



Research Article

“We will treat you well because you are helping our nation”: Migrant Wives and Functionalist Visions of Belonging in South Korea¹

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Abstract

Over the last three decades, cross-border marriages between non-Korean women and Korean men have become increasingly common, comprising between 4% and 10% of all annual marriages in South Korea since 2005. In this article, I explore the historically evolving gendered, racialized, and classed normativities that migrant wives have confronted during this period. Triangulating between state-collected statistical data; ethnographic, demographic, and legal studies on migrant wives in Korea; and the country's changing laws and policies on marriage migration, I show how these normativities, or what I term “functionalist visions of belonging,” have defined the legitimacy of migrant wives' presence primarily in terms of their imagined use-values. I suggest that migrant wives have been interpellated by at least three analytically distinct functionalist visions of belonging over the past three decades: (1) *ethnonational*, which interpellated them in terms of “blood (dis)similarities”; (2) *social-Confucian*, which interpellated them in terms of their ability to fulfill gendered Confucian social roles; and (3) *biopolitical*, which interpellated them in terms of their biological-reproductive potential and also as the molders, not merely the bearers, of future Korean citizens.

Keywords: South Korea, marriage migration, gender governance, ethno-national identity, social Confucianism, biopolitics

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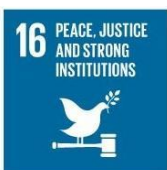
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¹ Quote from Yu (2020), p. 994.



1. Introduction and Context

Since the 1990s, South Korea (henceforth, “Korea”) has seen significant in-flows of migrant wives. From comprising less than 1% of all marriages in 1993, marriages between Korean men and non-Korean women reached a high of nearly 10% of all marriages in 2005 (see Figure 1).

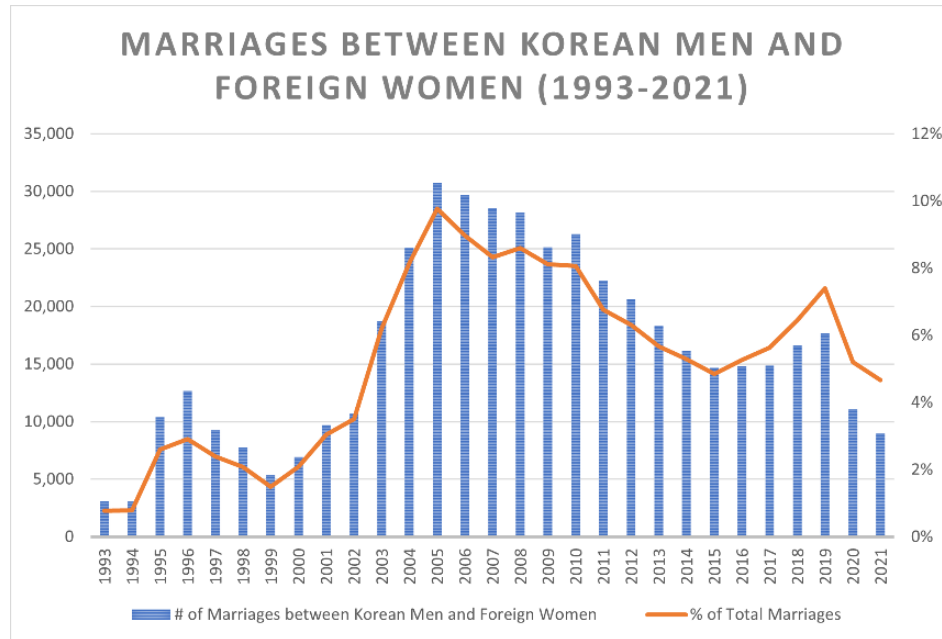


Figure 1. Korean Statistical Information Service.

Between 1993 and 2021, more than 460,000 marriages were recorded between Korean men and non-Korean women, most of whom were from China (47%), Vietnam (24%), Japan (6%), and the Philippines (5%). As can be seen in Figure 2, during the first decade of marriage migration, the vast majority of migrant wives were from China, most of these *chosŏnjok* (i.e., ethnic Koreans living in China).² Migrating out of a desire for “independence, adventure, [and] entrepreneurialism” and often as part of a household income-generation strategy, *chosŏnjok* women’s cross-border mobility was facilitated by the normalization of relations between China and Korea in 1992, Korea’s initially relatively favorable immigration policies for *chosŏnjok*, and the organization of “marriage tours” by local governments and associations in Korea to connect *chosŏnjok* women with Korean bachelors (Freeman, 2005, p. 88; Seol and Seo, 2014, p. 15; Kim, 2010, 103-4, 107-108; Lim, 2010, p. 66).

The last 15 years, however, have seen proportionally fewer migrant wives coming to Korea from China, while women from other countries, particularly Vietnam, Japan, and the Philippines, have come to comprise progressively larger proportions of annual international marriages (Figure 2).

² The Korea Statistical Information Service does not distinguish between *chosŏnjok* and non-*chosŏnjok* Chinese migrants in its data sets. However, most research on marriage migration to Korea has found that the vast majority of early migrant wives were *chosŏnjok*.

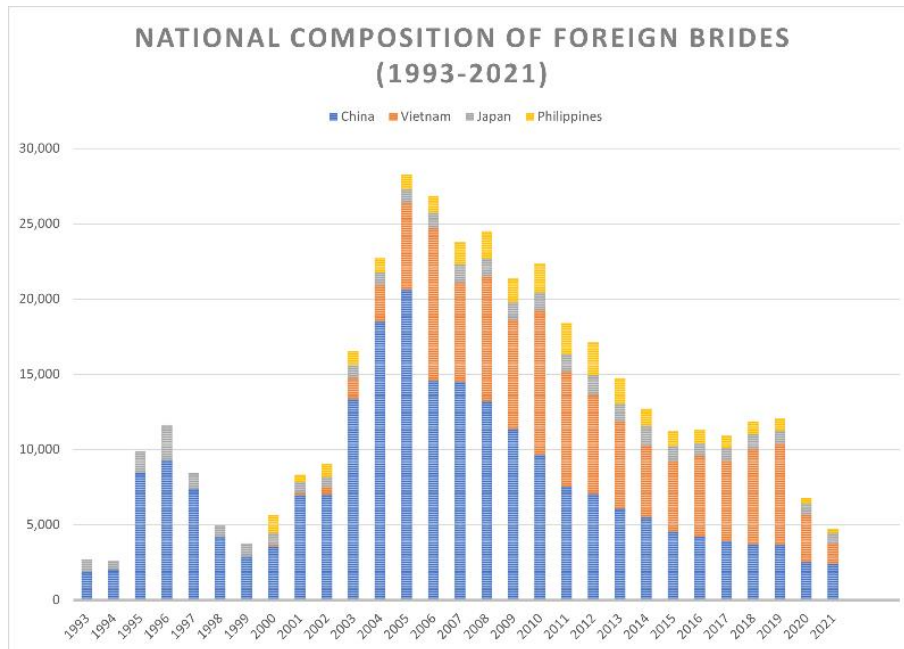


Figure 2. Only migrants from the top four countries of origin are displayed (Korean Statistical Information Service).

This diversification of marriage migration flows was driven by a complex set of domestic, international, and transnational factors, including changing immigration policies in Korea, deliberate efforts by Korean associations to match Korean men with women from different countries, and the thickening of transnational social and economic networks with the expansion of commercial matchmaking agencies and increased cross-border economic investments by Korean businesses (Kim, 2014, p. 298; Lee-An 2020, p. 131; Belanger and Wang, 2013, p. 37). Structurally, these migration flows have been shaped by, and themselves shape, inequalities within and between countries, as poorer sending countries such as the Philippines and Vietnam have deliberately positioned labor and marriage migration to Korea and other wealthier countries as a national economic growth strategy and as migrants are often drawn from more economically marginalized regions and classes within sending countries (see Kim, 2012, p. 545-51 for a discussion of how these dynamics play out in Vietnam).

The phenomenon of cross-border marriages between non-Korean women and Korean men emerged from a series of historically situated social, economic, and technological transformations that, interacting with Confucian-inflected, patriarchal family structures and marital practices (including a norm of son-preference that generated historically male-skewed birth ratios), began to produce new, geographically differentiated demographic realities across Korea. Beginning in the 1960s, export-led industrialization generated labor demands in urban areas for young, single women, who in Korea (as in many export-oriented economies) were viewed as “docile,” pliant, and, therefore, highly desirable as laboring bodies (Ha, 2007, p. 370-1; Park, 1995, p. 746).³ The dramatic increase in feminized employment opportunities in the cities led to the significant out-

³ See Hewamanne (2006) for Sri Lanka and Siddiqi (2009) for Bangladesh.

migration of Korean women from the countryside (Sundaram, 2009, p. 43). As Park (1995) notes, in the 1960s and 1970s, “women workers in agriculture and fisheries decreased dramatically. . . whereas in the production sector their numbers skyrocketed,” indicating substantial rural-to-urban population transfer (p. 744).

Rural men, however, did not out-migrate at similar rates, and the out-migrated women rarely returned to the countryside. Obligated by Confucian social norms to care for their aging natal parents and facing “the constrictions of neoliberal globalization” (e.g., Korea’s shrinking rural economy, limited urban demand for their labor power), rural men have been generally prevented from establishing a life in cities and are, in any case, discursively framed in the Korean public imagination as undesirable, abject, “subaltern” figures (Kim 2014, p. 294; Kim, 2012, p. 540; Schubert, Lee, and Lee, 2015, p. 234-5; Yu, 2020, p. 987). Conversely, urban Korean women, who are upwardly mobile and socially expected to be hypergamous, live in marriage markets with an adequate supply of status-acceptable men and, thus, face “no reason. . . to marry down the social and economic ladder” by returning to rural areas and accepting “the hardships of farming, conservative familial expectations, and the dullness of rural life” (Yu, 2020, p. 982; Kim, 2014, p. 296; Kim and Kilkey, 2017, p. 27; see also Lee, Williams, and Arguillas, 2016, p. 269). Indeed, many Korean women “tend to stay unmarried or postpone their marriage since marriage since marriage and having a child hampers the pursuit of their careers” (Kim, 2012, p. 543). As can be seen in Figure 3, this tendency has become only stronger over the past 30 years.

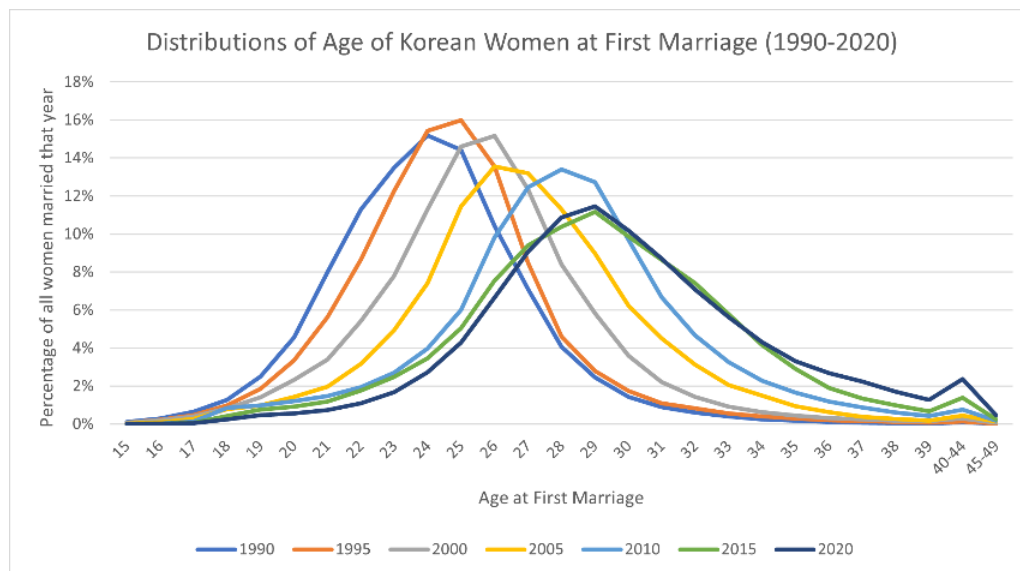


Figure 3. Note that ages 40-44 and 45-49 are aggregated in the original dataset (Korean Statistical Information Service).

In other words, the gendered demands of Korean industrialization created a basic dynamic that, over time, generated increasingly male-skewed sex ratios in rural areas. Across Korea as a whole, a historically persistent norm of son-preference has created a complementary dynamic (Chung and Gupta, 2007). As early as 1960, there was an average of 1.05 boys for every girl, and, by 1995, facilitated by newly available sex-selective abortion technologies, there was an average of 1.13

boys for every girl (Lee, Williams, and Arguillas, 2016, p. 272).⁴ Interacting, these macro-level dynamics have created a “bride shortage”/“bachelor surplus” and, hence, a demand for brides.⁵

The aim of this paper is to analyze this “bride-demand” and show how, far from being a generic demand for generic migrant wives, it was multivalently structured by deeply gendered, classed, and racialized normativities, which, in turn, demarcated the parameters of migrant wives’ belonging in Korea. These parameters consist of:

- the *terms* of their inclusion (i.e., what they have to do or who they have to be to be included)
- specific *deviancies* (i.e., what becomes, with the defining of the norm, simultaneously defined as “deviant”)
- specific *rationalizations* (e.g., what justifies migrant wives’ presence in Korea? What is “reasonable” to ask of them?)

Drawing on a variety of ethnographic, demographic, and legal studies on migrant wives in Korea and closely reading the changing laws and policies that have regulated different women’s trajectories within Korea, especially its nationality laws and its “multicultural” policies, I argue that these terms, deviancies, and rationalizations conceived of migrant wives predominantly on the grounds of their use-value, “as commodities [to be] mobilized to maximize Korea’s national interests” (Kim, 2012, quoted in Campbell, 2015, p. 494). I term these use-value-informed parameters of belonging *functionalist visions*—a phrase that is intended to emphasize how migrant wives are expected to *live up to* these functions. It refers, then, not only to a principle of selection for specific women who exist “out there” but also to specific social-disciplinary processes that confront migrant wives after they arrive in Korea.

I suggest that migrant wives have been interpellated by at least three different functionalist visions: (1) *ethnonational*, which interpellated them in terms of “blood (dis)similarities”; (2) *social-Confucian*, which interpellated them in terms of their ability to fulfill gendered Confucian social roles; and (3) *biopolitical*, which interpellated them in terms of their biological-reproductive potential (“fertility”) and also as the molders, not merely the bearers, of future Korean citizens.

While periodizing large-scale discursive changes risks implying the existence of ‘clean breaks’ and glossing over important overlaps and lingering historical residues, I suggest that, in the case of marriage migration in particular, the structuring terms of the ethnonationalist functionalist vision were most strongly operative in the 1990s. During this period, it offered an ideology, reflected in

⁴ Two comments should be made here. First, this extremely sex-skewed cohort would not come of reproductive age until 2015 and so does not bear upon the initial emergence of the migrant wife. Second, this precipitous climb in male-to-female sex ratios reflects the more technologically “efficient” manifestation of what was, nevertheless, a generally declining belief in the validity of the son-preference norm (see Chung and Gupta, 2007, p. 1-2).

⁵ In the early years of marriage migration to Korea, most migrant wives went to rural areas. Now, they are more evenly dispersed between urban and rural areas: “The data. . . indicate that among newly formed Korean-Vietnamese couples, 53.2 percent now reside in urban areas (*dong*) and 46.8 percent reside in more rural areas (*eup* and *myeon*)” (Lee, Williams, and Arguillas, 2016, p. 278; see also Ahn, 2013, p. 44).

public opinion, law, and policy, that rationalized the migration of *chosŏnjok* women as the return of 'ethnic kin' and, accordingly, defined deviancy in relation to this underlying expectation. (Indeed, this rationalization is precisely why *chosŏnjok* women comprised the vast majority of cross-border marriages during this period.)

However, over the course of that decade, the essentialist myth of *chosŏnjok* women's intrinsic ethnic similarity became increasingly untenable, and, while *chosŏnjok* are still imagined as (albeit less desirable) co-ethnics, the broader phenomenon of marriage migration subsequently became more structured around the parameters of the social-Confucian functionalist vision, as different women began to be considered 'assimilable' and as different structures were built to ensure that they did assimilate. Finally, the biopolitical functionalist vision, which has taken increasingly concrete shape in law, policy, and public discourse since the 2000s, has placed new accents on migrant wives' reproductivity as a condition for national belonging, creating new hierarchies of (non-)value and new legal and rhetorical terrains for migrant wives to navigate.

In the following sections, I trace the contours of each of these functionalist visions, identifying how and where they have established the migrant wives' parameters of belonging and who has acted as enforcers of these parameters. Some of these parameters have allowed for strategic action on the part of the migrant wives to assert their belonging, but the fact that strategic action has been possible should not obscure our view of the underlying legal and normative terrain that has demanded certain strategies and made other strategies impossible. Finally, I conclude by suggesting that, while these functionalist visions were not all historically coeval, they have become discursively sedimented in the form of "multiculturalism."

2. The Ethnonational Functionalist Vision

"As with many Chosŏnjok brides I interviewed, neither Yŏnghwa's upbringing nor her expectations had prepared her for the hard physical labor of running a farm, the cultural imperative to serve her in-laws and husband, the isolation of living beyond the reach of public transportation, or the stigma of being treated as a foreigner in her father's homeland" (Freeman, 2005, p. 89).

Ethnocultural nationalism, as Brown (2000) notes, is "a sense of community that focuses on belief in myths of common ancestry, and on the perception that these myths are validated by contemporary similarities of physiognomy, language, or religion" (p. 51). Like all nationalisms, it is a species of ideology, describing not "how nations come into being, merely how attitudes towards nation are expressed" (Campbell, 2015, p. 486). Korea is often cited as the paradigmatic example of an ethnocultural nation-state, as it

takes much pride in being an ethnically, culturally, and linguistically homogenous society. For Koreans, being mono-cultural, mono-ethnic, and mono-lingual is a paramount factor that constitutes 'Koreanness,' identified as national identity. (Kim and So, 2018, p. 106)

As Shin (2006) writes, Korean ethnonationalism emerged from a historical (and ongoing) process by which "race, ethnicity, and nation [have] come to be conflated. . . to produce a strong sense of oneness based on shared bloodline and ancestry" (p. 223). The ethnonational myth is precisely that there is a "Korean people" (*minjok*) that is "racially and culturally homogeneous" and "extends

beyond the boundaries of the nation-state to unite Koreans throughout the diaspora on the basis of blood ties" (Freeman, 2005, p. 95; Watson, 2012). "Blood" here is functioning as a kind of genetic-historical substance that imbues one's body with "Koreanness" and, in so doing, links such Koreanized bodies by ineffable ties that (ostensibly) make even those whom one has never before met immediately recognizable, immediately understandable—in short, like oneself.

The 1948 Nationality Act, Korea's first citizenship law, reflected this ethnonationalism in several ways. First, its patrilineal, *jus sanguinis* mechanisms had the effect of (re)producing a narrow, ethnically defined body politic by severely circumscribing who could pass on Korean citizenship. Under the law, only Korean men automatically passed on their nationality to their children, and, similarly, they "automatic[ally] and involuntar[ily]" passed on their nationality to their foreign wives (Lee, 2017, p. 23).⁶ In contrast, Korean women could pass on their nationality to their children only if their father "was unknown or was stateless," their foreign husbands could become Korean nationals only through naturalization, and, until the legalization of dual citizenship in 2010, they *lost* their citizenship when they married non-Korean men (1948 Nationality Act, Articles 2.1.3, 6.2; Kim and Kim, 2020, p. 429). Here, Korean ethnonationalism expressed most clearly its patriarchal principle, as the mechanism of patrilineal descent ensured that only Korean men could pass on "Koreanness" and its attendant rights and privileges and that Korean women who did not marry Korean men and their families fell outside the patrilineally constituted boundaries of the Korean ethno-nation (Lim, 2010, p. 65).

Second, the 1948 Nationality Act reflected, but did not explicitly state, the belief that all overseas Koreans were, in fact, Korean (i.e., *minjok*). Article 2 held that all those whose fathers were nationals of Korea were themselves nationals. It did not, however, define "who the initial citizens of the ROK [Republic of Korea] were," and so it left open the possibility that all pre-1948 overseas Koreans and their patrilineal descendants were legally Korean nationals (Lee, 2017, p. 5). While, under the 1948 Nationality Act, *chosŏnjok* migrant wives became Korean nationals via their automatic acquisition of their Korean husbands' nationality, this broader legal ambiguity allowed *chosŏnjok* migrants and other migrants defined as ethnic kin to access Korean citizenship through the legal mechanism of "reinstatement of nationality," a procedure that identified them as former citizens who were seeking to *reacquire* Korean citizenship (Lee, 2017, p. 22). The vast majority of migrant wives in the early 1990s were *chosŏnjok* precisely because *chosŏnjok* were seen as *minjok*: "Local governments used a rhetoric of 'reunifying nations' to encourage international marriages between Korean bachelors and Joseonjok women" (Lee-An, 2020, p. 132, quoting Freeman, 2011, p. 44). Viewed as ethnic kin, *chosŏnjok* women appeared to be a way to "alleviate the farmer bachelor problem" while simultaneously "maintain[ing] the ethnic homogeneity of the Korean peninsula," which was seen as under threat by the forces of globalization and "unhealthy foreign influences" (Freeman, 2005, p. 80; Schubert, Lee, and Lee, 2015, p. 233; Hong, Song, and Park, 2013, p. 30; Seol and Seo, 2014, p. 13).

Importantly, "ethnic homogeneity" here refers not only to the political imaginary of "shared blood" but also to the *chosŏnjok* women's supposed possession of social customs and practices that,

⁶ Note that migrant wives' "automatic and involuntary" acquisition of citizenship was not defined as "naturalization."

being essentially Korean, made them interchangeable with the Korean women who had left for the cities. As Freeman (2005) notes, "The myth of ethnic homogeneity. . . [led] South Korean men to imagine that incorporating a *Chosŏnjok* bride into their household [would] be a culturally seamless process," as (1) Korean husbands would (ostensibly) instantly understand and find familiar the *chosŏnjok* women and as (2) these women would (ostensibly) easily, naturally, and unprotestingly fill the household roles that had been vacated by the rural-to-urban women (p. 95). Indeed, at the beginning, *chosŏnjok* were viewed as an "uncontaminated" remnant of "pure 'Korean-ness'" and, hence, were seen as more Korean than the rural-to-urban women (Schubert, Lee, and Lee, 2015, p. 235). Racially and culturally "pure," they were portrayed as "restorers of ethnic homogeneity," which had been undermined by the "Korean women who 'betrayed their ancestral roots' and deserted their male counterparts to go to urban cities" (Freeman, 2005, p. 84, emphasis added; Lee-An, 2020, p. 132, quoting Freeman, 2011, p. 41).

By the end of the 1990s, however, the myth of *chosŏnjok*'s essential Koreanness had been fatally undermined. As Freeman (2005) writes, "Readily identified by their style of dress, their patterns of speech and pronunciation, and their unfamiliarity with Korean linguistic and behavioral codes of politeness, *Chosŏnjok* are for the most part unable to 'pass' as South Koreans" (p. 95). Every claim of difference precisely demarcated a deviation from the narrow parameters that defined their legitimate belonging. Expected to be fluent in Korean cultural norms, they were criticized for their "cultural incompetence" (p. 96; see also Hong, Song, and Park, 2013, p. 39). When they culturally deviated, their "Chineseness" rather than their "Koreanness" was emphasized (Freeman, 2005, p. 93). In the "runaway bride" discourses that circulated in the mid- and late 1990s, they were framed "as 'illegal migrants from backward China,'" as "cunning Chinese duping honest Koreans" (Schubert, Lee, and Lee, 2015, p. 236; Hong, Song, and Park, 2013, p. 39).

Previously seen as "representatives of the authentic Korean nation," *chosŏnjok* eventually came to "fall firmly outside conceptions of the South Korean national unit" (Campbell, 2015, p. 491-2). Two legal developments in the late 1990s marked this shift. First, in 1997, Korea officially clarified that the *chosŏnjok* had lost their Korean citizenship as of Oct. 1., 1949 (i.e., the founding of the People's Republic of China) (Lee, 2017, p. 22). Second, in 1998, the Nationality Act was revised to make Korean citizenship bilineal (though still *jus sanguinis*) and to remove "the automatic spousal transfer of citizenship to the wife of a citizen upon marriage" (Lee, 2017, p. 7; 1998 Nationality Act, Articles 2.1.1, 6.2). Migrant wives, thenceforth, were required to naturalize to receive Korean citizenship. Since most migrant wives were, at this point, mainly *chosŏnjok* (cf. Figure 2), this revision amounted to another formal statement that *chosŏnjok* were not already Korean nationals. From being the subject of "metaphors of national reunification" in the early 1990s, by the decade's end *chosŏnjok* were, perhaps, no longer seen as a core part of the Korean ethno-nation (Freeman, 2005, p. 97).

3. The Social-Confucian Functionalist Vision

"The most important thing is that they like Korea for real. Then I can accept that person as Korean. Even some Koreans hate Korea and leave here for another country. I think foreigners who love Korea are more Korean than Koreans who hate Korea." (quoted in Campbell, 2015, p. 493)

Alongside and in many places imbricated with the ethnonational functionalist vision was what I'm calling the "social-Confucian functionalist vision." Whereas the ethnonational functionalist vision employed an ideology of sameness/difference to construct certain migrant wives as compatible with Koreanness and others as incompatible, the social-Confucian functionalist vision has relied, instead, on an overwhelming assimilation imperative. For it, what is most important is not whether some populations are already more like Korean nationals but simply that, with their arrival, they do become more like Korean nationals:

'If immigrants get to know Korean culture well, spend a long time here, can fully communicate with us even though they were not born Korean and if they adopt Korean culture they can live as a Korean with Koreans together.' (quoted in Campbell, 2015, p. 488)

As many researchers have documented, the Korean state and much of the Korean public have long imagined the overriding function of migrant wives to be "ideal Korean wives, mothers, and daughters-in-law" as defined by the Confucian household *qua* social structure (Campbell, 2015, p. 494; Koo, 2019, p. 419). As a social structure, the Confucian household is "a rigidly patrilineal kinship system, which specific[s] in extensive detail the roles and status of each member of a household and lineage" according to gender, age, and social class (Chung and Gupta, 2007, p. 3; Koo, 2019, p. 419). In particular, the Confucian gender regime employs a doctrine of separate spheres, coding women as normatively responsible for the private sphere and men for the public sphere (Kim, 2014, p. 308). The Confucian value of filial piety means that sons (especially eldest sons) are obliged to care for their parents in their old age. Consequently, in rural areas especially, a household often comprises a son, his wife, and the son's parents, to whom a daughter-in-law is expected to be obeisant (Sung, 2003, p. 346; Freeman, 2005, p. 97). Indeed, under Confucian norms, married women are "more responsible for looking after their parents-in-law than their own parents" (Sung, 2018, p. 591, 594).

Consequently, even though many migrant wives come to Korea to find employment opportunities that will help them financially support their natal families, Confucian norms often force them "to assume traditional gender roles by producing, raising, and caring for children and other family members and devoting themselves to household tasks" (Lee, Williams, and Arguillas, 2016, p. 278-9; Kim and Shin, 2008, p. 26; Kim, 2012, p. 550, 552).⁷ This is, as we saw for *chosŏnjok* women, a far from seamless process, but, since this is a social-assimilationist discourse, it admits of these migrant wives *becoming* ideal Korean wives, mothers, and daughters-in-law. They can learn to be Korean, and, more importantly, they must learn. Their legitimate belonging is a function of their ability to become socially Korean:

⁷ This is not to suggest that migrant wives do not perform waged labor. As Yu (2020) notes, "more marriage-migrant women (59.5%) are nationally engaged in employment than their Korean counterparts (49.9%), notwithstanding that the jobs they maintain are disproportionately low-paying and precarious" (p. 991). Indeed, both migrant wives and the Korean women who cannot afford hired care bear the double burden of working in the formal economy and in the household economy. In addition, most of the migrant wives' wages go to support their Korean families, not, as they had expected, their natal families.

'I know a migrant woman who maintains her role by cooking every meal for her mother-in-law and father-in-law just as if they are her own parents. We are living at a time when even the eldest [Korean] daughter-in-laws [*sic*] do not take care of their parents-in-law and keep their distance from them.' (quoted in Yu, 2020, p. 988)⁸

As Lee-An (2020) documents, a variety of socio-ethnic presumptions about which nationalities are 'fit-to-purpose' underpin this assimilationist project, as Vietnamese and Filipino women in particular are seen as more "'submissive, obedient to their parents, and [more] traditional than other nationalities'" (p. 133, citing H.-K. Lee, 2005, p. 100). Even among the marriage and labor migrants still identified as 'co-ethnics,' law, policy, and popular discourses produce hierarchies of migrant desirability according to "class-based assumptions about their value to the nation and . . . assimilability" (Chung, 2019, p. 2504). For instance, differentiated, hierarchized visa statuses have imagined Korean-Americans to be, and legally produced them as, highly desirable migrants. Meanwhile, the downgrading and precaritization of the more temporary visa statuses that *chosŏnjok* workers can now *de jure* and *de facto* access have placed them firmly on the lower tiers of the ethnic hierarchy, effectively constructing them as a class "of Korean migrants who engage largely in manual labour. . . who will *or should* eventually return to China" (Chung, 2019, p. 2502-5, emphasis in the original). The legal situation is slightly different for *chosŏnjok* migrant wives because, since 2011, migrant wives have been able to apply for a dedicated marriage migrant visa. Nevertheless, the increased restrictions on the mobility and residency of *chosŏnjok* reveal how much the legal status of *chosŏnjok* migrant wives (and migrant wives in general) hangs on their being, and continuing to be, wives.

Nevertheless, belying this socio-ethnic selection principle of the 'best suited' migrant wives is the immense amount of on-the-ground social-disciplinary work that is devoted to ensuring that migrant wives do, in fact, become ideal performers of gendered Koreanness. State and civil society groups actively participate in this assimilationist project, as state- and NGO-sponsored language programs have proliferated to help, as one language textbook describes, migrant wives "live as . . . sound member[s] of Korean society both within and outside the family" (quoted in Kim, 2013, p. 467; see also Choo, 2016, p. 99-100). The Korean government sponsors a pre-migration class *in Vietnam* for migrant wives, and "wife classes" run by a private Korean organization teach Vietnamese migrant wives "how to set a table, tips for dealing with in-laws, and the difference between Korean and Vietnamese childrearing techniques" (Kim, 2013, p. 476). Choo (2016, p. 113-6) writes about how Korean educators—and, indeed, at times the migrant wives themselves—use the metaphor "newborn babies" to describe migrant wives:

'If a woman comes to South Korea to marry, and let's say she's been here for three years, it means that she's like a three-year-old. Culturally, that's how it is, because everything is new. People around her, the in-laws, have to be patient and help them to grow, and take care of them.' (Choo, 2016, p. 112, quoting a migrant wife)

⁸ Note how "selfish" Korean women are so often deployed as the antithesis of "self-sacrificing" migrant wives.

This is, of course, literally infantilizing, but it is also teleological; it constructs a migrant wife as someone who will “grow up” to be a Korean woman, a superior form of what she currently is. To become a Korean woman is her end, her *telos* (see Yu, 2020 throughout).

These state- and NGO-facilitated programs represent the softer side of social-Confucian assimilation, as they express their work with migrant wives as an essentially aspirational effort: a project of “striving for” cultural Koreanness that is assisted by a beneficent Korean state. However, this assimilatory project also operates by disciplining unruly figures, seeking to contain persistently nonnormative migrant wives within the bounds of acceptability. The household appears to be a key site where this social discipline occurs, and cultural signifiers of “Koreanness” feature as its primary objects. For instance, interviewing women from Uzbekistan, Cambodia, and Vietnam, Yu (2020) found that, “The burden of having to cook Korean food, perceived as [an] essential element of Korean family life, was. . . a source of stress for many foreign wives” (p. 993). The unequal division of household labor is, at times, presented as a distinctly Korean piece of cultural habitus. As the mother-in-law of one of Chang’s (2020) respondents claimed, more egalitarian divisions of household labor is something that “only happens in Vietnam, not Korea” (p. 2945).

Since Korean “blood” was expected to make one culturally Korean, Korean ethnonationalism always contained within itself these social-Confucian elements. The *chosŏnjok* were imagined to be already-assimilated figures, and their “non-Koreanness” was precisely a function of their failure to perform normative Koreanness naturally. The social-Confucian functionalist vision, then, can be seen as a diminishment of the ethnonational vision, ejecting the uncompromising ideology of “blood (dis)similarities” but retaining an elastic ideology of “cultural (dis)similarities” that, still, is very much secondary to the actual act of assimilation. In this way, the movement from a “blood” discourse to a “culture” discourse has the function of making acceptable non-ethnic-Korean brides and so may be seen as a discursive precondition for rationalizing more nationally varied migrant flows. Before, there were fixed categories of “Korean” and “not Korean.” Under the social-Confucian functionalist vision, there is “Korean” and “not-yet Korean.”

4. The Biopolitical Functionalist Vision

“The important thing is that [migrant wives] have a baby. One, two, three [babies]. I think they are really patriotic, and I think that is a great thing” (quoted in Yu, 2020, p. 986).

“Biopolitics” refers, broadly, to those ways in which the state concerns itself with the life of a population not as, for instance, a collection of rights-bearing citizens or household-units but, rather, as a biological unity. It is a distinct kind of state rationality that (1) brings into the realm of state concern newly defined objects, (2) employs characteristic modalities of state action, and (3) is preoccupied with certain “vital phenomena” whose action occurs mainly on the level of the population (Blencowe, 2010, p. 122). Biopolitical governmentality, Blencowe (2010) argues, “*does not* operate through the exercise of direct control over the body and *does not* intervene in individual lives. . . [instead, it] ‘targets collective phenomena such as the birth *rate*, or the *average life*’” (p. 122, quoting Braun, 2007, p. 11, emphases in the original). As such, statistics is the central technology of biopolitical governance, as it “enable[s] the specific phenomena of population life

to be recorded and thus reveal[s]. . . vital phenomena [that] are not contained in the scale the family" (p. 117).

The biopolitical functionalist vision emerged when—and, indeed, could not emerge until—Korea's persistently declining fertility rates became articulated as a "national crisis" and, thus, became an object of state concern.⁹ As can be seen in Figure 4, the First Basic Act on Low Fertility and Ageing Society was passed in 2005 as the average fertility rate reached 1.09 children per woman (Korea Population, Health, and Welfare Association, n.d.). Since then, despite the passage of three more five-year plans for "increasing fertility and slowing the ageing of society," the average fertility rate dropped to 0.92 children per woman in 2019—one of the lowest in the world (Seo, 2019, p. 33).

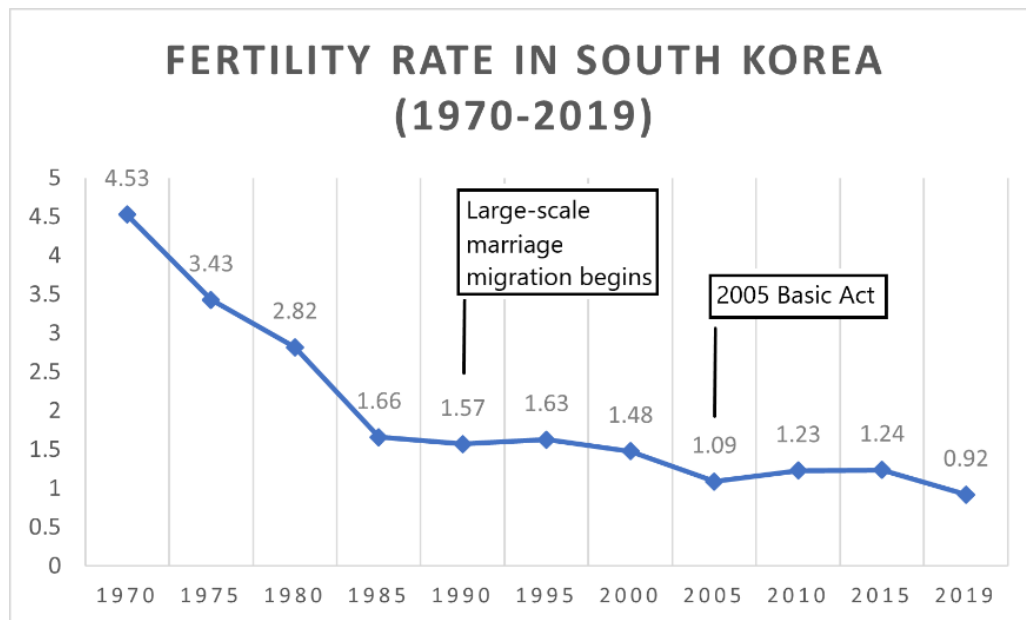


Figure 4. OECD Fertility Rates.

With the articulation of Korea's fertility rate as a national crisis and as a site of intervention, migrant wives began to be framed in a distinctly new way: as bearers of fertility, as bodies possessing abstract "reproductive potential." Of course, discourses about migrant wives' capacity to have children have attended them from the very beginning. Slogans from the initial international marriage campaigns in the 1990s framed migrant wives as a way to bring "the sound of crying babies back to the countryside" (Kim, 2017, p. 22, quoting Freeman, 2011, p. 39). They were viewed as vehicles for continuing their husbands' bloodlines and for "maintain[ing] the viability of family farms in the Korean countryside," which had been depopulated by population transfer and low birthrates (p. 22).

⁹ This is not to suggest that Korea did not previously engage in biopolitical governance. Indeed, Korea has historically had a robust population control regime, which sought throughout much of the latter half of the 20th century to *decrease* Korea's fertility rate. I'm simply noting the point when foreign wives were integrated into this biopolitical governance regime, which was also a point when the aim of this biopolitical governance regime was substantially revised.

Yet biopolitical “fertility” needs to be seen as a component of a fundamentally different discursive apparatus. Literally a population average, “fertility” at every point references the *population* and its collective capacity to renew itself. Its reproductive project is not the parochial concerns of lineage reproduction or rural rejuvenation but, rather, the biological fate of the nation. Consequently, the “woman” in “average number of children per woman” is an abstraction, a figure who emerges from a homogenized, unvariegated “population.” She is a technical imaginary who discursively transforms “childbearing,” in which *childbirth* is a concern predominantly of individual people and families who exist within specific life configurations, into “fertility,” in which *reproduction* is a concern predominantly of the ethno-nation and a state seeking to “maintain ‘proper population composition’” (Kim, Yang, and Torneo, 2014, quoting the 2005 Basic Act). The discursive consequences of this shift are simple but dramatic: Whereas the children of migrant wives used to be relevant only to their families and, perhaps, the local political economy, they are now relevant to all Koreans, having, as a migrant wife from Japan put it to Yu (2020), “consequences for the nation” (p. 996).

This biopolitical shift adjusted the parameters for migrant wives’ belonging, which became partly a function of how many children they could have. In a country where “people don’t get married [or] have babies,” migrant wives’ reproductive potential now imbues them with a “distinct value”:

People still don’t look at you as being part of this community. But things have changed. . . . People ask how many children I have, and I say four, and they say, ‘Wow you must be very nationalist, patriotic’. . . . The low birth rate is one factor that puts me into a position of being accepted. (quoted in Yu, 2020, p. 987, 994)

As the quote suggests, the biopolitical shift has opened up a new rhetorical front for migrant wives to strategically assert their belonging by having children. In her research on Filipina migrants in Korea, Choo (2016) found that Filipina migrant wives—but, critically, *not* Filipina women factory workers or hostesses—could and often did reference “their statuses as mothers [of Korean children] to support their inclusion in South Korean society as moral and political equals” (p. 168). Legally, divorced migrant wives are allowed to stay in the country if they “raise South Korean children,” though, as a strategic action, it reflects a legal architecture that intensely circumscribes the conditions of their legality (Yi, 2021, p. 75, quoting Immigration Act Enforcement Decree Table 1; see also Chung, 2020).¹⁰ This biopolitical shift has also constructed new limiting notions of whom is seen as capable of belonging. Non-childbearing migrants, for instance, are now articulated as undesirable and, indeed, suspicious figures, “subject to more scrutiny as potential fraudulent marriage migrants when applying for a spousal visa and later acquiring Korean citizenship” (Lee-An, 2020, p. 135). A child has become akin to a certificate of authenticity for international marriages—which is an indirect way of saying that children have become a reason for international marriages:

¹⁰ See Kim, Park, and Shukhertei (2017) for an extensive discussion of the kinds of national and transnational legal precarities that marriage migrants face in and between Korea and their home countries.

A child means it's not a fake marriage. If their marriage is real, it also goes to show how well the woman has adapted to the Korean lifestyle. In that case, she can receive Korean citizenship within a year. (Kim, 2011, p. 9, quoted in Lee-An, 2020, p. 137)

In the context of sedimented ethnonational and social-Confucian discourses, the employment of migrant wives as vehicles of national-biological reproduction carries with it an element of cultural risk, which may be framed as thus: "Migrant wives are foreigners who are nevertheless expected to produce Koreans. How, then, can it be ensured that they not only give birth, but also raise these children to be Korean?"

The response of the state and NGOs has been, similar to what we saw under the social-Confucian functionalist vision, to build out a "social infrastructure" to teach migrant wives not only how to become Korean themselves but also how to raise Koreans (Yi, 2021, p. 73). According to Kim, Yang, and Torneo (2014), as of 2012, there were 159 Multicultural Family Support Centers

established nationwide to provide marriage immigrants and multicultural families with integrated services, including education in Korean language and culture, education on multicultural society, counseling on family education, interpretation and translation service, support for employment, and support for language development and education of children. (p. 104; see also Yu, 2020, p. 996)

However, since migrant wives are still structurally and normatively positioned as the sole agents responsible for molding their children into Koreans, *their* belonging is also partly a function of how well their children perform as Koreans. Several authors have described this dynamic as "ethnized maternal citizenship," whereby citizenship and belonging are a "rewar[d]. . . for their mothering of *South Korean* children" and their denial a penalty for raising "foreign" or insufficiently Korean children (Yi, 2021, p. 73, emphasis in the original; see also Yu, 2020; Lee-An, 2020). Accordingly, it is not surprising that a 2017 survey by the Korean Institute for Healthy Family found that the majority (58.4%) of children from multicultural families are monolingual, speaking only Korean (cited in Yu, 2020, p. 997). Thus, this dynamic may be seen as a layering of the social-Confucian functionalist vision upon the biopolitical, as migrant wives are held to be responsible not only for their own assimilation but also for their children's.

5. Conclusion

This article has sought to identify the historically evolving ways in which migrant wives have been interpellated as fulfilling specific functions for Korea—functions that, in turn, have demarcated the parameters of their legitimate belonging. Showing how notions about the 'good' migrant wife have been pegged to interpellations that stress their racialized and gendered use-values, my analysis is very much aligned with recent critiques of Korean multicultural policies as "patriarchal and ethnocentric" (Yu, 2020, p. 983), as "reifying cultural homogeneity even while preaching diversity" (Kim, Yang, and Torneo, 2014, p. 109), and as a "racial project" that Korea employs to "contro[l] its population and racial order" (Ahn, 2012, p. 106). As Watson (2012) points out, Korean multiculturalism's particular reifications of 'cultural difference' not only leave "beliefs in racial and ethnic exclusivity" intact; they also construct 'cultural diversity' as an always potentially threatening (if demographically unavoidable) reality and, for this reason, acknowledge and valorize culturally

diverse subjects only insofar as they can be positioned as “representatives of [other] cultures who are willing to emulate the representation of official-led narratives of what counts as Korean tradition” (Watson, 2012, p. 235-6).

This article’s contributions to these critiques can be found in its historicizing approach. It has sought to show how the commodification of migrant wives has actually consisted of several historically situated *commodifications*, which have not all been perfectly contemporaneous and which, making different demands on migrant wives, have articulated significantly different notions of who is capable of belonging. At every point, these functionalist visions were gendered, classed, and racialized, but, importantly, they have often been *differently* gendered, classed, and racialized. The framing of migrant wives as child-bearers was, to a certain degree, deemphasized throughout the 1990s, and, as I argued earlier, even those childbearing framings need to be seen as fundamentally different than the biopolitical project of “fertility.” Migrant wives are persistently presented in the Korean public imagination as uneducated even though many are, in fact, better educated than their Korean husbands (see, e.g., Hong, Song, and Park, 2013, p. 38-9; Kim, 2013, p. 472). The ethnonational functionalist vision was, of course, the most blatantly racist in its operation, but, even so, both the social-Confucian and the biopolitical functionalist visions had the effect of re-establishing Korea as a culturally uniform and superior entity.

It is clear that multiculturalism, as a discursive apparatus, combines and sediments elements of all of these functionalist visions, which may be usefully regarded as constitutive parts of its genealogy. While in this article I have chosen to emphasize politically significant discursive transformations, the underlying continuities are significant, too, for these continuities show how the instruments of inequality production can find new life in and through different guises, even when a particular guise claims to be a decisive break with the past. Researchers should continue to be attentive to the gendered, racialized, and classed inequalities that multicultural policies both presume and instate and draw out potentials for change by analytically triangulating between institutional frameworks, individual migrant and non-migrant subjectivities, and on-the-ground political activism by migrants, migrant groups, and their allies.

Furthermore, in a way that could not be done in this article, more attention should be paid to the ways in which compulsory heterosexuality as an ideology and social practice acts as a fundamental unifying and naturalizing principle not only for Korea’s multicultural policies but also for the Korean state’s broader efforts to address its “fertility crisis.” Going beyond a narrow focus on biological and social reproductivity and bringing in sexuality, sexual norms, and sexual behavior (which are always more than merely reproductive) may offer new insights into how different groups are defining, contesting, and (re)imagining what the Korean (ethno-?)nation can be.

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