South Korea's Journey Towards a Multicultural Society: A Filipino Case Study

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ABSTRACT

South Korea's economic development and ascendance in the global market have earned it a reputation as a technological leader. The government has sought to cultivate a favorable international image, despite facing labor shortages resulting from economic growth in the 1980s and a decline in the working population. This resulted in the implementation of immigration policies such as the Industrial Technical Training Program (ITTP) for low-skilled workers, which was subsequently replaced by the Employment Permit System (EPS) in 2004. The increasing number of foreign residents in South Korea presents a challenge to the country's cultural integration and social cohesion. Despite efforts to become a multicultural society, the understanding of multiculturalism in South Korea emphasizes assimilation over integration, perpetuating narratives of exclusion among the foreign population. This paper evaluates the multiculturalism policies of the South Korean government in light of the experiences of Filipino workers in Korea.

Keywords: Globalism; multiculturalism; migration; inclusion; foreign workers; immigration policies

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Recibido: 22 de julio de 2024 / Modificado: 26 de septiembre de 2024 / Aceptado: 30 de septiembre de 2024

Para citar este artículo:

Montalvo Granados, D. y Camposano, S. (2024). South Korea's Journey Towards a Multicultural Society: A Filipino Case Study. *Oasis* 41, 69-88.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.18601/16577558.n41.05

El trayecto de Corea del Sur hacia una sociedad multicultural: un estudio del caso filipino

RESUMEN

Desde su desarrollo económico y ascenso en el mercado global, Corea del Sur se ha ganado una reputación de líder tecnológico. El gobierno ha buscado una imagen internacional positiva mientras enfrentaba la escasez de mano de obra debido al crecimiento económico en la década de los ochenta y una población activa en declive. Esto condujo a políticas de inmigración como el Programa de Capacitación Técnica Industrial (ITTP), que luego fue remplazado en 2004 por el Sistema de Permiso de Empleo (EPS–Employment Permit Sytem), para trabajadores poco calificados. Hoy, la creciente población extranjera presenta desafíos para la integración cultural y la cohesión social. Corea del Sur se esfuerza por convertirse en una sociedad multicultural; sin embargo, la comprensión del multiculturalismo apunta a la asimilación en lugar de la integración, y reproduce narrativas de exclusión entre la población extranjera. Este documento evalúa el multiculturalismo de Corea en consonancia con las experiencias de los trabajadores filipinos en dicho país, en relación con las políticas multiculturales que el gobierno busca implementar.

Palabras clave: globalización; multiculturalismo; migración; políticas de migración; trabajadores extranjeros.

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, South Korea has undergone a series of significant transformations. In the aftermath of the Korean War, the necessity for a swift and enduring recuperation loomed large over the country. The path to economic growth and modernization was beset with numerous challenges, including political instability and dictatorship. However, South Korea surmounted these obstacles through unwavering efforts and a commitment to democratization. It became a leading developed country, aspiring to join the international community and play an active role in global affairs. Currently, South Korea presents itself as a democratic and robust economy that has propelled it onto the world stage.

One of the many characteristics of the country of South Korea (hereafter Korea) is its homogeneous population, which is characterized by a strong focus on cultural unity and national identity. This sense of unity has played a significant role in the formation of Korea's national identity, as well as in the development of its political decision-making processes and, ultimately, in the formulation of its immigration policy and the government's response to the increasing influx of foreign nationals seeking to live and work in Korea. Notwithstanding the country's endeavors to preserve its cultural identity and the population's pride in its ethnic Korean identity (Shin and Moon, 2019), the government has recently implemented policies to attract diverse foreign workers, international students, and

intellectuals to address labor shortages and low birth rates (Kang, 2023).

Since the early 2000s, there has been a notable increase in the number of foreign nationals residing in Korea, contributing to a more diverse and multicultural society. Consequently, the terms "multicultural" and "multiculturalism" have emerged as pivotal concepts in discourses pertaining to Korean society. While some may regard this increased diversity as a challenge to traditional values, others view it as an opportunity for growth and development, as well as a means of enhancing Korea's international image (Shin,2022).

These concepts emerged concurrently with social mobilization and the country's democratic aspirations. For those in positions of political power, the realization of a multicultural Korea became inextricably linked with the creation of an open and welcoming environment for external observers, with the aim of attracting positive economic benefits, international companies, and investments. Meanwhile, for civil society groups, including human rights organizations, labor unions, and religious groups, the pursuit of multiculturalism became part of their broader agenda to promote the protection and equal labor conditions for foreign workers, as well as inclusion and social justice within Korean society (Park, 2017). In essence, the impetus behind the drive for multiculturalism in Korea reflects a broader global agenda aimed at securing economic and political advantages while reinforcing the democratic character of the nation.

However, multiple experts, including Park Hyun-Seo (2017) and Gi-Wook Shin and Rennie Moon (2019), have argued that the acceptance of foreign migrants in South Korea is driven more by the desire to meet global standards and the aspiration to be recognized as an "advanced" nation than solely by economic development (Park, 2017, p. 377). Labor shortages and an aging population are common factors that influence government decisions in advanced countries to push for more liberal immigration policies, seeking to attract skilled labor and help with the declining working population. In contrast, South Korea did not pursue these policies until the implementation of the Industrial Technical Training Program (ITTP) in 1992 (p. 381). Up to this point, it has been argued that socioeconomic aspects were not a major contributing factor in the explosion of multiculturalism in Korea. Rather, it has been proposed that the driving force behind this phenomenon was the desire to gain acknowledgment from other countries and to improve global standing by adhering to the expected international norms (Park, 2017). This argument may have been valid in the initial stages of multicultural policy implementation. Nevertheless, as will be demonstrated in the case study of the Filipino community in Korea, social issues such as the low birth rate and aging population may have begun to emerge as key factors behind the country's embrace of multiculturalism.

A considerable number of foreign individuals have recently relocated to South

Korea, not merely as tourists but also as permanent residents and workers. This phenomenon originated with low-skilled laborers from China and Southeast Asia who immigrated to Korea in pursuit of enhanced prospects. Consequently, Korea has since evolved into a nation with a robust capacity for absorbing labor (Park, 2017).

A recent report from the Korean Ministry of Justice indicates an increase in the number of foreign residents compared to previous years. The data on immigration indicates that the number of foreign residents in the country initially decreased from 4.87% in 2019 to 3.79% in 2021 due to the effects of the global pandemic. However, the number rebounded with remarkable swiftness, reaching 4.37% in 2022 and 4.89% in 2023. This figure signifies that there were 2,507,584 foreign residents in Korea in 2023. These recent statistics also indicate that, although Chinese nationals remain the predominant migrant group in Korea (with over 900,000 individuals), other nationalities are increasing as well, with approximately 700,000 individuals from various countries. Moreover, a greater number of foreign nationals are enrolling in the social integration programs offered by the Korean government than was the case at the time the programs were first implemented in 2009. As indicated in the immigration statistics, the number of individuals participating in such integration programs reached 58,028 in 2023, representing a 37.6% increase compared to the previous year.

The growth in the number of foreign residents can be attributed to a number of factors, including the availability of employment opportunities, the provision of educational resources, and the facilitation of cultural interactions. The Korean government has implemented a series of policies with the objective of attracting and retaining foreign talent, with the aim of enhancing the country's global standing, fostering a positive perception of diversity, and facilitating the integration of foreign residents. Nevertheless, the practical application and actual experience of foreign residents with regard to both immigration policies and the process of assimilation into the Korean style of multiculturalism remain subjects of ongoing investigation.

The objective of this paper is to gain insight into the functioning of multiculturalism in Korea and its ramifications for the migrant community. In particular, the case study will be employed to examine the experiences of Filipino migrants and their trajectory through the various immigration policies and their integration into Korean society. This will focus on labor migrants and marriage migrants, as the majority of Korean immigration and multicultural policies are directed towards these groups. This paper is divided into two main sections. In the initial section, our objective is to comprehend the conceptualization of multiculturalism in Korea and the evolution of this terminology to align with the country's initial aspirations for international recognition and subsequent economic development. The final section will examine the experiences of the Filipino community in Korea and their perceptions of multicultural policies.

METHODOLOGY

This paper employs a descriptive case analysis methodology to examine South Korea's multiculturalism through the lens of the Filipino worker community. The study examines the challenges encountered by Filipino workers in South Korea, including those pertaining to discrimination and cultural integration. The study employs a variety of secondary sources, including academic articles, government reports, and statistical data, to examine the experiences of Filipino migrant workers and the evolving multicultural landscape in Korea. By focusing on this particular group, the objective of the paper is to provide insights into the broader challenges and dynamics of immigration, labor, and cultural integration in South Korea, with a particular emphasis on the Filipino community's experiences with the country's multicultural policies and social cohesion efforts.

The utilization of secondary sources is pivotal to the methodology of this study, as these sources facilitate a more time-efficient approach, enabling the investigation of a more expansive scope of pertinent material while providing a comprehensive overview of existing research. Furthermore, this research benefits from the use of peer-reviewed data and validated information sourced from secondary sources, including academic articles and governmental statistics. Secondary sources provide the requisite context and background for an effective analysis of the Filipino worker community as a case study. This is in line with the paper's objective of exploring the broader societal and policy frameworks surrounding South Korea's multiculturalism.[1]

SOUTH KOREA AND ITS QUEST FOR MULTICULTURALISM

The concept of multiculturalism is inextricably linked to the notions of identity and recognition. Consequently, it signifies a conflict between minority communities and the dominant population, underscoring the significance of representation and the acknowledgment of minority communities within a dominant cultural community. This entails reconciling cultural differences with political rights and ensuring active political and social participation for all groups (Ahn, 2012). Consequently, nation-states implement multicultural policies to oversee and streamline the incorporation of assorted cultural groups into their societies, including indigenous populations, individuals of mixed heritage, and sexual minorities (Kukathas, 2002).

While multicultural policies are not a novel phenomenon in many parts of the world, numerous Western countries have a

[1] Originally, this study sought to include a semi-structured interview with a variety of Filipino workers in Korea; however, due to time and resource limitations, these interviews could not be conducted. We hope that this article will provide a solid basis for further research on this subject, possibly incorporating the Filipino viewpoint on South Korea's multiculturalism policy.

lengthy history of managing multicultural societies. These countries have developed comprehensive policies and programs to support diversity. Conversely, Korea has only recently commenced efforts to address the challenges of multiculturalism, largely due to its relatively homogeneous population and a robust history of state interventionism aimed at achieving economic development in conjunction with the processes of national identity construction (Lim, 2009). Consequently, immigration and integration policies that permitted foreign nationals to reside in the country and integrate into society were discouraged, resulting in the implementation of short-term foreign recruitment or training programs.

"The government's shift towards embracing multiculturalism has encountered challenges and developed a distinct 'Korean style' of multiculturalism. Watson (2010) describes this as state-led multiculturalism, characterized as a practical measure to enhance Korea's global standing and increase its international influence."

> Watson (2010) asserts that Korean multiculturalism serves to disguise the persisting exclusions. These are policies that prioritize the integration of foreign individuals into a privileged and homogeneous Korean society. Additionally, there is a mobilization driven by the sentiment of "having to be multicultural rather than wanting to be multicultural" (p. 338). Consequently, the Korean government is perpetually situated in a dichotomy between the imperative to integrate foreigners into their society and the concomitant need to preserve their homogeneity as a source of national pride, as Watson (2010) posits. It is a tension between a government that aspires to liberal democratic republicanism with equality between cultures but one that simultaneously wants to continue the language of cultural purity and superiority. (p. 341)

The concept of state-led assimilation is a key factor in these analyses, given the government's efforts to promote and implement assimilation policies since 2006. While some citizens are actively engaged in advocating for labor migrants' rights and the proper implementation of related policies, they frequently overlook or ignore the rights and needs of other categories of migrants in Korea. For instance, labor rights groups have primarily focused their attention on the exploitation of foreign low-skilled workers (Park, 2017). Consequently, the majority of initiatives targeting foreign residents originate from governmental entities.

One of the initial measures undertaken to advance multiculturalism within the country was the enactment of the Act on Social Integration of Mixed-Race Koreans and Immigrants and the Act on Marriage Migrant Integration in 2006. In 2007, the Multicultural Family Support Act was introduced (Kim, 2015). These measures included the implementation of multicultural training programs for government officials and employers, the enactment of anti-discrimination legislation, and the establishment of free Korean language and culture classes for adult immigrants. Furthermore, the government introduced

educational materials on civic education that addressed the subject of immigrants and refugees (Kim, 2015). Subsequently, multicultural policies have been implemented primarily by government-affiliated organizations operating under the direction of the Ministries of Gender Equality and Family and Education, or by these ministries specifically for language education, cultural integration, and consulting programs (Jung, 2020).

A common thread running through these policies is their focus on marriage migrants and mixed-race families in Korea. This focus has resulted in the creation of a sense of exclusivity and marginalization among other immigrant groups, which has in turn discouraged labor and economic migrants from integrating further into Korean society or pursuing citizenship (Kim, 2012). Those with opposing views contend that these policies give preference to specific immigrant groups, which has resulted in the formation of factions within the immigrant community and the reinforcement of stereotypes and discriminatory attitudes towards other groups (Kim, 2012). Furthermore, this exclusionary approach has had an impact on immigration policies, including those related to visa classifications, transitions between visa types, and access to citizenship or naturalization. These policies are shaped by a system that promotes a hierarchical structure among immigrants.

However, this does not negate the need for integration and assimilation strategies for married migrants and their multicultural children. Foreign spouses of Korean nationals can obtain permanent residency and citizenship through fairly clear norms and requirements (Yu, 2023), while multicultural children obtain Korean citizenship through the principle of jus sanguinis, meaning that as long as one of the parents is Korean, they are (at least) legally considered Korean as well (Jung, 2020). However, legal access to settlement in Korea has not translated into a sense of belonging in Korean society or an open acceptance of the diversity they bring (Yu, 2023).

Since the emergence of international marriages between rural Korean men and women from China, Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand and the Philippines, views of international families have been negative. For example, foreign spouses are often seen as lower class (or from 'underdeveloped' countries) and less able to fit into Korean society (Yu, 2023), while their Korean counterparts are seen as incapable of finding a Korean partner (Kim, 2012). This stereotype is compounded by the negative perception that multicultural families are the primary target of government integration initiatives, as it contributes to the image of these families as individuals in need of government support, making them a burden on society rather than valued members (Yu, 2023). As a result, many women from these countries face discrimination and social exclusion in Korea. The stigmatization and marginalization of these families further perpetuates the belief that international marriages are inferior and less desirable than traditional Korean marriages.

The hierarchical order within the migrant community is also evident among multicultural families; Yu (2023) argues that there is a distinction between families with foreign spouses from "advanced" countries and those from "underdeveloped" countries. Categorizing the latter as "international marriages" and the former as "multicultural families," this distinction affects how policies are reproduced and implemented in the various programs aimed at foreign residents.

On the other hand, other migrants may view such policies as exclusionary; for example, labor migrants on the E9 visa (non-professional work visa) cannot access permanent residency or citizenship under the current system. This means that even if these workers wish to integrate and participate in Korean society, immigration policies act as a barrier to their long-term stay in Korea (Kim, 2012). Without the possibility of permanent residency or citizenship, their presence in the country remains conditional and temporary. This distinction highlights the complexity of immigration policies and how they shape the experiences of foreign residents within Korean society.

In the study of multiculturalism, the expectation of access to citizenship is often seen as a key factor in determining the successful integration of immigrants. Without the option of permanent residency or citizenship, foreign workers in Korea may struggle to participate fully in society. As Kim (2012) argues in his interpretation of Kymlicka's ideas, "when citizenship is not offered, multiculturalism is conceptualized very differently–not so much as a tool for incorporating immigrants, but rather as a recipe for exclusion" (Kim, 2012, p. 113).

In this sense, it is possible to observe Korean immigration policies that aim to attract foreign workers to Korea to alleviate labor shortages and meet the demands of the economy, but not necessarily to create an inclusive and diverse society. Rather than creating a welcoming space for the ever-increasing number of foreign residents, these policies embrace claims that Korea's multiculturalism is a crucial tool for the Korean government to achieve global standing. Moreover, these policies also reflect the assimilationist orientation of Korean-style multiculturalism, where the expectation of integration relies on foreign migrants adapting to Korean society, rather than Korea becoming more diverse and open to the changes and differences they bring (Shin and Moon, 2019).

South Korea's pursuit of multiculturalism has been influenced by its aspirations to improve its global standing as a middle-income country (Watson, 2010). While economic gain and low birth rates were not initially considered significant factors in Korea's multicultural policy, in recent years these elements have become more important. The country has faced exponentially low birth rates, creating a demographic crisis that requires the integration of immigrants to maintain economic growth and social stability. As a result, multiculturalism is now seen as a strategic tool

to enhance Korea's international reputation and address pressing economic and social issues.

CASE STUDY: FILIPINO MIGRANTS

As we have noted, multiculturalism in Korea marks a significant shift from its homogeneous past to a society enriched by diverse cultural contributions. This chapter explores the experiences of Filipino migrants, an important community within Korea's foreign population. The Filipino community in Korea serves as a compelling case study for understanding multiculturalism, especially because of its unique composition compared to the Filipino diaspora in other countries. In Korea, Filipinos are predominantly employed as low-skilled workers, which contrasts with their presence in other countries where they often work in a wider range of sectors, including healthcare, education, and professional fields.

With a total diaspora of 67,523 individuals, Filipinos make up a significant portion of Korea's foreign population. Employment visa holders (E1-E9) make up 47% of this group, with low-skilled workers on E9 visas accounting for 37% (27,940 individuals) of the total Filipino population and 78% of those on E series visas. This reflects the heavy reliance on Filipino workers to fill essential roles in labor-intensive industries such as manufacturing, construction, and domestic work. In contrast, marriage migrants make up 17% (11,781 people) of the Filipino community, and only 2% are skilled workers (Romulo, 2023). As the Philippines is one of the ten largest groups of foreigners in Korea (Carolino *et al.*, 2018), Filipinos play a significant role in supporting the Korean economy through these labor roles.

Their journeys reveal the intricate interplay of economic imperatives, societal integration, and individual goals in a new place. We seek to examine the different experiences of legal (and illegal) migrant workers navigating established pathways, undocumented workers experiencing exploitation, and married immigrants seeking family stability in South Korean society. It also examines how South Koreans view Filipino migrants, by exploring the societal roles assigned to them and their contributions to the country's economic and social environment. By closely examining these dynamics, this section aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of multiculturalism in contemporary Korea and its implications for both migrants and the host society.

History of Filipino Migration to Korea

Filipino migration to Korea has a long history, dating back to the post-Korean War era when Filipino engineers were sent to rebuild Seoul, including the construction of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism and the US Embassy. Filipino professionals, such as the second president of IBM Korea (Ray O. Reyes, 1968–70), were also employed by multinational corporations in Korea. In addition, through the Unification Church, Filipina women began marrying

Korean men in the 1960s, establishing a pattern of temporary and permanent migration that continued after the Korean War.

In the 1970s, there was a notable increase in the number of Filipino migrants to South Korea. In 1970, 789 Filipinos entered Korea; by 1980, the number had risen to 6,180, with the majority entering as tourists due to the limited number of visa categories (KIS data) available. In 1982, 13,731 Filipinos entered Korea, with more than 70% of these individuals arriving as tourists. The arrival of Filipino performing artists in the 1980s coincided with a larger trend of Filipino women going overseas as domestic workers and entertainers. In 1982, 351 Filipinos entered on entertainment visas, although until the mid-1990s, the majority of Filipino performers in Korea were men (Kim, 2009).

The Seoul Olympics in 1988 constituted a pivotal moment in Korean history, facilitating the influx of a greater number of foreign workers into the country. By the early 1990s, a considerable number of Filipinos had entered Korea on tourist visas but continued to engage in labor without government approval. By 1992, the number of undocumented Filipinos in Korea had reached 1,334, representing a significant proportion of the total number of overstayers in the country, which stood at 52,443 (KIS data). Filipino performers and domestic workers were employed in a range of locations, including United States military bases and small Korean-owned clubs. In the 1990s, the Industrial Training Program was established with the objective of facilitating Filipino migration for employment purposes in accordance with the relevant legislation. At the outset, there was only one category of training visa, which was subsequently divided into general and industrial training visas. The number of Filipino arrivals on these visas subsequently increased, with 1,655 individuals arriving as industrial trainees in 1994. The program, which was modeled after Japan's trainee system, permitted small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to employ foreign trainees in order to alleviate labor shortages (Seol, 2000). Notwithstanding the expansion of formal migration pathways, irregular migration persisted. By December 1998, 6,404 Filipino nationals had overstayed their visas (Park *et al.*, 1999). Filipinos frequently utilized government-certified agencies, brokers, or the assistance of relatives and friends to facilitate their migration, often paying substantial commissions or engaging in passport forgery (Park *et al.*, 1999).

The employment landscape for Filipinos in Korea has undergone significant diversification over the course of several decades. In the early 1990s, 418 Filipino men and 131 women entered Korea on entertainment visas. In the mid-1990s, there was a notable shift in the demographic composition of foreign workers in Korea. A greater number of women began entering the country under E-6 visas, primarily to work in clubs situated in proximity to US military bases. By 2001, over 8,500 E-6 visa holders were in Korea, many of whom were employed in the entertainment industry,

which was perceived to have associations with prostitution and sex trafficking (Yea, 2004).

Filipino migrants in Korea

The phenomenon of Filipino migration to Korea has undergone significant transformations over the past three decades, largely influenced by shifts in socio-economic trends and legislative changes. As of October 2023, the total number of Filipino inhabitants in the country was 67,523, including 32,107 individuals holding employment visas, classified under the E series visas (E1-E9) (Romulo, 2023). Furthermore, the KOSIS indicates that the total number of incoming Filipino immigrants was approximately 1,100. In particular, there were approximately 600 male incoming Filipino foreigners and somewhat fewer than 500 female incoming Filipino foreigners. This statistic indicates that a greater number of males than females were entering the country as Filipino foreigners during that year. It should be noted, however, that this data set excludes the incoming flow of foreign Filipino nannies who will begin working in Korea in 2024.

By the conclusion of 2017, approximately 66,788 Filipinos had entered Korea through the Employment Permit System (EPS), representing approximately 11% of all E-9 visa holders (Lee *et al.*, 2018).

There has been a notable increase in the number of Filipino students migrating to Korea, with a higher proportion of women than men enrolling in academic programs. As of December 2016, 297 Filipinos were pursuing master's degrees, 103 were enrolled in doctoral programs, and 124 were engaged in Korean language studies or

TABLE 1. VISA STATUS OF FILIPINOS AND OTHER NATIONALS IN KOREA 2012 AND 2015
(Unit: %, person)

Visa Type	2012				2015			
	Filipinos			Other nationals	Filipinos			Other nationals
	F	M	Total	Total	F	M	Total	Total
Non-proefssionals (E-9)	90.7	18.7	53.8	40.2	87.9	15.4	54.0	37.7
Professionals (E-1 to E-7)	5.4	8.5	7.0	8.2	6.3	12.8	9.3	6.7
Trainees & Students	0.6	2.2	1.4	14.8	1.4	0.5	1.0	13.7
Permanet residents (F-5)	0.0	2.0	1.0	6.3	0.0	2.0	0.9	7.6
Marriage migrants (F-2-1, F-6)	0.5	57.4	29.6	16.6	0.9	52.0	24.8	14.3
Others	2.8	11.2	7.1	13.9	3.4	17.3	9.9	20.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Number	16.405	17.210	33,615	546,941	23,205	20,338	43,543	639,151

Source: Graph, Lee et al. (2018, p. 46).

other training (Lee *et al.*, 2018). However, recent data from the Philippine Embassy in Korea indicates that the total number of E-9 holders by October 2023 is 24,940, representing 78% of the total E-visa holders. Additionally, the current number of students is 689 (Romulo, 2023).

The Philippine and Korean governments have implemented modifications to their immigration policies with the objective of facilitating labor migration and enhancing the welfare and remittance environments for Filipino migrant workers. In the early 2000s, Korea began allowing foreign nationals to engage in elementary occupations, concurrently offering return assistance services and settlement opportunities. In addition, policies have been introduced to facilitate the integration of migrants who have married Koreans (Lee *et al.*, 2018). Although employment remains the primary motive for Filipino migration to Korea, recent trends indicate a notable increase in the number of students and a corresponding decline in the number of migrants arriving for marriage purposes. These shifts illustrate the ongoing evolution in the demographic profile and the underlying motivations of Filipino migrants to Korea. As reported by the Commission on Filipinos Overseas, Korea is the fourth most popular destination among Filipino spouses, fiancées, and other foreign partners. Nevertheless, the number of Filipino migrants entering into marriage with South Korean nationals has exhibited a consistent decline over time. In 2011, the greatest number of Filipino spouses and other companions traveling to South Korea was 1,903. This figure declined gradually until 2015, when it reached a level below one thousand.

Beginning in 2004, the majority of foreign migrant workers no longer entered Korea as industrial and technical trainees. Instead, they entered as unskilled workers holding E-9 visas, which permit them to work for up to five consecutive years at select small and medium-sized enterprises with fewer than 300 employees. In contrast with the preceding trainee status, E-9 visa holders, predominantly unskilled personnel employed by small and medium-sized enterprises, are now permitted to work for up to five consecutive years (Lee *et al.*, 2018). This modification permits the implementation of higher remuneration and more extended labor agreements, as well as the conferral of "worker status," which entitles them to the protections under Korea's Labor Standards Act that are comparable to those afforded to Korean employees. Notwithstanding these advancements in immigrant worker policies, the enhanced status of migrant workers does not insulate them from the typical challenges associated with working abroad. Those who are undocumented face an elevated risk of discrimination and violations of their human and labor rights. Nevertheless, a significant proportion of these individuals elect to remain employed in Korea, driven by a complex array of personal and economic considerations (Carolino *et al.*, 2018).

The table 2 illustrates the number of documented and undocumented Filipino

TABLE 2. NUMBER OF DOCUMENTED AND UNDOCUMENTED FILIPINO WORKERS IN KOREA (2000–2015)

Year	Documented Workers			Undocumented Workers			Total
	Male	Female	Sub-Total	Male	Female	Sub-Total	
2000	28,223 (54.6%)	11,759 (22.8%)	39,982 (77.4%)	N/A	N/A	11,701 (22.6%)	51,683 (100%)
2005	22,830 (44.5%)	15,227 (29.7%)	38,057 (74.2%)	7,978 (15.5%)	5,271 (10.3%)	13,249 (25.8%)	51,306 (100%)
2010	23,243 (45.8%)	16,282 (32%)	39,525 (77.8%)	5,986 (11.8%)	5,270 (10.4%)	11,256 (22.2%)	50,781 (100%)
2013	15,843 (33.3%)	18,642 (39.3%)	34,485 (72.6%)	7,527 (15.8%)	5,502 (11.6%)	13,029 (27.4%)	47,514 (100%)
2015	N/A	N/A	42,443 (77.2%)	N/A	N/A	12,534 (22.8%)	54,977 (100%)

Notes: Korea Immigration Service has not publihed the sub-category of foreign workers in Korea since 2014. N/A represents not available or not applicable through the paper.

Sources: KIS (2005 2010, 201 l- 2013 2015, 2016), POLO (2013) and DFA (2015)

Source: Carolino *et al.* (2018, p. 5).

workers in Korea from 2000 to 2015. As of 2000, the number of Filipinos documented in Korea was 51,683, reaching 54,977 by 2015. The annual number of Filipino workers exhibited an irregular pattern, with fluctuations that were partly dependent on policy changes. The number of documented Filipino workers exhibited an upward trajectory, rising from 39,982 in 2000 to over 42,000 in 2015. Over the course of the 15-year period, the estimated increase in the number of documented Filipino workers was approximately 2,500. However, the number of male documented workers decreased as a result of the introduction of the EPS Memorandum of Understanding with other countries, which led to increased competition for labor. It is noteworthy that the proportion of undocumented overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) remained relatively high (22.8%) in 2015, exceeding the average rate of undocumented workers among total immigrant workers (11.3%) in Korea.

The evolution of Filipino migrants who entered the country under an employment visa illustrates the prioritization of low-skilled workers over other types of immigrants from the Philippines. This is evidenced by the intention of these migrants to return to their home countries, which effectively denies them the possibility of obtaining permanent residency or citizenship. Consequently, they are not regarded as welcome members of the Korean conceptualization of multiculturalism. Previously, Korean policies permitted the employment of trainees (without the legal protection of Korean labor law), rendering them more susceptible to exploitation and abuse. Gradually, the regulations have facilitated the

admission of an expanding number of low-skilled workers through the E9 visa, yet they have not been granted the option of acquiring Korean citizenship or integrating into the Korean culture. The Filipino experience is illustrative of a common predicament faced by numerous migrant workers in South Korea, where they are frequently regarded as expendable laborers devoid of the prospect of integration or long-term settlement.

Filipino workers experiences

The multifaceted nuances of Korea's multiculturalism are exemplified by the difficulties encountered by less-skilled workers in attaining permanent residency, which serve to underscore the inherent limitations of the immigration policies in place.

Those who enter the country through the Visa for Ethnic Koreans (VEP) program may qualify for permanent residency if they have resided and worked in manufacturing, agriculture, or livestock industries for a minimum of four years and earn a sufficient income (in accordance with current policies). Nevertheless, attaining permanent residency remains a significant challenge due to the maximum permitted duration of employment, which is four years and ten months, a period that falls short of the requisite five years of continuous employment (Seol, 2000). Furthermore, this policy impacts low-skilled workers under the E9 visa. Additionally, workers who have accumulated more than five years of work within the past ten years and meet specific income, technical, and character criteria may transition to a residence (F-2) visa, which could potentially lead to a permanent residence (F-5) visa. Nevertheless, instances of less-skilled workers attaining permanent residency are scarce, underscoring the constraints of the system (Seol, 2000).

The experiences of Filipino workers in Korea exhibit notable disparities between those who are documented and those who are undocumented. Those who are legally employed in the Philippines often have more favorable access to social support, healthcare, and fair wages. Undocumented workers, however, frequently encounter a number of challenges, including elevated stress levels, inferior working conditions, and heightened vulnerability to exploitation (Amit *et al.*, 2020). One of the most significant obstacles to Filipino migrant workers' incorporation into Korean society is the language barrier. Prior to their arrival in Korea, they receive only a modicum of Korean language training, and their employment status hinges on their ability to attain a rudimentary proficiency in Korean, which falls far short of the language's full capabilities. No supplementary language training is provided subsequent to their arrival in Korea (Amit *et al.*, 2020). In contrast to the initiatives aimed at multicultural families, Additional resources are available for language training, with a particular focus on immigrant women who marry into Korean households. As Laranjo (2017) notes, the government has taken steps to facilitate the integration of these migrants into Korean society. One

such initiative is the translation of a Korean language textbook into Filipino and Tagalog. Laranjo asserts that the utilization of the native languages of the Filipino community facilitates the process of integration into Korean culture through the medium of language.

With a few notable exceptions, including the King Sejong Institution Foundation's "Easy Korean for Agricultural Workers" and "Easy Korean for Fisheries Workers," these publications are rarely accessible to migrant laborers (KSIF, 2024). In contrast to the approach taken with multicultural families, these publications sought to educate immigrants on the minimum level of Korean language proficiency required to engage in the anticipated economic activities within Korea. However, they did not promote integration or advancement into society, as the expectation is that immigrants will not reside in the country for extended periods.

Furthermore, according to Carolino *et al.* (2018), 55.4% of overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) in Korea rated their working conditions as satisfactory, with no significant difference between documented and undocumented workers. However, wage disparities were found, with documented OFWs earning an average monthly income of US$1,586.6 and undocumented OFWs US$976.9. Legal status increased the income of OFWs by US$ 848.5, indicating lower bargaining power. Wage disparities don't just make life harder, they also make citizenship less likely, as income is one of the requirements in the Korean point system for applying for both permanent residency and citizenship visas, which affects both documented and undocumented workers.

In addition, South Korea's Ministry of Justice announced that starting in December 2019, illegal migrants will be able to re-enter the country if they leave voluntarily by June 2020. (Jung, 2019). The policy exempts those who leave voluntarily from paying fines and allows them to obtain a 90-day short-term visa after a certain period of time following their departure. Under this new incentive program, more than 8,000 illegal residents have left South Korea as of January this year (Yonhap, 2020). Although the news did not specify the nationality of the illegal migrants who voluntarily left the country, this immigration policy proved attractive for undocumented migrants like Filipinos to consider returning to their home country.

This voluntary departure program for foreigners with illegal status in Korea shows that the Korean government is aware of the economic contributions of these workers in various industries to the country. A few years ago, Korean policy was aimed at prosecuting and deporting illegal workers, but now it focuses on providing an opportunity for those who wish to leave and return under legal conditions. However, this recognition is limited to temporary economic relief and short-term solutions to Korea's labor and social problems. This approach is consistent with Watson's (2010) argument that South Korea's move toward multiculturalism is driven by necessity rather than a genuine desire to embrace diversity. Watson

(2010) argues that the Korean government faces an ongoing dichotomy: the need to accept foreigners into its society while maintaining the homogeneity that underpins national pride. This tension is evident in the government's efforts to uphold liberal democratic values and cultural equality, while at the same time perpetuating notions of cultural purity and superiority. This duality underscores the complex and often contradictory nature of South Korea's multicultural politics.

As Yu (2023) argues, the Korean multicultural assimilation policies and those who inform them, such as in the multicultural family support centers, view families from certain countries as considered poor. In contrast, international marriages imply that the spouse is from a more developed or similar status to Korea. The target of these policies seems to be directed at the "poorer" migrants. Yu also highlights the fact that some of the staff at this center view the traditional Korean family as the ideal model to be emulated by multicultural families, further reinforcing the notion of cultural superiority. This creates a hierarchy that places Korean culture above others and assumes that multicultural families are less capable (Yu, 2023).

Recent Korean policy to increase birth rate: Filipino caregivers

South Korea's birth rate reached an all-time low of 0.65 in the fourth quarter of 2023, a record since Statistics Korea began collecting such data in 1970 (Oh, 2024). This demographic crisis, exacerbated by high housing prices, a tight job market, and changing social norms, has led to a significant decline in the number of marriages, with the fertility rate falling from 1.24 in 2015 to 0.72 in 2023 (Lee, 2024). In response, Seoul Mayor Oh Se-hoon launched an initiative to hire foreign nannies, particularly from the Philippines, to provide affordable childcare, encourage higher birth rates, and increase female workforce participation (Jun, 2024).

The South Korean government plans to receive 100 domestic helpers from the Philippines for a six-month pilot program, starting in September. These nannies, arriving under non-professional employment visas (E-9), will serve households with children under the age of 12 or expecting a child, regardless of income. Applications, which will prioritize single-parent families and working parents, will be accepted through mobile apps. The cost of hiring these nannies will be about 9% less than childcare services provided by the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family and 21% less than hiring a domestic helper through private companies (Cho, 2024).

However, this program initially proposed an estimated salary of 1 million won per month, which is much lower than the minimum wage in Korea. As a result, this income may not be sufficient to provide a fair standard of living for the workers, raising concerns about their economic well-being and financial security. As of September 2024, following negotiations with the Philippine government, it was determined

that these caregivers would be entitled to a minimum hourly wage of 9,860 won ($7.37) (Lee, 2024). However, this decision has been openly criticized by various political figures, including Na Kyung-won, a representative of the ruling People Power Party (PPP), and Seoul Mayor Oh Se-hoon. Both have advocated for differential wage schemes for certain foreign workers and have called for a reduction in these wages to bring them in line with more affordable rates (Lee, 2024).

This new program demonstrates Korea's multiculturalism and problem-solving tendency to use other nationalities as tools for its own gain while denying them the opportunity to become citizens of the country. Instead of allowing more multicultural and international families to move to Korea and work legally, thus increasing the birth rate and the economy, the initial approach was to capitalize on their superior bargaining power over low-skilled Southeast Asian labor.

The case of the Filipino caregivers is illustrative of the relationship between Korea and Southeast Asian workers because it highlights the assumption that migrant workers are mostly low-skilled and therefore deserve less compensation than other migrants or locals in the same field. However, as the Philippine ambassador noted, these caregivers are professionally trained to perform specific tasks in Korean households and have received additional training in Korea. Mayor Oh's remarks seek to highlight the possibility of using Korea's bargaining power with these countries to lower the current agreed minimum wage. These discourses perpetuate a cycle of exploitation rather than fostering a mutually beneficial relationship.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, Korea's multicultural policies, driven by necessity rather than a genuine embrace of diversity, reflect the country's struggle to balance economic imperatives with social integration. The experiences of Filipino migrants highlight the limitations and contradictions within these policies and call for a more inclusive and equitable approach to multiculturalism that recognizes and values the contributions of all immigrant groups.

Multiculturalism in Korea has been implemented under the notion of assimilation and exclusion rather than embracing the diversity that foreigners can bring to Korean society. These policies have targeted certain groups of migrants to adopt Korean traditions and lifestyles while excluding the vast majority of foreign residents, such as the case of non-professional migrant workers. Our case study of the Filipino community has highlighted the major barriers to integration and tolerance that not only apply to other foreign communities but also shed light on the need for a more inclusive and diverse approach to multiculturalism in Korea.

The Korean government has created a system that allows for a hierarchical system to take place among foreigners in which only a few are accepted and assimilated into

the homogeneous society, while the others that are usually considered "poorer or lower class" are subjected to systematic exclusionary policies and underlying discriminatory practices (Yu, 2023).

In this paper, we have argued the Korean government is caught in the dichotomy of accepting multiculturalism as an option to solve the country's demographic and economic issues while at the same time perpetuating social hierarchies and discrimination against certain groups of foreigners. This dual approach to multiculturalism in Korea highlights the complexities and challenges of achieving true inclusiveness and diversity within the society. This study provides the basis for further research on the perceptions of the Filipino working community regarding such multicultural policies.

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