

■ Project Review ■

**Supporting Migrant Youths in the Late-Modern Period:
A Review of the Research Project: “See the Future of
Multicultural Society with the Next Migrant Generation”***

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We have conducted the joint research project “See the Future of Multicultural Society with the Next Migrant Generation” with the financial assistance of the Toyota Foundation. We are grateful to the Toyota Foundation for the generous financial support. In this paper, I will articulate the findings from this research and propose some improvements in public policies. I will also make some suggestion for further research.

Both Korean and Japanese societies have been getting culturally diverse and the national, local, and municipal governments have been implementing a set of policies under the slogan of “multiculturalism.” There are many similarities between the situations of both countries, but we found substantial differences as well, differences which have important policy implications. Let us begin with the basic features of major immigrant groups of both countries. When Korean policy makers discuss the policies for youths with foreign backgrounds, the most important group is the so called “multicultural families,” which are typically formed through marriage between a male Korean citizen and a female immigrant from Asian countries. These immigrant wives come to Korea to settle for good, so the aim of the government’s policies is to integrate them

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into Korean society. In addition to this category, there are other types of families that need special care. Ethnic Koreans with foreign nationalities are one of them. They are allowed a long stay and they often bring up their children in Korea. They do not all share the same commitment to Korea. Some stay in the country for good, whereas others leave the country after a certain period of stay.

International marriage is also on the rise in Japan, especially in rural areas, where many female immigrants settle as wives of Japanese farmers. Their situation is similar to that of their Korean counterparts. Another important group is South Americans of Japanese descent, who come to Japan to work as unskilled laborers. It is long-standing Japanese policy not to admit unskilled migrant laborers. However, the 1992 immigration law grants them permanent residency and extensive rights to live and work in Japan. Although most of them come to work as unskilled workers, their admission is justified by their special connection to Japanese society. Their careers are very diverse and difficult to trace. Some of them return to their home country after making some money in Japan, but some continue to stay for the rest of their lives, raising their children there. The problem is that there is no systematic policy to integrate into Japanese society those people who continue to stay in Japan. Although they have formal legal rights, they lack basic skills to improve their lives in Japan. Their lives are organized by personnel companies which provide housing and transportation to the workplaces. They work for long hours, often during night time. Thus, they live in Japan for many years segregated from the mainstream society, with few opportunities to learn social norms for getting along with Japanese neighbors.

Now let us see whether the current policies meet the basic needs of their children. Korean multiculturalism puts priority on language education. We have been impressed by the robust support which schools and governmental institutions provide to help these children acquire Korean language skills. This policy seems appropriate, because language competence is the necessary condition for access to other school programs.

Japanese schools are not doing so well in this respect. Japanese public schools accept foreign children but they have not been successfully accommodating their special needs. The support from national government is very limited and the schools cannot provide robust programs for students who cannot speak fluent Japanese. Nonprofit Organizations (NPOs), with financial help from public funds and private donations, have been working to help them with Japanese language and school works. Public funding is unstable and its instability often hinders NPOs' activities. No wonder many children fail to master Japanese and give up primary or secondary education. Some families send their children to schools operated in their mother tongues, such as Spanish or Portuguese. The problem is that many of such schools receive little financial support from the Japanese government and they have difficulty in offering high-quality programs. To sum up, the Japanese government is failing to provide basic educational services to these students. Korea provides a wonderful example for the Japanese government to follow.

Children from these families often need emotional care in addition to academic support. Their parents are often poor and must work long hours. They are absent until late at night and cannot take adequate care of children. Lack of stable emotional bonds hinders development of self-esteem and stable identity. In this respect, emotional support from teachers, counselors, and advisors is indispensable. We were impressed that all the staff of schools, NPOs and government organizations in both countries are so dedicated in this work. The government should provide enough personnel and financial support so that they can continue their effort. Korea has a substantive support system, but some critics argue there should be more government support. In Japan, the government should improve their commitment drastically.

Children's development is greatly affected by their social environment, especially that of their family. Good family relationships are crucial for development of stable identity. Conflict within the family often has a harmful effect on emotional development of the children. In this respect we have to note that immigrant wives often have difficulties forming

good relationships with their husband and their relatives. All international marriage couples face challenges arising from cultural differences, but these marriage migrants encounter special difficulties which should be addressed by public policy.

In both countries, many of the female migrants marry farmers in rural areas, where single males have difficulties finding a female partner. Rural municipalities often support international marriage, as the very survival of their communities is at stake. Migrant wives are expected to perform a set of roles, which the husbands, the families, and the communities have determined. In Japanese farming communities, immigrant wives are often required to accept heavy burdens. The gender division of labor is often unfair, and young wives are required to perform most of the house keeping work, in addition to the work on the farm. Three generations live and work together and young wives are put under a patriarchal governing structure. These families retain elements of the pre-modern Japanese household, which was the unit of economic enterprise that was to be handed down through generations.

For a number of reasons, the husbands and their family members often fail to notice the problems of imposing heavy burdens on the immigrant wives. First, they suppose that the immigrant females will be happy to take the role of farmer's wife because, after all, they married farmers of their own will. Second, they suppose the immigrants are accustomed to a heavy workload and an authoritarian family structure because they come from countries which are "less developed" and which do not have good human rights records. Third, marriage brokers often present a false image of Asian female migrants, as hard-working, patient, and obedient, in order to appeal to the conservative tastes of the Korean and Japanese customers. Fourth, especially in Korea, the national and local governments hold out the policy goal of preserving traditional family values. Thus, it is natural for them to assign such roles to the new wives.

However, many migrant wives often have different preferences. First, their home countries, in part because of their socialist history, often have gender norms which are more egalitarian than those of rural Korea and

Japan. They wish to have an egalitarian family relationship created through romantic love and individual commitment. They expected to live in a modern nuclear family in Korea or Japan as, in their image, Korean and Japanese societies are modernized and advanced. These discrepancies are the source of serious conflict in the households, which could lead to domestic violence, separations, or divorces. Children are often badly affected by such conflict.

In order to prevent such troubles, prospective wives must be well informed about rural lives in Korea or Japan at the time of the marriage arrangement. The prospective husbands and their families must also have better understanding of the backgrounds of immigrant wives. After the marriage, all family members must try to understand and accommodate each other's needs and aspirations. The national, local, and municipal governments can play important roles in each of these processes. They must convey a proper image of rural life to foreign women who intend to marry Korean or Japanese farmers. Governments should not only prohibit brokers from conveying false information about individual Asian females, but also disseminate proper information so as to correct their false image as hard-working, patient, and obedient. Finally, they should provide consultation services for families in trouble. Its aim should be to help them work out mutually acceptable relationships, rather than to persuade the immigrant wives to accept the pre-determined social roles. In the late-modern period, when radical reflexivity shakes the legitimacy of existing institutions, it is not appropriate to impose pre-arranged social roles on some people. We should recognize Asian immigrants as autonomous agents and we should negotiate with them on fair terms. This process could lead to the reshaping of current social structure, so that new couples could lead more egalitarian and democratic family lives.

In this respect, the Korean governments' integration policy could be susceptible to criticism. Recently Korea has been accepting migrants and developing robust integration policies for them. These policies have been justified mainly by their economic benefits. It has been claimed that Korea needs more immigrants to sustain its economic growth.

Marriage migrants are necessary for survival and revitalization of rural communities. This is a powerful mode of justification, but it also has a weak point. This logic could imply that immigrants and their children deserve special assistance only as long as they perform the expected roles. In fact, the Korean government is sometimes criticized for excluding some immigrant groups, such as ethnic Koreans with foreign nationalities and divorced immigrant wives from the benefit available to multicultural families. It seems that this differential treatment comes from the different functions these groups are supposed to perform in the society.

Such discriminatory treatment is problematic because, in the time of radical reflexivity, many people reject the expected roles and negotiate new agreements. In this situation, it is more appropriate to base assistance for children on the needs of individuals. (The Japanese system is mainly based on this principle, although the government's commitment is too weak.) In Korea, many staff of schools and support institutions are trying hard to make sure that these students will not be badly affected by the discriminatory treatment.

Furthermore, economic justification alone cannot generate enough public sympathy toward multicultural families. In international marriage, many people suppose that poor young females give up their home countries and immigrate to more affluent countries. Rural male bachelors obtain an immigrant female partner by use of economic power. These husbands exercise authoritarian power in patriarchal households, which their fellow female citizens refuse to join. Thus, the immigrant wives are regarded as "victims" of poverty and, then, of patriarchal oppression. Their husbands are regarded as "oppressors." If these are the typical images of international marriage, they can hardly gain respect from the general public. In fact, we have learned that not many Koreans have a positive image of multicultural families. The Korean government is trying to improve their image by promoting foreign cultures, but this may not be the main source of the problem. The negative image of multicultural families arises from the moral nature of how they are formed.

In order to generate genuine respect towards multicultural families,

it is important to improve its moral quality by transforming their relationships to be morally acceptable. The husbands and the wives should cease to be “oppressors” and “victims.” We should help the husbands and the wives negotiate mutually acceptable relationships. In addition, in order to remove stereotypes, the public should be informed of the reality of their lives; their life histories, difficulties, struggles, and valuable achievements they make together.

We have left several issues not extensively examined in this research. One is that of the preservation and promotion of cultures. Generally speaking, there are a number of reasons for encouraging both children with foreign backgrounds and their classmates to learn about the cultures of the children’s home countries. First, it helps the children better understand their background and develop sound self-esteem. Second, by nourishing respect for the different cultures among their classmates, it can prevent bullying and give these children some resources for negotiating their positions among classmates. Another topic is the prevention of hate-related actions. The Japanese Diet recently passed legislation in this regard, although many critics hold that it is not strong enough. These are familiar topics in multicultural literature, but they are still understudied in Korea and Japan. We would like to continue to work on these issues.

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