CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE ROLE OF MULTICULTURAL FAMILIES IN SOUTH KOREAN IMMIGRATION POLICY

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INTRODUCTION

Regarding immigration, most countries compete to attract high-skilled migrant workers, but want to restrict the numbers and permanent settlement of low-skilled migrant workers. South Korea has been no exception to these global patterns. Since 2004, South Korean immigration policies have changed significantly in two main ways. One change has occurred within policies concerning the utilization of low-skilled migrant workers, and the other has been the initiation of a pilot integration policy for immigrants, the first such scheme since foreign workers began migrating to Korea in the late 1980s.

This paper examines: 1) why and how the Korean government changed its immigration policy from the notorious “industrial trainee program (1993–2006)” to an “employment permit system (2004-)” for foreign workers, and 2) what caused the desire for an “integration policy” geared at establishing a multicultural society. In order to deal with the first issue, this paper divides the last twenty years into three phases: the early phase (1987–1994), the middle phase involving the struggle for reform towards the Employment Permit System (1995–2003), and the institutionalization phase since 2004. It will then illustrate: 1) what factors inspired immigration policy change and, 2) why this shift has become increasingly rapid since 2004. In order to deal with the second issue, the increasing trend of marriage migration to South Korea and its impact on immigration policy, i.e. the social integration policy, will be examined.²

¹ This paper is a synthesis of my previous research (Lee 2008a; 2008b; 2008c).
² Immigration policy can include foreign worker policies and social integration policies. While foreign worker policy includes policies concerning both high-skilled and low-skilled workers, this paper tends to focus on those policies concerning low-skilled migrant workers.
Prior to the mid-1980s, the work force in Korea was made up predominantly of Koreans. As there was little immigration into Korea at that time, there was no real immigration policy. During the late 1980s, the situation began to change and large numbers of foreign migrant workers began to pour into Korea. As a result, an immigration policy was formulated and in late 1993 implementation of what became known as the Industrial Trainee System began. From 1995, efforts were made to change the system, but various obstacles prevented the implementation of a new system until 2004, when the Employment Permit System was finally adopted. More recently, in 2007, the Working Visit System was adopted in relation to ethnic Koreans of other nationalities.3

During the late 1980s and into the 1990s, the majority of migrant workers were men, except for ethnic Koreans with Chinese citizenship (hereafter called Josunjok) (Lee 2003: 131–2). As a result, there had been little gender perspective in Korean immigration policies. From 2000 marriage migration has become a social issue, where the majority of marriages consisted of foreign brides and Korean men. However, rather than focusing on “gender,” policy has turned to a “family” perspective, which will be examined in a later section.

In order to review Korean immigration policy changes for low-skilled workers, this paper highlights three main periods: the early phase (1987–1994), the middle phase (1995–2003), and the institutionalization phase (2004 onwards).


The influx of foreign nationals into Korea began in the late 1980s. Initially the majority of immigrants were Josunjok. There were several factors behind the movement of these people. The first and official reason was the desire of Josunjok to visit relatives in Korea. The second was the improved relations between China and Korea, which made the visits possible. The third was the desire of Josunjok to improve their standard of living by seeking employment in Korea. Korea at that time was suffering from a severe

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3 This paper will not examine the “Working Visit System.” For an in depth analysis of this, see Lee (2010).