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Marrying into South Korea:
Female Marriage Migrants and Gendered Modes of National Belonging

In recent South Korean public discourses on the growth of diversity within the country, the female marriage migrant emerges as a key figure. Remarkably, one out of ten marriages in South Korea today are transnational; in three quarters of these marriages, the foreign spouse is a woman (MoGEF 2012:19).¹ Introducing national, cultural, and often ethnic/racial others into the intimate spheres of Korean society, the increasing commonality of such conjugal unions has prompted citizens' reevaluation of longstanding nationalist fantasies of a homogeneous nation-state.

Nevertheless, the influx of foreign women marrying into South Korea requires an account more complex than the narrative of globalization leading to a cosmopolitan nation. State-generated media representations of exemplary foreign wives tout them as contributors to a more “multicultural” Korea but invariably portray them as having “become Korean”; the state’s continued focus on the family as the basic unit for its “multicultural” policies discloses its interests in the reproduction of the patriarchal family. Providing a glimpse into the array of government media depictions of and policies addressing the growing population of marriage migrant women, I argue that the “multicultural family” rhetoric and policies of the South Korean state impose well-worn modes of female national belonging: they are premised upon the imperative of turning foreign women into Korean wives, daughters-in-law, and most importantly, mothers of Korean children. Hence, marriage migrant women come to occupy a complex position in a structure of *stratified reproduction* (Ginsburg and Rapp 1995:3) in South Korea. National leaders' interests in replenishing the nation-state's population,

¹ This means that in a total population of approximately 5 million, about 200 thousand are marriage migrant women (MoGEF 2012:19).

perpetuating the structure of the family, and nurturing the potential “global talents” born from transnational marriages elevate migrant women in the hierarchy of reproductive subjects. Nevertheless, the encouragement to reproduce also presupposes that to do so is to receive recognition as members of Korean society. (Marriage) migrant women then come to occupy a paradoxical position as essential but marginalized individuals in the South Korean nation.

The transnational marriage that I focus on here has specific classed, geographic, and ethnic/racial contours. Most commonly, it is the marital union between a Korean man of lower socioeconomic status and an Asian woman hailing from a country in the global south. Families created by such marriages are the ones targeted by the multicultural family policies of the South Korean government, which reports that more than 75 percent of marriage migrant women of the some 200 thousand currently residing in South Korea are from China and Vietnam (MoGEF N.d.). Hence, I situate the phenomenon of transnational marriage in South Korea within larger contexts of *global hypergamy* and the *commodification of intimacy* as defined by anthropologist Nicole Constable (2005, 2009). In other words, I consider the recent influx of female marriage migration into South Korea to be a part of the recent pattern of labor migration in which certain women are permitted to cross borders into a more prosperous country in exchange for establishing relations and performing acts of physical and/or emotional intimacy. At the same time, the influx of female marriage migrants into South Korea is made possible and shaped by culturally and historically specific notions of femininity and instances of other gendered, and at times feminist, nationalisms in South Korea.

In order to remain attentive to these specificities as well as the broader contexts that give rise to transnational marriages in South Korea, I ground my analysis upon the methodology of *robust social constructionism* (di Leonardo and Lancaster 1997:3). In their introduction to *The Gender/Sexuality Reader*, Micaela di Leonardo and Roger Lancaster call

for an acknowledgement of the body as a space always activated by a multiplicity of enmeshed and interacting forces. Because constructions of difference such as gender, sexuality, race/ethnicity, and class are “analytically distinct yet practically intertwined domains,” an accurate analysis that takes any one or more of these categories as its focus cannot isolate those concepts from the others, and the categories themselves from the nexus of powers that shape our lived experiences (1997:3). Neither can we omit from consideration the currents of history, both local and global, in which the body exists (1997:3). I thus strive to remain attentive in my analysis to the intertwined constructions of difference and hierarchy that persons embody, as well as to the historical and cultural contexts which give these constructions particular meaning. There is much scholarship on a variety of nationalist discourses that assign women the role of biological and social reproducers of the nation (e.g. Enloe 2000, Heng and Devan 1997, Moon 1998). But how does this gendered mode of national belonging become the one afforded to female (marriage) migrants in South Korea?

In order to answer this question, I first situate the rise of transnational marriage in South Korea within larger patterns of gendered migration—the forms of mobility that have emerged with the *commodification of intimacy* (Constable 2009). I then trace the beginnings of transnational marriage as I have defined above, examining how government-sponsored marriage tours in the 1990s, seeking to address the gender imbalance in the countryside, made it possible for Korean bachelors and their families to envision marriage to a foreign woman as one that would fulfill Korean kinship and cultural norms. Next, I outline some reasons the South Korean government's welfare policies addressing marriage migrant women have come to take the "multicultural family" as its basic unit. The family is considered the building block of the nation, and sedimented cultural practices continue to conceive of the woman as *encompassed* (Wardlow 2006) within the family. Motivations for the South Korean government's involvement in the business of transnational marriage include a

dwindling population, the demise of the traditional family, and more recently, the desire to join the ranks of ethnically diverse “advanced nations”. The recent burgeoning of *damunhwa* (multiculture/multicultural) rhetoric and policies on the “multicultural family” can then be characterized as reactions to these internal and international contexts, which call upon the marriage migrant women as not only solutions to the nation’s social ills, but also as individuals bringing diversity to a South Korea thought to be ethnically and culturally homogeneous. Therefore, the female migrant becomes visible and worthy of membership in South Korean society and nation only when she cooperates with the following intertwined projects of the state: replenishing South Korea’s dwindling population through the structure of the family, and moving the country into the ranks of “advanced,” cosmopolitan nations.

On one hand, recent studies on the phenomenon of transnational marriage in South Korea largely focus on people's essentializing fantasies about the future bride and the her nation of origin (Freeman 2005, 2011, Abelman and Kim 2005). On the other, Korean-language studies have made sociological inquiries into the impact of “multicultural family” policies on the marriage migrant population, largely through interviews or surveys of the migrant women (Seol et al. 2005, Eom 2006, Lee H.K. 2008, Jeong et al. 2007). Both these streams of previous scholarship take the individual’s experiences as their central material for analysis. As an examination of state policies and rhetoric on marriage migrant women, my essay occupies a middle ground between these past studies, while drawing from the illuminating findings of both.

Marriage Migration as Gendered Labor Migration: the Commodification of Intimacy

In her 2009 essay of the same title, Nicole Constable defines the *commodification of intimacy* as the rendering of relations of physical and/or emotional proximity, of love and care, as objects for market exchange (50). She names transnational marriage, sex work, and

domestic labor as three branches of this phenomenon. Because relations and acts of intimacy, often linked to the feminized realm of domesticity, are now considered commercial products, Constable points out that “certain women [come to] have opportunities for mobility that are unavailable to men” (2009:51). Referring to previous theories of “power geometry” and “gendered geographies of power” (Massey 1994, Pessar and Mahler 2001) as well as to recent ethnographies on transnational marriage and sex labor (e.g. Brennan 2004, Abelmann and Kim 2005), she points out that a number of scholars have examined the “variety of factors that determine who moves and who controls or influences the movements of others” (2009:51). Socioeconomic class is a well-examined factor, which Constable herself addressed by borrowing William Lively’s concept of *spatial hypergamy* (2005:10). She writes that transnational marriages often take the form of women from the global south marrying into countries that are considered more developed and prosperous. She emphasizes, however, the adjective “spatial”: upward movement in the economic hierarchy of nation-states does not necessarily translate to the elevation of an individual’s socioeconomic class. Many foreign brides have higher class and educational backgrounds than their husbands, who often have difficulty marrying within their country because of their low socioeconomic status (2005: 10-11).

Most importantly, Constable’s concept of the commodification of intimacy allows us to consider marriage migration as a form of gendered labor migration. Though their work is obscured by the notions of feminine duty that accompany the titles of wife, daughter-in-law, and mother, marriage migrant women not only cross national borders but also blur the boundaries between the reproductive and productive, public and private, and official and unofficial in their everyday lives (Hwang 2009:17). On one hand, the marriage migrant is an individual who is placed and places herself in motion through a decision about a private matter, and her trajectory takes her from one kin group to another. On the other hand, she is a

migrant from one nation-state to another, whose entry and residence in the country she arrives in are strictly regulated by the policies of the receiving country. An examination of the presence of the state in marriage migrant women's lives thus constitutes another essential step toward demystifying the phenomenon of transnational marriage. I hope to show that the South Korean state has high stakes in the business of transnational marriage—after all, it is a phenomenon state policy helped spark from the very beginning.

Origins: Rural Bachelors and Marriage Tours to China

The first waves of transnational marriage between Korean men and Asian women emerged in the 1990s, as the South Korean government promoted it as a solution to the social ill of bride shortage in the countryside. During South Korea's period of rapid industrialization in the 1960s, many young women left their homes in rural areas to work in urban factories (Freeman 2011:35). Young men were less mobile in comparison: they were expected to maintain the ancestral family plot and take care of their parents, especially if they were the eldest son (Freeman 2011:36). During this time, the state's focus on nurturing the burgeoning industrial sectors widened income disparities between the town and the country; with rural lifeways becoming quickly devalued, young women were encouraged to marry into the cities, while young men who remained in the country became less and less attractive as suitors (Freeman 2011:35). Hence, when rural bachelors voiced their discontent about the absence of marriageable women in the countryside in the 1970s and '80s, they spoke of a symptom resulting from larger structural inequalities—with or without intention. Stressing the significance of marriage as a rite of passage of sorts into robust masculinity in the Korean countryside, Caren Freeman writes that the “sense of disabled manhood must have seemed unbearable for the some sixty rural bachelors who took their lives in protests in the 1970s” (2011:37). Though their inability to find a partner for marriage would surely have been a

source of much suffering for these men, it may be excessive to describe their suicides as the result of despair over nothing other than their extended bachelorhood.

Nevertheless, the so-called “marriage problem” of rural men was the social ill brought to the attention of the public, and the issue the government responded to by funding the Marriage Aid program in the 1980s (Freeman 2011:37, 40). The program seems to have been not exactly a direct response to the suicides, but more so to the growing public concern about rural bachelors that was sparked by media reports about farmer protests.² Implemented by the government-subsidized Research Association for the Welfare of Korean Farm and Fishing Villages (RWFFV), the program initially focused on matching women in urban areas with men in the countryside (Freeman 2011:40). By 1993, however, RWFFV began organizing four-day marriage tours to northern China, where much of the Korean Chinese, or *Chosŏnjok*, population live (Freeman 2011:41). This change in strategy was enabled by the reestablishment of diplomatic ties between South Korea and China during this period (Freeman 2011:41). Caren Freeman notes with irony that foreign brides began to enter the country at the same time that the South Korean government liberalized import regulation on agricultural products (2011:41). As inexpensive agricultural imports began to encroach upon the livelihoods of Korean farmers, the South Korean government hastily applied the salve of transnational marriage to the deepening wounds of its rural population.

From this time, the figure of the foreign bride was constructed as a mirror opposite of the modern Korean woman: *sunjongjök* (obedient), *sunjin* (innocent), and chaste, rather than headstrong and morally/sexually loose. Promotions of the marriage tours to China portrayed

² It is unlikely that the farmers always already construed the state as responsible for their marriages. But it seems that in a historical and cultural context where *jungmae* (arranged marriage) was the norm, the farmers may have come to hold the government accountable to some extent in this private matter when the physical lack of marriageable women in the countryside made it increasingly difficult for local matchmakers to find them brides. It is noteworthy that some protests took on a rhetoric similar to that of human rights activism: one slogan was “Farmers are people too! Let us get married!” (Freeman 2011: 37).

the *Chosŏnjok* woman as untainted by the polluting forces of modernization: coming from a less developed country, they were said to possess virtues of traditional femininity that the urbanized Korean woman did not (Freeman 2011:42). The modern Korean woman, “spoiled by commodity fetishism,” had become morally and sexually questionable, but the *Chosŏnjok* woman embodied the feminine virtues of docility and chastity (Freeman 2011:42).

Descriptions of their innocence were also attributed to their upbringing in a relatively poorer, less urbanized country (Freeman 2011:42).

In addition, the linking of life in a less developed country with the preservation of the feminine virtues of docility and innocence or purity allows such essentialistic characterizations to be applied to foreign brides from other countries of the global south. In Nancy Abelmann and Hyunhee Kim’s ethnography of a Korean mother’s failed attempt to find a Filipina wife for her disabled son, the mother “describe[s] the Filipina fiancée as ‘pure’ for having lived in a less developed social reality that maps easily onto South Korea’s [...] past” (2005:111). Such a characterization accords with the aforementioned rhetoric describing Korean women as having lost their feminine virtues in the processes of modernization. Docility, another feminine characteristic attributed to foreign brides, is also linked to poverty, assumed to result from one’s existence outside forces of modernization. A Korean male interviewee in Freeman’s ethnography who married a *Chosŏnjok* woman explicitly states, “I went to a poor country because I wanted to find an obedient woman” (2011: 87). As Abelmann and Kim point out, these characteristics compose the “image of the traditional Korean bride,” which is based upon Confucian notions of femininity and the concept of “wise mother, good wife” (*hyŏnmoyangchŏ*, 賢母良妻) introduced during the Japanese imperialist period (2005:113, Park 2005). The irony lies in that foreign women, albeit from Asian countries whose cultures are believed to be similar to that of Korea, are

recruited to fulfill the model upon its perceived disintegration in the Korean female population.

The demise of so-called traditional Korean femininity and the difficulty lower-class men³ have in finding spouses are intertwined branches of what might be identified as a larger national crisis: the dissolution of the traditional family. In the wake of rising divorce and declining birth rates, South Korea faces a predicament shared by many post-industrial countries. Its native population is aging and growing smaller. Acts of care traditionally provided by the family now increasingly need to be supplied by non-kin others: through the private sector, organizations of charity and humanitarianism, and welfare programs of the state. To some extent, upholding the traditional family through the recruitment of foreign wives allows the modern state to deflect its responsibility for the well-being of its citizens. Secondly, it addresses the problem of biological reproduction while ensuring the “continuity of Korean patrilineage” (Abelmann and Kim 2005:112). Foreign wives, even if they may disrupt the imaginary of an ethnically homogenous nation, permit the perpetuation of a Korean patriline, whereas foreign husbands would not. Abelmann and Kim point out that “it was only in 1998 that non-Korean husbands gained legal rights to naturalize, [while] non-Korean wives...have been able to do so for decades” (2005:108). In other words, transnational marriage between Korean men and foreign women makes certain that new citizens fall under the established organizing principle of South Korean society and nation.

Family as Building Block, Nation as Family

That the patrilineal family operates as a basic unit of the South Korean nation is

³ Though the “marriage problem” was initially identified in and continues to be associated with rural areas, in 2006, 75 percent of marriage migrant women were recorded as living in urban areas (Kim Y.J. 2011:14). Kim Young Jeong writes that this misconception that transnational marriage mainly occurs in rural areas “contributes to the widespread othering of the rural from the point of view of urban residents” (2011:14). I would add that this notion contributes to the othering of marriage migrant women as well.

manifest in the decades-old, though recently abolished, *hoju* (family-head) system of identity registration. The system, as its name suggests, organized the nation's population based upon the basic unit of the patriarchal, patrilineal family. Until 2008, when it was in effect, all citizens of South Korea "belong[ed] to [a] family (*ga*), wherein a child belongs to a father's family, a wife belongs to her husband's family, a [male] family-head represents the family, and the eldest son has priority to succeed to the family-headship" (Kim H-K 2009:115). In this system, then, each individual was identified as either a patriarch or his dependent. Women were either daughters or wives/mothers no longer belonging to their premarital family. During the decades of debate about surrounding the *hoju* system, Confucian-identifying organizations defended it as one of the *mipung yangsok* (good and beautiful customs) of Korea. On the other hand, feminist groups argued that it is not only an oppressive system that denies women subjecthood outside of the family, but it is also a remnant of the family registration laws introduced in the Japanese imperialist period (1910-1945) (Kim H-K 2009:115). The system's roots may be debatable, but even considering it a fairly recent imposition, one can estimate that it was in practice for nearly a century. After five decades of feminist activism, the reformed "Family Registration Law" began to be implemented in 2008. However, feminist organizations point out that even the new system persists in taking the family, rather than the individual, as the normative unit of identity registration (Yoon 2008).

While the family operates as the building block of the nation, the nation itself is in turn imagined as a large patriarchal family in which women are praised or protected as one's mothers, sisters, and daughters. Independence movement organizer Yoo Kwan-soon (1902-1920) is one of the few female historical figures honored in discourses of masculinist nationalism. At the age of 16, she participated in the 1919 March 1st Independence Movement in Seoul and went on to lead the uprisings that occurred in her native city of Chŏnan. She was eventually arrested and died in prison from torture. Though she was an

organizer not only among her peers but of the protests held in Chǒnan at large, she is remembered as a symbol of the Korean people as a family, called a “sister of the *minjok* (ethnic group)” or rendered a merely decorative “flower of the Independence Movement” (Cho-Lee 2013).

Still, Yoo is a prominent figure in the Korean public memory—she was one of the two female candidates out of ten historical figures who were considered for the face of a new banknote in 2007. The other female candidate, and now the first woman featured on a South Korean banknote, was Shin Saimdang. Shin was an accomplished painter, calligrapher, and writer who is arguably more often remembered as a model of traditional motherhood. She is in fact known as the embodiment of the phrase “wise mother, good wife” believed to capture the ideal of traditional Korean femininity: she is praised for raising Yi Yulgok, one of the best-known Confucian scholars of the Choson dynasty, and supporting her husband throughout his years of working as an official by keeping peace within the home (Reuters, Ahn and Jǒng 2007).

The irony is of course that the attribution of the title “wise mother, good wife” to Shin is a relatively modern phenomenon. Korean feminist historian Jǒng Yo Sub argues that in the Japanese imperial period, a model of femininity that took passivity and obedience as prime virtues was taught in schools as a foundational step toward creating “women of the empire” (1971). Historian Park Noja also observes that the “good wife, wise mother” theory of Meiji Japan was also introduced through pro-Japan media during this time; in Korea, the two components of the phrase were reversed in their order to better fit the Korean cultural context where sons are favored over daughters, and thus the role of women as mothers rather than wives was more important (2005).

If not imagined as virtuous mothers and sisters, women are rendered vulnerable kin requiring protection from violent foreign men in South Korean masculinist nationalism. The

discourse surrounding the comfort women issue is an example. As noted in Cynthia Enloe's succinct summary of Malek Alloula's introspective analysis as a male nationalist, "becoming a nationalist requires a man to resist the foreigner's use and abuse of his women" (1990:44). The government-run "online museum on the history of comfort women" consistently refers to the women as "our grandmothers" or "mothers" (MoGEF Hermuseum). In private media, too, the word *halmoni* (grandmother) is often used rather than *yŏsŏng* (woman, female) as in this article title: "*Wianbu* (comfort provider section) grandmother[s] send 5 demands to Hashimoto [Japanese politician]" (Kim 2013).⁴ Though the comfort women issue has provided much opportunity for feminist (nationalist) activism as well as that of masculinist nationalism, critics point out that much of the discourse continues to "[reflect] and even redeploys a traditional gender hierarchy and patriarchal norms of female sexuality...interpret[ing] rape merely as 'the infringement of male property rights' and 'the violation of the nation'" (Kim H-K 2009:114).

Encompassment in the Multicultural Family

Under this framework, the South Korean state acknowledges female migrants as members of the nation insofar as they give birth to and raise Korean children; they are not acknowledged as potential citizens in themselves, but only through encompassment within the family structure. I draw the notion of encompassment from Holly Wardlow's ethnography on Huli passenger women in Papua New Guinea, which complicates notions of women's subordination in Huli communities by articulating that Huli women must be understood as encompassed within the kinship group (2006:12-13). She forms the concept from Huli idioms about women which describe their proper position in society as "under the legs of men" or

⁴ I am aware, however, that the use of kinship terms to signal alliance may be difficult to avoid in a culture where kinship terms are often used to refer to non-kin others in contexts such as friendship.

“fenced in” (2006:13). Looking beyond the binary of the passive exploited versus the actively resisting, Wardlow explains that women as encompassed subjects have “capacities for acting on the social order [... but these energies and acts are] contained within and mobilized for plans larger than themselves” (2006:12).

In Korea, a commensurate notion of encompassment can be identified in not only the above-mentioned family-head system, but also adages such as “a woman dies after a life as a ghost of the household” or “even when [a woman] dies, [she] must die behind the fences of [her] family-in-law”.⁵ Both idioms restrict the realm in which women are active to that of the household; the first goes further to deny the woman full participant status even in the domestic sphere by likening her to a ghost (Bang 2004:72). The latter proverb, in its invocation of the family-in-law, expresses the patrilineal expectation for women to marry into the family of her husband. From the point of marriage onward, the family-in-law becomes the kin group that claims exclusive possession of a woman’s body and energies.

In this context, the female marriage migrant as encompassed subject is always seen as participating in or contributing to society as part of what the government calls the “multicultural family,” with her husband as its expected head. Migrant women are not visible until they come to create a “multicultural family”. Hence, the marriage migrant woman occupies a paradoxical position in the hierarchy of *stratified reproduction* (Ginsburg and Rapp 1995:3). She is encouraged to reproduce within her marriage to a Korean male—first, in the state’s interest of replenishing the dwindling population, and second, to provide the nation with children who will later grow up to be “Asia bridges” or at least indicators of South Korea’s status as a cosmopolitan nation. But policies that take the “multicultural

⁵ The first proverb in Korean is “여자는 집안 귀신 노릇만 하다가 죽는다”; the second, “죽어도 시집 울타리 안에서 죽어야 한다”. Though the latter does not explicitly name a female subject, the word 시집(*sijib*), which is only used to refer to the family-in-law of a woman, indicates that the subject of the proverb is female.

family” as its unit of support not only obscure the migrant woman but also disregard the reality that she is a participant in the nation outside the realm of the family. Migrant women then are valued solely for their reproductive capacities and as visible symbols of diversity giving Korea leverage into the community of *sonjingu* (advanced nations) with multiethnic populations. Their “reproductive futures are valued,” but simultaneously they are not “entitled to refuse childbearing” (Ginsburg and Rapp 1995:3): any state-provided social welfare services or rights to membership in Korean society are granted to them insofar as they are wives of Korean men or mothers of Korean children.

The rhetoric of *damunhwa* (multiculture/multicultural) and its linkage to the family

Tracing the appearance and uses of the term *damunhwa* (multiculture/multicultural) in government documents shows that it was from the beginning linked to the phenomenon of transnational marriage, and associated with the family as the unit for social welfare and integration policies. According to Korean sociologist Kim Hyun Mee, the government began using the term *damunhwa* in 2003 when an activist organization called Hifamily petitioned for the use of the phrase “*damunhwa* (multicultural) family” instead of “*gukje* (international) marriage family” and “second generation of a multicultural family” rather than “*honhyŏl* (mixed blood) children” (2007:107). The *damunhwa* was thus established as a “counter-concept” to Korea’s nationalistic myth of ethnic homogeneity (Kim H.M. 2007:107). In addition, its first uses connected the term with the structure of the family and the recent phenomenon of transnational marriage (Kim H.M. 2007:103).

More recent uses of the term *damunhwa* reflect this association between a “multicultural” South Korea and the recent influx of marriage migrant women. The 2013 Operation Implementation Plan of the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family (MoGEF) contains the following heading: “10 years into a multicultural society, new problems such as

childrearing and [family] disintegration have emerged” (2013:4). Though one might argue that there has been foreigner populations of various occupations and entry purposes in South Korea, and that Korean society as any other has always been heterogeneous by measures including but not limited to ethnic diversity, the Plan uses the term “multicultural” as a gloss for the “multicultural family” and the ethnic diversity brought to Korea through the recent migration of foreign brides. Transnational marriage has a long history in Korea, but prior to 1995 unions between Korean women and foreign men outnumbered those between foreign women and Korean men (Hwang 2009:19). Many of these earlier transnational marriages were between US servicemen and Korean women; the fact that there were no “multicultural” policies aimed at these families’ social integration is telling of the government’s interest in the perpetuation of Korean patrilineage (Abelmann and Kim 2005:108).

Moreover, the rhetoric of multiculturalism reflects the government’s desire to insert South Korea into the ranks of *sonjingu* (advanced nations) with diverse populations. The 2nd Basic Plan for Ageing Society and Population states that the “use of foreign-national Koreans and foreign labor...is inevitable” in contemporary South Korea, which faces problems of low birth rate and a shrinking labor pool (2010:198). It then goes on to observe that South Korea’s foreigner resident population has increased from approximately 750,000 in 2005 to 1,170,000 in 2009 (2010:198). This is “about 2.35 percent of the total population, so it is lower than the ratio in *sonjingu* (10.3 percent) but higher than the average of developing nations (1.5 percent)” (2010:198). Here, a foreigner population is accounted for as an instrument to remedy the labor shortage in South Korea. In addition, the comparison of the foreign population ratio in South Korea with those of “advanced” and “developing nations” betrays the government’s interest in portraying South Korea as a cosmopolitan nation befitting the age of globalization.

The latter goal comes into view more starkly in light of sociologist Kim Hyun Mee's observation that a number of *damunhwa* policies came into being just before the visit of football player Hines Ward in April 2006. As the first Korean-American player to win the Superbowl MVP award, Ward received much attention from Korean media and was greatly welcomed when he visited Seoul (Jöng 2006). Prior to his visit, then-president Roh Mu-hyun ordered a series of policies addressing the foreigner and biracial population in South Korea (Kim 2007:104). Whether or not Ward's visit was what triggered these policy decisions, it is worth noting that Ward is a citizen of the U.S., one of the multiethnic, "advanced nations" that Korea is constantly comparing itself to. Ward was named an honorary citizen of Seoul during his visit for "raising the status of Korean peoples [in the international community] through his extraordinary capacities" (Jöng 2006). This inclusion of Ward in the community of the South Korea is a manifestation of a "homogeneous ethnic vision that imagines a 'Korean' transnation that is centered in South Korea" (Abelmann and Kim 2005:107). The policy decisions, on the other hand, attest to the "multi-ethnic vision that calls for diversity in South Korea as an index of its stature among nations" (Abelmann and Kim 2005:107). Both projects intertwine in the effort to establish South Korea as a nation of global renown, with international networks within and beyond the territory of the nation-state.

In the context of transnational marriage, the former vision can be identified as what justified the government-sponsored matchmaking of *Chosönjok* women with Korean farmers in the 1990s; the latter is part of the motivation underlying the recent proliferation of multicultural family policies. The 2013 MoGEF Operation Implementation Plan states one of the Ministry's *damunhwa* program's goals as "supporting the positive self-formation and *strengthening the capacity* of children [from multicultural families] to grow into talented 'Asia bridge' individuals by operating '*Language-Gifted Children's Classes*' that provide education of the languages and cultures of their mother's (or father's) country" (32, emphases

in original).⁶ Here, learning the language of one's non-Korean parent is recognized as valuable, but only because this will help the children develop into internationally competent individuals who can serve South Korea in its diplomatic relations. The goal of developing this potential for global talent overshadows the sub-aim of facilitating the children's positive self-understanding: it turns the latter into another step in the project of national gain, rather than a valuable end in itself. The description of the children as "language-gifted" at first glance seems to support linguistic diversity, but such a characterization also discloses the assumption that learning the language of their foreigner parent is an extra-ordinary step. It implicitly asserts that the children's first-acquired language must be Korean. Finally, we might note that non-Korean fathers are included in this goal, but as an anomaly, in parentheses.

Domestic Interests: Reproducing the Nation/Family

The South Korean state perceives female marriage migrants as solutions in the reproduction of its population and the preservation of the family as an institution. The two goals are tightly intertwined, in the sense that reproduction must occur within the structure of the family. A 2009 government blog post titled "What Government Supports Are There for Multicultural Families?" outlines welfare programs available to families of transnational marriage. It contains the following statement: "Multicultural families have the proper positive function (*soongineung*, 順機能) of suppressing two problems that darken the future of Korean society: a low birth rate and an aging population". In this utopic vision, transnational marriages invigorate Korean society by providing it with children. Korean bachelors who

⁶ Original text: 엄마(아빠)나라 언어, 문화 교육을 위한 '언어영재교실' 운영으로 자녀의 긍정적 자아 형성 및 향후 '아시아 브릿지' 핵심 인재로 성장할 수 있도록 역량강화 지원

would have become just another statistic in the elderly population counter a looming dark future through their marital unions. This rhetoric parallels the slogan of the Marriage Aid Program of previous years: “bringing the sound of crying babies back to the countryside” (Freeman 2011: 39).

The use of the word *soongineung* is significant in that it reveals a heterosexist belief about the function of the family: biological reproduction. The latter two syllables of the word compose the Chinese loanword for “function”; the “soon” prefix imbues the word with a teleological tint. “Soon” (順) can be translated as simply “positive,” but the positiveness must be understood as deriving from fulfilling a correct or appropriate function. The antonym of “soon” is “yŏk” (逆), which has the meanings “against the order/current” or “contra”. Hence, the government document suggests that a family that produces children not only has a positive function but also fulfills its rightful goal.

But biological reproduction of its population is not the state’s only concern; reproduction must occur within and in maintenance of the traditional family structure, and hence its support of multicultural families and marriage migrant women. After all, the industry of transnational matchmaking is a marriage industry, rather than one of sex or domestic work. Though all three are instances of the commodification of intimacy (Constable 2009), only transnational marriage explicitly upholds the institution of the family. Sex work is part of the duties the foreign brides are expected to fulfill, but its emphasis is on the outcome of reproduction rather than the satiation of male desires. Domestic work is also part of the package of marriage, but these acts of care are not compensated for in timed or task-based increments because they are the obligations of a wife, mother, and daughter-in-law. Moreover, not many Korean women can afford to hire other women as domestic workers, as only about 50 percent of them are employed and a select few of those workers hold stable,

well-paying jobs (Hwang 2009:12). The strong belief that childrearing is a mother's duty also make it unlikely for Korean women and their families to envision delegating the care of a child to another woman, albeit a linguistic and ethnic Other (Hwang 2009:12). Sociologist Hwang Jung-Mee notes that migrant women hired as domestic workers in South Korean homes are primarily *Chosonjok* women, who are thought to be ethnically and culturally Korean (2009:12-3).

With the encompassment of the (marriage) migrant woman within the multicultural family, femininity becomes nationalized in a familiar way. If former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore proclaimed that “marry[ing] and bear[ing] children [is] a patriotic duty” for educated women of Singapore (Heng and Devan 1997:111), the South Korean government through its policies on the multicultural family insinuates that female migrants can only belong to the nation by exercising their reproductive capacity within the family. In comparison to the 37 support centers for multicultural families established by MoGEF, there were only two government-run centers for migrant women nationwide in 2006 (Kim H.M. 2007:105,109). At times government organizations use the term “migrant woman” as a synonym for “marriage migrant woman”: MoGEF’s “Policy Guide—Migrant women” webpage lists a series of programs that solely address marriage migrant women (MoGEF N.d.). While migrant women were included in the 2005 Natural Basic Livelihood Security Law, they could only become eligible to receive benefits as mothers of children with Korean fathers (Kim H.M. 2007:109). Such policies do not recognize migrant women as members of society in any form outside their role as mother, despite the fact that marriage migrant women comprised just 35.2 percent of all women migrants in 2011, and there are over 270 thousand female migrant laborers currently in South Korea (Eom 2013). Furthermore, even among mothers, only certain ones can qualify as potential members of the nation. Marriage migrant women divorced from their Korean spouses and those in common-law marriages are

also excluded by the government’s narrow definition of “multicultural family” provided in the Multicultural Family Support Policy Law: “a family formed by a Korean citizen and a legally residing marriage migrant or foreign worker through matrimony, kinship, or adoption. Families created by the marriage between foreigners of different nationalities or denizens are excluded” (Kim H.M. 2007:106).

Erasure via Encompassment

Recognizing marriage migrants only as members of the multicultural family allows in some cases for the omission of migrant women altogether in the government’s call for a more multicultural society. The following MoGEF print advertisement from 2011 was part of the ministry’s campaign to “improve the public’s perception of multicultural families” (MoGEF 2011).



To the left of the advertisement is a framed photo of children dressed in clothing, such as the *qipao*, that seem to represent their non-Korean backgrounds. The caption below the image tells us that they are singers of the ministry-sponsored “Rainbow Choir”, described as “the first multicultural choir in Korea, composed of 27 children of multicultural families of seven

nations [...] singing of greater dreams and hopes in the Republic of Korea”.⁷ On the right, the first two lines of text proclaim the “‘beautiful harmony’ of the Republic of Korea coexisting with multicultural families”. The construction of this sentence places the phrase “multicultural families” as a counterpart of “Republic of Korea”, conceptualizing multicultural families as entities that the country accompanies. In other words, the families are subtly placed outside of the nation. This is in contrast with the use of the article “in” (*an*) in the description of the Rainbow Choir singers. The children of the multicultural families are certainly part of the nation—they are here the representatives of the family as a whole—but the position of the family remains ambiguous. It is an entity now considered for integration. To encourage the viewer to think of the multicultural family as part of the whole, the smaller text below reminds the reader of a common factor: “Our hearts, dreaming the same dream toward happiness, are the same. A society living together with multicultural families—as one, [we] make a greater Republic of Korea”⁸. The pursuit of happiness unites all, but multicultural families are again described as an entity separate from “society”. They are a group that may coexist *with* Korean society, but which remains outside its borders. Even the image of the Rainbow Choir is placed within a frame that further adds to the stagnant tone of the advertisement; the multitudes of difference are neatly sealed off from the world of the viewer. The diverse cultural backgrounds of the children are first simplified into clothing, then the children as a group are distilled into an image within the larger image that is the advertisement itself.

⁷ Original text: 7 개국 다문화가족 자녀 27 명으로 구성된 국내 최초 다문화합창단으로 다양한 색으로 이루어진 무지개처럼 대한민국 안에서 더 큰 꿈과 희망을 노래하고 있습니다.

⁸ Original text: 다문화가족과 함께하는 / 대한민국의 ‘아름다운 하모니’ // 행복을 향해 같은 꿈을 꾸는 / 우리의 마음은 같습니다 // 다문화가족과 함께하는 사회 / 하나되어 더 큰 대한민국을 만듭니다

True to the conception of *damunhwa* from its first emergence, the term “multicultural” here also glosses difference of race/ethnicity. The children of multicultural families are raised in Korea as Koreans, speaking Korean. Nevertheless, they are marked as somehow different, a part of a rainbow in which no child born of two native, ethnic Koreans is involved. We are reminded that *damunhwa* replaced the term *honhyŏl* (mixed-blood), and ethnic/racial difference is an appealing measure of diversity because of its relative visibility.

On the other hand, MoGEF’s 2013 Operation Implementation Plan allows a marriage migrant woman to express her concern yet still manages to disregard it. Organized in the format of a few quoted “voices from the field” leading to a list of suggestions for policy revision, the Plan’s section on “approach[ing] multicultural families as a warm neighbor” begins with a Cambodian marriage migrant woman’s anecdote about her difficulty accessing multicultural family center services without the help of a translator (2013:30). The following “voice” is that of a Korean man who worries that his “*child’s speech development is late* because [his Vietnamese] wife’s Korean is not good” (2013:30, emphasis in original). The accompanying “plan for program improvement” is summed up as:

1. Revision of international marriage laws and provision of education sessions of marriage migrants in their home countries prior to their arrival in Korea.
2. Increase of educational services for children of multicultural families, who are the next generation of our society. [2013:30]

In this list and the following two pages of the Report that expand upon it, there is no mention of ameliorating interpretation services for marriage migrants. The phrase “marriage migrant” appears just twice in these three of the some 50 pages of the Plan dedicated to multicultural family policies: in the quote above where she is identified as the target for premarital edification, and in a stated goal to establish a hotline for multicultural families including marriage migrants. As the list above suggests, the proposed policy revisions focus on the protection and nurturing of Korean husbands and children. The pre-marriage education targets migrant women, but not their husbands. The details on programs for the “next

generation” occupy a page. There is a brief outline of improvements on services offered at multicultural family centers, but the marriage migrant is always implicitly referred to in these goals via the phrase “multicultural family,” and only once explicitly named in reference to the hotline.

Privileged Minority or Marginalized Foreigner?: Nuances of Stratified Reproduction

Despite such minimal concern paid to marriage migrants in multicultural family policies, the proliferation of *damunhwa* programs at large has caused some to claim that migrant wives are actually privileged minorities in South Korean society who receive more support from the government than do native Koreans. One commentor of the aforementioned government blog post on welfare programs for multicultural families writes, “I’m curious how much money that would be going to low-income families...are put towards these policies...I guess now if you have enough money you’d better live abroad [rather than] suffer reverse discrimination” (sun 2012). Three out of the four comments on this post expression similar sentiments of “reverse discrimination,” with another commenter specifically making an objection to the government’s provision of childcare subsidies to multicultural families with children from ages 0 to 5. Since at least 2011, multicultural families receive such funds regardless of income level (Lee 2011). These funds are only available to the bottom 70 percent of families of so-called average Koreans who do not qualify for other supports such as those for families with children with disabilities (Lee 2011).

It seems clear that marriage migrants have access to more services than does the general migrant laborer population. Over 90 billion won was budgeted toward multicultural family programs in 2012 as opposed to the 4 billion set aside for support of migrant laborers (Kyöng 2012). But it is difficult to deem multicultural families or marriage migrants unequivocally privileged, when their receiving welfare services depend upon sustaining their kinship

relations to Korean citizens. Even if marriage migrant women have access some specialized services such as childcare subsidies and complimentary counseling, these predicate upon her status as wife and/or mother to (a) Korean citizen(s). Moreover, her right to residence in South Korea is revoked upon the dissolution of her marriage. A divorced marriage migrant is given an opportunity to apply for citizenship only if she has been a resident in South Korea for two years and can prove that her divorce was “due to the fault of the Korean-national spouse” (Moon and Jeon 2011). A marriage migrant who is the primary caretaker of an underage child may also be naturalized after three consecutive years of residence in Korea, but considering that most divorced marriage migrant women (88.5 percent in 2010) do not have children means that only a few can qualify these requirements (Moon and Jeon 2011:199).

Without acquiring citizenship themselves, (marriage) migrant women have no status in Korean society other than that of “foreigner”; they are simultaneously valued and marginalized as ethnic/racial and national Others. Though their reproductive capacities render them essential to the perpetuation of the nation, marriage migrant women are made invisible even within the domestic sphere via encompassment in the multicultural family and exclusion of national aliens. If a migrant woman has not acquired citizenship, she does not appear on her child’s Family Registration Form: one woman relates that her child was asked at school if she has no mother (Hwang et al. 2009:97). Though she is encouraged to reproduce, and ostensibly catered to for this capacity, naturalization requirements and welfare policies that solely focus on foreign wives and mothers render these so-called supports pressures that the migrant woman cannot ignore.

Finally, one might note that social integration and welfare policies for marriage migrant women always operate from the perspective of the receiving nation-state, naming the migrant as the individual with excesses and lacks, who must adjust to the standard of South Korean

society. Ministry of Welfare's Plan for Ageing Society and Population assesses the current state of multicultural families as thus: "children of [multicultural families] feel isolated due to differences in language and appearance, [and] grow up in difficult domestic environment[s] due to parents' lack of childraising capacities" (2010:203). There is no mention of the myth of ethnic homogeneity that constitutes the backbone of Korean nationalism, nor a clear definition of what "childraising capacities" are. Both the children and parents of multicultural families are the ones blamed for their hardship, and burdened with label of difference. As Hong-zen Wang and D. Belanger have written of the Taiwanese government's recent policies targeting marriage migrants, "call[s] for integration [nevertheless] emphasize the migrant's deficiencies and inabilities; they interpellate them as an Other with incomplete citizenship" (Hwang 2009: 29). As second-rate citizens subsumed under the "multicultural family" at best and instrumental foreigners who remain excluded for their differences, marriage migrant women are made simultaneously visible and invisible in the South Korean nation. It remains to be seen whether fantasy of a newly cosmopolitan nation can continue to bear the weight of the "same dream toward happiness" (MoGEF 2011).

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