbers of marriage migrants, most especially women in Vietnam, China, and the Philippines, and the unending influx of North Korea defectors seeking resettlement. Consequently, Korea turned from a previously homogenous society to develop visible disparities in communities, multicultural families, and an increasing number of mixed-heritage children. The Korean government, in its turn, came up with policies that support the inclusion of multicultural students, including the Multicultural Families Support Act (2008), language and integration programs, education reforms, etc. These institutional attempts notwithstanding, multiculturalism in Korea is a controversial issue (Jung, 2022) [4]. Although issues of diversity and coexistence are also encouraged by the formal rhetoric, it is believed that most of the policies continue with the assumption of assimilation into the mainstream Korean norms instead of sharing the cultures with each other. The attitudes of the masses tend to be ambivalent or uncomfortable because, over many centuries, there has been a sense of ethnic purity and minjok identity. Migrant employees have to struggle with labour exploitation and social alienation, marriage migrants are under the pressure of the culture, and in school and the community, multicultural children face discrimination (Kim, 2017) [5]. According to scholars, the younger generation seems to be comparatively more welcoming towards multiculturalism, but there are still severe obstacles in society. Media discourses of multicultural families offering a sign of global development or migrants threatening social order only complicate the shift even more. All in all, multicultural change in Korea represents a complicated negotiation process between the imperative of population change, policy accommodation and the entrenched national identity models. The current issue is to evade the path of assimilationism and transition to a more authentic and inclusive multicultural society.

Historical Context of Korean Ethnic Nationalism

The recollections of descent, innocence, and continuity of cultural heritage trace their roots way back to the times of the Joseon, which form the historical basis of Korean ethnic nationalism. At this time, the Confucian ideology defined social stratification and established the ancient lineage among Koreans, with great emphasis being placed on the purity of the ancestors and the importance of being of the same descent. This ancient sense of common bloodstock gave rise to the future conceptualisations of minjok, or ethnic nationhood. These ideas were exacerbated and restructured during the colonial period of Japanese rule. Korean nationalists and intellectuals strongly rejected the Japanese efforts to marginalise Koreans at an imperialist level through the use of Japanese racial discourse, and therefore, to counter Japanese efforts to marginalise them, they needed to assert their own racial identity (Hong, 2013). It was during this time that the consolidation of the belief that Koreans were part of one, biologically and culturally homogeneous community strengthened the unity of ethnic characteristics as the key element of nationalist anti-colonialism. After the processes of liberation and destruction following the Korean War, ethnic nationalism became even more entrenched in the consciousness of the post-war South, through nation-building. Anti-communist ideology and the message of a fragmented nation helped

make the state stronger in terms of bonding with similar ethnicity, and thus, the people of North and South Korea were being depicted as a single family that has been divided by ideology. Also, education, media and state propaganda aggrandised a single ethnic identity in the effort of creating a sense of national resilience amid economic crises and political unrest. Irrespective of globalisation and growing exposure to diversity over the past decades, the ethnic homogeneity rhetoric persists (Han, 2007) [7]. The fast economic growth and integration in the global networks made Korea a stronger advocate of the sense of national pride and boosted the notion that national cultural and ethnic unity were the pillars of its prosperity. Although demographic shifts are proving demographic changes to this story, the assumption of an unadulterated and uninterrupted Korean ethnicity continues to influence attitudes about identity, popular opinion, and state policies. This historical legacy is something that persists, ending, and it is according to this historical background that modern-day arguments on multiculturalism are taking place.

Emergence of a Multicultural Korea

The development of a multicultural Korea is directly associated with fundamental demographic changes, which have started at the beginning of the 21st century. Low fertility rates and high ageing of South Korean demography posed a great labour scarcity, which caused the country and industries to depend more on an imported labour force, especially the South and Southeast Asian groups. At the same time, the prevalence of international marriages, a large number of which were between Korean men and women of Vietnam, China, the Philippines, and Mongolia, the presence of multicultural families and mixed-heritage children grew significantly (Yu *et al*., 2025) [8]. Moreover, there was a growth of global networks of education, leading to an even larger influx of foreign students, thereby diversifying the Korean society even further. The Korean government responded to these changes by coming up with various legal and policy frameworks that would control the integration and support multicultural households. The Multicultural Family Support Act created institutional frameworks for language education, social services, and cultural adaptation programs. Migration laws institutionalised the employment of foreign labour by using mechanisms like the Employment Permit System that aimed at sustaining the provision of labour, but at the same time making sure that strict state control was upheld. Educational policies were also expanded to meet the requirements of multicultural children through crime through the provision of classes in the Korean language, cultural education, support programs to minimise the dropout rate and enhance social adaptation. In conjunction with these institutional modifications, the media and the general discourses have largely influenced how society views multiculturalism (Lee *et al*., 2023) [9]. Whereas some media examples demonstrate the idea of a multicultural family as the manifestation of international openness, there are many instances in which the migrants are displayed as either passive receivers of Korean generosity or simply as social vice that needs to be contained. With the effect of perpetuating social distance and discrimination, these dominant narratives tend to simplify the lived experiences of migrant workers and multicultural families. Generally, the development of a multicultural Korea can be regarded as the complicated combination of the demographic need, the state policy adjustment, and the alteration of the popular discourse that signified a strong change in the traditional society, which was characterised by ethnic homogeneity.

Points of Tension: Ethnic Nationalism vs. Multiculturalism

Strong ethnic nationalism and the population quickly growing in variety at once have resulted in various points of tension in South Korea, which informed the discourse of cultural identity, social solidarity, and national identity. A significant point of contention is the general fear of the establishment of ethnic purity due to the prevalence of demographic diversification. The controversy of Korean-ness is based on the question of whether national identity remains a preservation of ancestry and shared blood or develops into a more accommodative and citizenship-focused concept. These divisions in ideology are reflected in the form of daily discrimination and social exclusion of migrant workers, marriage migrants, and North Korean defectors. Migrant workers are often prone to xenophobia, underpayment, and working conditions that are disgruntling; the immigrants have to live with cultural prejudice and strict assimilation expectations; and the North Korean defectors, despite their ethnic similarity, refuse to deal with stigmatisation and socio-economic hurdles owing to their dissimilar cultures and political orientations (Kim, 2019) [10]. These tensions are also aggravated by institutional issues. An example is the education system, which tries to incorporate multicultural children, but in many cases, this was done via assimilation-based curriculum, where all forms of conforming to the mainstream Korean standards are taught instead of cultural diversity acceptance. On the same note, although the policies that the governments take aim at fostering multiculturalism do so externally, most of the policies underlying the programs are set on the principle that migrants should be assimilated to the fullest extent by the Korean society, portraying a fallacy between policies and their implementation. There are also strong generational and geographical divides in public opinion (Kang, 2024) [11]. The younger generation of Koreans is affected by globalisation and being exposed to more diversity, expressing their own acceptance of the concept of multiculturalism, but older generations are rather conservative and ethnocentric. In urban communities, the tolerance is often higher than in rural communities because the risk of cultural transformation and labour competition is high. All these tensions are manifestations of the complicated and still unresolved fight of Korean society to reconcile ethnic nationalism with the reality of the multicultural change.

Negotiating Identity in a Changing Korea

The negotiation of identity within fast-changing South Korea encloses a dynamic dialogue between traditional ethnic nationalism and new forms of civic and hybrid forms of belonging in South Korea. Over recent years, political rhetoric, particularly since 2010, has become more full of references to the concept of civic nationalism, where the emphasis is put on citizenship, on participation, and even shared social values more than on a bloodline-based sense of identity. This change is partially motivated by the pragmatic acknowledgement of demographic demands and partially by the changes in culture in general, due to

globalisation. Being born in a more interrelated world, being exposed to multiple media and global standards, younger generations are more open to the idea of multiculturalism and less inclined to conceive of what it means to be Korean, not based on ethnic origin. Parallel to this change, the hybrid identities are becoming more prominent in Korean society (Lim & Yoon, 2025) [12]. Multicultural children who have to manoeuvre their parents between their own cultures and the mainstream Korean expectations acquire punctual fluid and transcendent forms of identity. Their experiences, including the cases of inclusion and the cases of discrimination, demonstrate the problems and opportunities of the society at the time of the transition. The traditional limits of Korean identity are further complicated by transnational Korean families, including returning Koreans overseas or interracial families that are still in cross-border relations, and this shows how cultural identity is becoming transnational. NGOs and civil society are necessary in facilitating this change (Kim, 2015) [13]. The advocacy groups engage in defending the rights of migrant workers, fostering anti-discrimination policy, and offering multicultural families both legal and social support services. Migrant centres and faith-based groups, found within the community, offer immigrants language education, counselling, and cultural mediation services, which can assist in their integration as well as intercultural education. Not only can these civil society projects be perceived to have a practical support to offer, but they also help to redefine the discourse on identity and belonging that is fervent in society. Collectively, the politically rhetorical changes, emergence of hybrid identities and the influence of civil society activism demonstrate how Korea is renegotiating its national identity regarding multicultural change.

Discussion

The analysis of ethnic nationalism and multicultural change in South Korea reveals a society undergoing profound transformation yet struggling to reconcile competing narratives of identity. The strongest tensions persist in areas where the traditional minjok ideology directly conflicts with demographic realities—particularly in public attitudes, institutional practices, and policy implementation. Despite growing diversity, many Koreans continue to view national identity through an ethnic lens, creating friction in contexts such as workplace relations, school environments, and marriage migration. Migrant workers and multicultural families remain most vulnerable to discrimination, illustrating how ethnic homogeneity narratives retain their influence (Chang, 2012) [14]. Nonetheless, meaningful social transformation is occurring, especially among younger generations who increasingly embrace civic-based identity and express openness toward multiculturalism. Global exposure, digital communication, and more frequent interaction with diverse peers contribute to shifting attitudes. Hybrid identities among multicultural children and transnational families further signal an evolving understanding of "Koreanness," one that gradually stretches beyond ancestry. These developments have significant implications for social cohesion, national identity, and policy design. For social cohesion, Korea faces the challenge of preventing social fragmentation while building inclusive communities that recognise cultural diversity as an asset rather than a threat. Regarding national identity, the country is at a critical juncture where redefining belonging in civic rather than ethnic terms may become essential for long-term social stability (Jung, 2022) [4]. In terms of governance, policies must move beyond symbolic multiculturalism and address structural inequalities through anti-discrimination measures, inclusive education reforms, and more balanced migration regulations. Ultimately, the synthesis of findings reveals that the future of Korea's multicultural transition depends on how effectively the nation can balance its historical attachment to ethnic nationalism with the practical need to integrate a diverse and growing migrant population.

Conclusion

The examination of ethnic nationalism and multicultural change in South Korea underscores a society at a pivotal crossroads, negotiating between deep historical narratives of homogeneity and emerging multicultural realities. The study highlights that while the ideology of minjok continues to shape national identity through notions of shared bloodline and cultural purity, demographic changes driven by immigration, marriage migration, and global interconnectedness are challenging these long-held assumptions. The strongest tensions persist in public attitudes, institutional practices, and policy frameworks where ethnic-centred identity remains dominant. Yet, signs of transformation are evident: younger generations exhibit greater acceptance of diversity, political discourse increasingly acknowledges the need for civic-based inclusion, and hybrid identities among multicultural children and transnational families are gradually reshaping the social landscape. These shifts suggest that the future of Korean identity may move toward a more inclusive, multicultural framework, though the pace and depth of this transition remain uncertain. Future research is essential to deepen understanding of this evolving landscape. Long-term integration outcomes for migrants and multicultural families must be studied more comprehensively, especially regarding economic mobility, educational achievement, and social belonging across generations. The identity formation of mixed-heritage youth represents another critical area, as their experiences will reflect the success or limitations of Korea's multicultural shift. Comparative studies with other East Asian nations—such as Japan, China, and Taiwan—can also offer valuable insights into shared regional patterns of nationalism, migration governance, and cultural adaptation. Together, these research avenues will contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how Korea's national identity may continue to evolve in an increasingly diverse and interconnected world.

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