Multiculturalism for Urban Competitiveness
The Case of Seoul
都市の競争力の源泉としての多文化主義
——ソウル市の事例——

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Korea is now undergoing another dramatic shift from being one of the world’s most racially-homogeneous countries to a multicultural society. Even though the shift has a history of less than 15 years, multiculturalism is the most popular discourse in Korean society today. This paper reviews three main aspects regarding multicultural change in Korean society. First, the paper reviews the rapid increase in the number of foreigners in terms of the increase of foreign labor, international marriages, and international students. Secondly, the paper delineates the current development of various ethnic areas in Seoul, drawing an ethnic map of the city. Lastly, the paper analyzes the long-term multicultural policy of the Seoul Metropolitan Government to prepare for one million foreign residents. The multicultural policy of the Seoul Metropolitan Government contains creative plans oriented towards multiculturalism that pursue ethnic variety as a source of urban competitiveness. However, regarding the practice of the policy, the city’s actual plans are still focused on assimilation rather than multiculturalism. This paper is an introduction to multiculturalism in Seoul, which is lacking in terms of analytical evaluation and policy suggestion. Therefore, future research should
be directed toward analytical research into the results of the multicultural policy of the Seoul Metropolitan Government.

I. Introduction

Korea is well known for its rapid modernization after 1960s when President Park Junghee launched an export-oriented industrialization policy. Korean society has experienced rapid economic development, political democratization, and globalization of society. The speed of modernization was so fast that Korea still displays three social structural patterns at the same time: traditional, modern and post-modern social structures.

Korea is now undergoing another dramatic shift from being one of the world’s most racially-homogeneous countries to a multicultural society. The shift has a history of less than 15 years, but multiculturalism is the most popular discourse in Korean society today. Even in academia, research about multiculturalism is the most attractive topic for securing research funds. The rapid growth in the number of foreigners in Korea is mainly due to the sharp increase of immigrants from East Asian societies such as China, Mongolia, and Vietnam who have come to Korea for jobs, marriage, and study.

The Korean government has established various policies for dealing with the foreigners due to their sharp increase in number. The first policies were mainly focused on the assimilation of foreigners to Korean culture and customs. However, current policies tend to be more oriented towards cultural pluralism and multiculturalism.1)

This paper is focused on describing the rapid multicultural trends in Seoul and the multicultural policies of the Seoul Metropolitan Government. To do so, the paper will first review the increase in foreigners in Korea and analyze its influence on Korean society in general. The paper will next delineate the multicultural aspects of Seoul by showing an ethnic map of Seoul. Finally, the paper will evaluate the multicultural policies of the Seoul Metropolitan Government by reviewing the newly-developed multicultural policy and its practice.

II. Foreign Residents in Korea

The increase in foreigners in Korea has been dramatically high since the early 90’s. As shown in Figure 1, the number of registered foreigners in Korean has increased from 110,028 in 1995 to 895,464 in 2008, increasing eight-fold in less than 15 years.

Three main factors can be suggested to explain the sharp increase in foreigners in Korea: the increase in foreign migrant workers, the increase in immigrants due to marriage, and the increase in foreign students. First of all, the rapid increase in foreign migrant workers is mainly due to the increase of higher education and the change of occupational structure in Korea. As many Korean
Japanese youths are college graduates, they tend to prefer white-collar occupations and avoid the so-called 3D (dirty, difficult, and dangerous) jobs. Therefore, foreign migrant workers from East Asian countries have been replacing the workers in the hard 3D jobs during the past decade. As shown in Figure 2, the number of foreign migrant workers has reached almost one million (including unlawful workers). The Chinese make up the greatest proportion of foreign migrant workers,
comprising 58% of the total. Most Chinese workers are ethnic Korean Chinese, who make up almost 90% of the total of Chinese migrant workers. Following Chinese workers are Vietnamese (9%), Filipinos (7%), and Thai (6%) (Korea Immigration Service 2008).

The second factor accounting for the dramatic increase in foreigners is the sharp increase in the number of international marriages. As shown in Figure 3, the number of international marriages has increased from 4,710 in 1990 to 122,552 in 2008. The main reason for the rapid increase in the international marriages is that Korean men who have had difficulties in finding wives in Korea due to the gender imbalance try to find wives in East Asian countries.

Figure 4 proves this fact. The increase of foreign wives is much higher than that of foreign husbands. A striking fact is that ten percent of total brides in Korea in 2008 were foreigners. Foreign wives are mainly Chinese and Vietnamese who comprise 54% and 25% respectively (Statistics Korea 2008).

The last factor contributing to the rapid growth in the number of foreigners in Korea is the increase in foreign students. As shown in Figure 5, the number of foreign students in 2008 reached 75,000, which is twelve times higher than the number of foreign students in 2000. This is mainly due to the sharp increase in Chinese students. Korean local universities have had difficulties in recruiting students since 2000 because most high school graduates prefer to enter the universities located in Seoul. To cover the tuition deficit, local universities have recruited Chinese high school graduates who could not enter universities in their homeland. As a result, Chinese students currently make up more than 60% of foreign students, followed by Japanese students (12 %) who constituted the largest proportion of foreign students in 2000 (Korea Immigration Service 2000).

The rapid increase in the number of foreigners in Korea has produced many social problems.
First of all, there have been many protests by foreign workers who demand better working conditions at manufacturing factories. Sweatshop conditions have been considerably reduced but still remain in many factories. Secondly, there have been endless disputes regarding institutional discrimination. For example, immigrant wives can get citizenship after residing two years with their Korean husbands. They also need the consent of their Korean husband to apply for citizenship. This unfair regulation has given Korean husbands power over their foreign wife. There is also a social
problem of fraudulent marriage. Foreign wives have frequently raised problems of deception in international marriage. Many international marriage brokers have been accused of embezzling and providing incorrect information. The last social problems are related to the children of international couples. This may be one of the most significant problems in terms of social integration. Many children of multicultural families have been reported having difficulties with acculturation.

The increase in foreigners in Korea has led to policy changes in dealing with foreign immigrants. The policies for foreigners used to be oriented toward assimilating foreigners to Korean culture. Currently, they are more focused on cultural pluralism and multiculturalism. One example of Korean multicultural policy is the enactment of “the Law for Multicultural Families⁵” in March 2008. The main contents of the law include the guarantee of equitable status of the multicultural families, the protection of foreign spouses from domestic violence, the provision of foreign language services for multicultural families, and the establishment of local centers for multicultural families. The increase in the number of organizations for helping foreign migrant workers and multicultural families is also a distinct change in Korean society. Thus the number of organizations helping multicultural families reached 705 in 2009 (Kim, Yang, and Lee 2009:202).

III. Map of Foreign Residents in Seoul

This section will describe the increase in foreigners in Seoul and their regional distribution in terms of numbers and nationality. Figure 6 shows the sharp increase in foreigners in Seoul. In

![Graph showing the increase in foreign population in Seoul from 1995 to 2008](source)


<Figure 6> Increase in Foreign Population of Seoul from 1995-2008
fact, current population growth in Seoul is mainly due to the growth of the foreign population.\textsuperscript{6}

Figure 7 shows the distribution of foreign residents of Seoul by nationality. Korean Chinese command a dominant majority, comprising more than half of the total number of foreigners. Following the Korean Chinese, are Chinese, American, Taiwanese, and Japanese people who together account for 20\% of the total foreign residents of Seoul.

Figure 8 shows the proportion of foreign population in the 25 local districts (Gu) of Seoul. As shown in Figure 8, the foreigners tend to live together in specific districts rather than to be widely distributed. Yeongdeungpo-gu, Guro-gu, and Geumcheon-gu show the highest proportion of foreign residents, most of whom are Korean Chinese from the three northeastern Chinese provinces of Jilin, Liaoning, and Heilongjiang. Following these three districts are Jongno-gu, Jung-gu, and Yongsan-gu, which have more than four percent of foreigners. While the former three districts have a short history of foreign residents, the latter three districts have been famous for their internationalized places as the downtown and US military base areas.

Figure 9 delineates the ethnic residential districts of Seoul. As explained above, Yeongdeungpo-gu, Guro-gu, and Geumcheon-gu have newly developed residential areas for Korean Chinese. Seoudaemun-gu is a traditional Chinese residential area where Taiwanese are dominant. The upper area of Yongsan-gu (Itaewon) has been famous as an internationalized area with a variety of ethnic groups, including American, European, and Islamic populations. The lower area of Yongsan-gu (Ichon-dong) is a residential area for Japanese. Kangnam-gu, where many Americans are now living, is the most affluent residential area in Seoul. Seorae Village in Seocho-gu is famous

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{distribution_of_foreign_residents.png}
\caption{Foreign Residents of Seoul by Nationality}
\end{figure}

<Figure 8> Proportion of Foreign Population of Seoul by District (Gu)

<Figure 9> Ethnic Residential Districts in Seoul
for its French residential area.

**IV. Multicultural Policies of Seoul**

Given the rapid growth rate of the foreign population of Seoul, it will exceed one million in less than two decades. As shown in Figure 10, if we expect the growth rates to take a linear pattern, the foreign population in Seoul will exceed one million in 2025. However, if we expect the growth rate to follow a curvilinear pattern, the foreign population will exceed one million in less than six years.

Therefore, the Seoul Metropolitan Government is now developing a long-term multicultural policy to prepare for one million foreign residents. Figure 11 delineates the basic plan. The plan focuses on three areas: 1) developing global zones in Seoul, 2) preparing social services for multicultural families, and 3) achieving culturenomics by pursuing multiculturalism. Based on the three-part multicultural plan, the Seoul Metropolitan Government plans to change the image of Seoul toward that of global-multicultural city and to use multiculturalism as a source of the city’s competitiveness.

The first plan for multicultural Seoul is to develop global zones. The plan for developing global zones has been already established, and Seoul Metropolitan Government designated 15 global zones in three categories: four global business zones, six global villages, and five cultural exchange zones. Figure 12 displays the fifteen global zones.

The global business zones will be developed in four areas: downtown area around city

![Figure 10](image.png)

*Expected Increase of Foreign Residents in Seoul*
Multiculturalism for Urban Competitiveness: The Case of Seoul (Wonho Jang)

Source: Seoul Development Institute (2008)

<Figure 11> Basic Plan of Seoul Metropolitan Government for One Million Foreigners

<Figure 12> Fifteen Global Zones in Seoul
hall, the Yeouido area, and two Gangnam-gu neighborhoods, Samsung-dong and Yeoksam-dong. Global villages will be developed in six areas: Itaewon-dong, Hannam-dong, and Yeoksam-dong for general foreign residents; Yeonnam-dong for Chinese residents; Ichon-dong for Japanese residents; and Seorae Village for French residents. Cultural exchange zones will be developed in five areas, most of which are market places for cultural products and traditional Korean arts and crafts.

The second multicultural plan for Seoul is to establish a support system for multicultural families. The current support system for multicultural families includes establishing aid centers, providing free Korean language education, and enacting city regulations to support NPO’s helping multicultural families. In July 2009, the Seoul Metropolitan Government developed a more comprehensive plan for multicultural families called the ‘Multicultural Family Hanultari (Common Fence) Plan.’ The main objective of the plan is a shift of policy orientation from simple support for multicultural families to integration and living together. Immigrants are considered main constituents in local communities in this plan and thus need to receive long-term and stable support.

The main contents of the ‘Multicultural Family Hanultari Plan’ are as follows. First, the Seoul Metropolitan Government is establishing information centers for foreigners preparing to marry Koreans. The centers also educate foreigners to avoid fraudulent marriages. Secondly, the city government is providing multicultural families with special support for childbirth, including providing helpers mothers after child-birth (‘Loving-Mom Helper’). Thirdly, the city government is providing babysitters for multicultural families with children from one to twelve years old. Fourthly, the city government is providing tutors (‘Happy Mate’) for the children of multicultural families who have difficulties adapting to the Korean education system. Lastly, the city government is helping multicultural families find jobs or open businesses. In addition, the city government provides jobs (‘Rainbow Jobs’) for multicultural families by contracting with local companies and schools.

The third part of the plan for developing multiculturalism in Seoul is to pursue culturenomics based on multiculturalism. First of all, the Seoul Metropolitan Government is planning to support the diversification of arts by foreign artists. To do so, the city government is considering promoting exhibitions of multicultural artists and supporting joint works by Korean and foreign artists. In addition, the city government is planning to establish high schools which recruit both Korean and foreign students and use them as cultural exchange institutions for students. However, the third set of plans has not been concretely established yet. Considering that the third plan is the most important for the integration and competitiveness of Seoul, the metropolitan government needs to put more emphasis and energy on culturenomics based on multiculturalism.

Even though the Seoul Metropolitan Government is pursuing various plans for achieving social integration and competitiveness, it has the following shortcomings. First of all, the policies
are still focused on assimilation rather than multiculturalism. The ‘Multicultural Family Hanultari Plan’ is still oriented towards helping multicultural families to adapt to Korean society by providing birth aid, education aid, and job aid. In addition, the support for the multicultural families might be considered too great compared with that for lower-class Seoul residents, which can raise an issue of reverse discrimination. Secondly, the plan for developing global zones shows preference for developed countries. Except for the Chinese village in Yeonnam-dong, all other villages are for Americans, Europeans, or Japanese. This bias is shown in the plan for Seorae Global Village in which the city plans to support development of a French village where only 400 French people were living. Thirdly, there is no concrete plan for how to develop culturenomics using the multicultural characteristics of Seoul. In particular, there is no plan for using multiculturalism as a factor attracting tourism.

V. Conclusion

This paper has reviewed the three main aspects regarding multicultural change in Korean society. First, the paper reviewed the rapid increase in the number of foreigners in terms of the increase of foreign labor, international marriages, and international students. Secondly, the paper delineated the current development of various ethnic areas in Seoul, drawing an ethnic map of the city. Lastly, the paper analyzed the long-term multicultural policy of the Seoul Metropolitan Government to prepare for one million foreign residents.

The long-term multicultural policy of the Seoul Metropolitan Government contains many creative plans oriented towards multiculturalism that pursue ethnic variety as a source of urban competitiveness. However, regarding the practice of the policy, the city’s actual plans are still focused on assimilation rather than multiculturalism. In addition, the relatively high support for multicultural families may raise an issue of reverse discrimination, which can be an obstacle to social integration, one of the main purposes of the multicultural policy of Seoul.

This paper is an introduction to multiculturalism in Seoul. Although it describes various multicultural trends and policies of the Seoul Metropolitan Government, it is lacking in terms of analytical evaluation and policy suggestion. Therefore, future research should be directed toward analytical research into the results of the multicultural policy of the Seoul Metropolitan Government, and should suggest a more practical multicultural policy to enhance the city’s competitiveness.
<Appendix -1> Change in Nationalities of Foreign Wives: 2001-2008

Source: Statistics Korea (2008)

<Appendix -2> Change in Nationalities of Foreign Husbands: 2001-2008

Source: Statistics Korea (2008)


Footnotes

(1) The concepts of cultural pluralism and multiculturalism can be used interchangeably. However, multiculturalists promote multiple ethnic cultures for the competitiveness of society while cultural pluralists merely accept diverse cultures.

(2) The ethnic Korean Chinese are the descendants of Koreans who moved to China during the Japanese colonial period. There are almost 2 million ethnic Koreans in the three Northeastern Chinese Provinces of Jilin, Liaoning, and Heilongjiang. In this paper they will be termed Korean Chinese.

(3) According to the data of Statistics Korea (2008), the imbalance was highest in 1990 when there were 117 males for 100 females in the marriage market. Since then, the imbalance has decreased, but still there are about 5% more males in the marriage market.

(4) For details regarding the nationalities of foreign spouses, see Appendices 1 and 2. An interesting fact is the change in the nationalities of foreign husbands. In 2001, Japanese husbands were more than 50% of the total, but in 2008 Chinese husbands made up the highest proportion (62.7%) while Japanese husbands represented only 3.5 percent.

(5) The Korean government uses the term ‘multicultural family’ to refer to those families with foreign or naturalized Korean spouses.

(6) During the period of 2004-2008, the number of foreigners increased by 152,325, whereas the number of Koreans increased by 33,483 (Ministry of Public Administration and Security 2008). For more details, see Appendix 3.

(7) ‘Dong’ is the lowest level of administration in Seoul. There are 424 dongs in Seoul.

References


