“Our ethnic homogeneity is a blessing,” a South Korean worker says casually and without hesitation in an interview with The New York Times in November 2009. In Korea, it is not unusual to express one’s pride and one’s feelings of cultural distinctiveness and superiority for being a rare example of an ethnically homogenous nation. The great majority of Koreans would agree that their society is defined by a unique “Korean” identity—an identity based on a sense of shared bloodline and common ancestry—and feel proud of the racial purity and ethnic homogeneity of their nation. Although both North and South Korea have promoted ethnic nationalism, this chapter deals with the South.

Revealingly, in a recent survey conducted by Korea University, respondents gave an average score of 3.77 on a five-point scale (5 being “strongly agree”) to the statement “I am proud of having long maintained a racially homogeneous nation.” While others might see it as an exceptionally rigid and narrow conceptualization of national identity, Koreans have been taught, through decades of mandatory national history and citizens’ ethics education to take a positive view of the ethnic unity of their fatherland. Until recently, statements such as “Korea is a racially homogeneous nation” and “Korea uniquely maintains the tradition of a racially homogeneous nation” regularly appeared in national textbooks, indoctrinating Koreans into a kind of ethnic monotheism and leaving little room for the acceptance of social heterogeneity.

In fact, Korea is widely regarded as being among the most ethnically and linguistically homogeneous countries in the world. Traditionally, purity of
blood and ethnic homogeneity were at the core of the dominant notions of national identity and were furthermore a source of national pride. At times, the Korean government has gone so far as to impose various legal measures restricting immigration into Korea for this reason. However, while ethnic unity remains a defining feature of Korean nationalism and national identity, contemporary Korean society has begun to depart significantly and perhaps irreversibly from the long sought-after ideal of an ethnically homogenous society. Today’s South Korea is perceived by many migrant workers as a “land of opportunity.” As of September 2011, the number of foreigners residing in Korea—most of them migrant workers—exceeded 1.4 million, accounting for nearly three percent of the nation’s entire population. This figure may seem slight compared to that of other countries such as the United States, but it has significant implications for Korea. With the persistent and ever-growing influx of migrant workers and international brides, the Korean people are now more exposed than ever to racial and cultural diversity. However, this substantial enlargement of the foreign population has not been proportional to the Korean public’s tolerance of and openness to non-Korean cultures and values. In the midst of rapidly broadening diversity, notions of ethnic homogeneity and an exclusionary national identity have become serious problems for Korea, since they have driven discrimination and prejudice toward those not considered “pure” Koreans. However, most Koreans seem unaware of the potential danger that their deeply rooted ethnic pride and sense of superiority could pose to the emerging global society.

Today’s Korea shows that even when a society becomes diverse, it does not necessarily become tolerant of diversity. In other words, Korea has yet to become a multi-cultural society while it has, essentially, become a multi-ethnic nation. The transformation of Korea into a multi-ethnic society is by now irreversible, but many Koreans continue to exhibit prejudice against foreigners and Koreans of “mixed blood.” The key issue facing Korean society, then, is its ability to not only recognize and tolerate the reality of increasing ethnic heterogeneity—that is, to tame the racist modes of thought implicit in ethnic nationalism—but to accept and respect ethnic and cultural pluralism. It is important to consider the various ways in which Koreans might successfully adapt to their nation’s rapidly emerging multi-ethnic and multicultural society, as well as to isolate some of the major causes and attributes of Korean racism. To this end, this