

Different Takes: Migrant World Television and Multiculturalism in South Korea

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Abstract:

The geography of multiculturalism has expanded beyond western settler societies and post-colonial Europe, the traditional focus of most research on the topic. South Korea, once one of the most ethnically homogenous nations in the world, has recently adopted multiculturalism as official policy in order to manage a still small but rapidly growing population of foreigners. While real and substantial steps have been taken, this paper focuses on the tensions and contradictions that exist by examining the emergence of a unique experiment in multi-ethnic media called Migrant World Television (MWTV). MWTV's origins in the militant migrant worker movement and its development into one of the most vocal grassroots organizations involved in defining the meaning of multiculturalism in South Korea are detailed through a description of its programs and activism. Yet, as the South Korean government works to align its institutions with the reality of a more heterogeneous society, it continues to marginalize model organizations such as MWTV. This paper reveals a more dynamic, everyday form of multiculturalism that has taken root as different ethnic groups come together to practice multiculturalism by deciding what counts as news and entertainment for (im)migrants in South Korea.

Keywords: Alternative Media; Migrant World Television; Migrant Workers; Multi-Ethnic Media; Multiculturalism; South Korea

Résumé:

La géographie du multiculturalisme s'est développée au-delà des sociétés occidentales d'immigration et de l'Europe postcoloniale; le centre d'intérêt traditionnel de la plupart des recherches portant sur ce sujet. Anciennement une des nations les plus homogènes du monde du point de vue ethnique, la Corée du Sud a récemment adopté le multiculturalisme comme politique officielle afin de faire la gestion d'une petite population étrangère, mais en croissance. Tandis que des pas importants ont été pris, cet article se concentre sur les tensions et les contradictions qui existent en examinant l'émergence d'une expérience unique des médias multiethnique qui s'appelle *Migrant World Television* (MWTV). Les origines du mouvement militant des travailleurs migrants du MWTV et son développement vers une des organisations basistes les plus vocales qui intervient dans la définition du sens du multiculturalisme dans la Corée du Sud sont détaillés par le biais d'une description de ces programmes et de son activisme. Pourtant, pendant que le gouvernement de la Corée du Sud travaille vers l'alignement de ses institutions avec la réalité d'une société plus hétérogène, il continue de marginaliser les organisations modèles telles que MWTV. Cet article révèle une forme plus dynamique et quotidienne du multiculturalisme qui s'est enraciné lorsque différents groupes se sont réunis afin de pratiquer le multiculturalisme en décidant ce qui est considéré une nouvelle ou de l'*entertainment* pour les (im)migrant de la Corée du Sud.

Mots-clés: Médias Alternatifs; Migrant World Television; Travailleurs Migrants; Médias Multiethniques; Multiculturalisme; Corée du Sud

Introduction

Multiculturalism is once again the whipping boy of Western political leaders. German chancellor Angela Merkel, British Prime Minister David Cameron, and French President Nicolas Sarkozy have, in recent months, all taken turns attacking “the doctrine of state multiculturalism” in scathing speeches that have attracted wide international attention (Cameron, 2011). In Europe in particular the “failure of multiculturalism” is blamed for leading to segregation, a loss of a coherent national identity, and religious extremism (Finney & Simpson, 2009: 77).

Indeed, “[t]his is not a good time for multiculturalists” as Myria Georgiou and Eugenia Siapera (2006: 243) concede in their introduction to a special issue on multiculturalism in the *International Journal of Media & Cultural Politics*. Concerned with renewing multiculturalism, Georgiou and Siapera advocate skepticism towards both state multicultural policy and anti-multicultural arguments. They instead look for inspiration to British cultural studies theorist Paul Gilroy, who in his book *After Empire* (2004) calls for a return to the examination of everyday practices of multiculturalism in diverse societies.

[D]espite and in spite of all the anti-multicultural arguments, life with difference does go on in relatively convivial terms; and because the very idea of commonality can make sense in its generative dimension: as something actively pursued by people who choose to create it, rather than as a top down imposition, controlled and regulated through state apparatuses.

(Georgiou & Siapera 2006: 243)

In the spirit of this approach, in what follows I will focus on the practice of producing grassroots multicultural media by (im)migrants themselves. However, this paper also begins from the premise that if we want to renew multiculturalism we need to address the geographic insularity of discussions about it, which too often assume the backdrop of western settler societies and former European colonial powers.

The story of multiculturalism today is told in many unfamiliar languages. This point has important implications for its practice. As Will Kymlicka and Baogang He (2005: 10) argue in their edited volume *Multiculturalism in Asia*, while the adoption of multiculturalism in the west typically occurred after the consolidation of representational democracy, in Asia “claims for multiculturalism are often coinciding with democratization”. This profoundly influences the relationship between multiculturalism and the media in those societies. In the west, whenever the topic of multiculturalism and the media is broached in academic discussion, debate quickly settles around the issue of representation (e.g., Fleras & Kunz 2001). While critically important, a focus on the representation of minorities tends to assume the existence of a public sphere where pluralist ideology reigns dominant, which as Kymlicka and He (2005) demonstrate is often not the case in Asia. It also assumes that the study of multicultural communication begins and ends with media output—the messages and texts produced by media institutions. This approach appears to be less helpful in emerging democracies which have only recently adopted the policy and rhetoric of multiculturalism.

In South Korea, multicultural policy is being enacted in tandem with wider processes of democratization and civil society development, with the result that “multiculturalism” is still an open and highly contested signifier. In what follows, I will offer a window into one important site where this contestation is occurring—a multi-ethnic media organization called Migrant World Television (MWTV)¹. In place of a focus on representation, this subject matter calls instead for an approach that views multicultural communication as a process or a practice which has meaning in and of itself. This is the approach taken by Clemencia Rodriguez (2001) in her well-known study *Fissures in the Mediascape*, which looks at how the practice of making alternative media transforms the subject positions of marginalized peoples and communities. This paper follows a similar route in studying emerging multicultural media in South Korea. As Georgiou and Siapera (2006) imply multiculturalism should not be conceived of as a fixed entity to be either supported or rejected, but as a social practice made and remade through the interaction of multi-ethnic communities.

I will focus on MWTV’s emergence and development from 2005 to the present day, and the tensions between MWTV’s practices and South Korea’s official policies of multiculturalism which have been enacted over the same time period. In order to provide context for these developments though, it is necessary to first describe the demographic shifts that have created the conditions for the emergence of Korean multiculturalism in the first place.

Korean “Multiculturalism”

While multiculturalism as policy and political vision may offer itself up as the perfect sacrificial lamb in a period of economic uncertainty, multiculturalism as a demographic reality marches on relatively unaffected by political grandstanding. Serious labour shortages virtually guarantee that immigration will remain the only realistic political choice in developed nations plagued by low birthrates and an aging population. A report by the United Nations (2006) shows that the number of people who live and work outside their countries of birth has doubled over the last 35 years to 191 million in 2005. Of that total roughly one third have migrated from a developing country to a developed country. Interestingly though, another one third of this total have moved from a developing country to another developing country, indicating that the number of “South-to-South” migrants approximates that of “South-to-North” migrants (United Nations, 2006).

This increase and diversification in global population flows has expanded the geography of multiculturalism beyond the traditional settler societies of the United States, Canada, and Australia and postcolonial Britain, Germany, and France. As Will Kymlicka and Baogang He write in the introduction to their book *Multiculturalism in Asia* (2005), “the rhetoric of “multiculturalism” may now be ubiquitous around the world, but the word is being used to express quite different ideas, rooted in different traditions, both Western and non-Western” (Kymlicka & He, 2005: 2).

While Kymlicka and He effectively rebuked scholars of multiculturalism for their western centrism, their intervention primarily focused on Asian nations with a long history of ethnic diversity. In *Multiculturalism in Asia* no mention is made of an East Asian country that is currently experiencing profound changes as it implements multicultural policy and embarks on a journey towards greater acceptance of heterogeneity. Indeed, this country - South Korea - would seem to merit little attention in any discussion of multiculturalism as it has long been regarded as one of the most ethnically homogenous in the world. However, around the same time that Merkel was calling multiculturalism “an utter failure” (Sinico & Kuebler, October 17, 2010), the government of her conservative comrade in South Korea, President Lee Myung-bak, was issuing a press release titled “Happy Multicultural Society” to announce a nationwide 14 city consultation event for foreigners in Korea (Ministry of Justice, 2011).

Along with Iceland and Portugal, South Korea is often referred to as one of a very small number of countries which have historically been ethnically homogenous (Kymlicka, 2007: 62). As a result, the citizen and the nation are indivisible entities in South Korea. Non-ethnic Koreans are not recognized as citizens even if they acquire legal citizenship status. Even ethnic South Koreans raised in other countries are considered to be “waygook saram” (foreigners).

However, in the last few years, the South Korean government has embarked on a project of redefining the Korean nation. In 2006, the late President Roh Moh-hyun declared, “the trend towards multi-racial and multicultural society is irresistible” and it was “high time to take measures to incorporate multicultural policies” (Kim, 2007: 65). Statements such as these signalled a realization that steps needed to be taken to maintain social cohesion in a rapidly changing society. Non-Koreans residing in South Korea only make about two percent of the country’s population (1 million out of a population of 48 million) (OECD, 2010). However, the fact that the government is turning to multiculturalism to manage this “diversity” is an indication not so much of where Korean society is now as where it is coming from, and where it sees itself as going. Indeed the number of foreigners in South Korea almost tripled in the decade since 1997 and if the current trend continues, the number of foreigners in South Korea will reach 2.5 million

by 2020, and 4.1 million by 2050, or 9.2 percent of the total population. This, as Andrew Eungi Kim points out in a recent article, is comparable to the proportion of foreign-born residents in England in 2005 (Kim, 2009).

The reasons for this sudden increase are familiar. South Korea has one of the lowest birth rates in the world and is also one of the world's most rapidly aging societies (Rahn, 2009). As a result, the country has for two decades been highly dependent on migrant workers from surrounding Asian nations to fill labour shortages in its growing economy². These shortages have been particularly pronounced in the manufacturing and construction industries as Koreans increasingly avoid these so-called 3D jobs ("dirty", "dangerous", "difficult"). As a result, the migrant worker population has increased quickly over a short period, to the point where now there are around 700,000 documented migrant workers (excluding the roughly 200,000 undocumented workers) in South Korea (Kim, 2009). Future labour shortages are projected to be as high as 4.8 million by 2020 (Bank of Korea, 2006). As Andrew Eungi Kim predicts, "the South Korean government may be forced to grant permanent resident status to migrant workers in order to secure a stable supply of labour" (Kim, 2009).

Alongside the steady increase in the number of migrant workers there emerged another significant demographic phenomenon. Beginning in the late 1990s, there was an explosion in what is called "international marriages". South Korean bachelors, particularly in rural areas, began importing brides from countries like China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Cambodia, and Thailand in increasing numbers. In 2005, 36% of marriages in rural areas were between Korean men and foreign wives, while nearly 14% of marriages overall in Korea were international marriages (Kim, 2009). This phenomenon is due to the cultural preference for boys which has led to a serious gender imbalance and a surplus of bachelors. As with the population of migrant workers, the population of what the government calls "marriage migrants" will almost certainly rise significantly over the next decade³.

This explosion in the number of marriage migrants has more than any other factor forced a policy shift away from mono-ethnicity and towards multiculturalism. Since 2005 the South Korean government has instituted policy to deal with what it calls "multicultural families"—the distinct social unit that emerges from the union between a Korean man and a foreign woman⁴. The "Act on the Social Integration of Mix-Race Families and Immigrants" and "Act on Foreign Wife Integration" were passed in order to address problems with the cultural adaptation of international brides and with domestic violence, issues which have received considerable attention in mainstream Korean society. In the field of education, the Ministry of Education and Human Development declared that school textbooks would now promote multiculturalism (Kim, 2007: 65). This is quite a considerable shift as previous education material tended to emphasize how fortunate South Korea was to be ethnically homogenous and how distinct Koreans were from all other ethnic groups.

However, while marriage migrants and their mixed race "multicultural children" are seen as requiring government assistance to help them integrate, multicultural policy is not meant to apply to migrant workers and their children. Although migrant workers make up the largest population of foreigners in Korea, they are considered to be a disposable tool for the Korean economy rather than contributors to Korean society. While recent policy changes permit a stay of up to five years and there are hundreds of thousands of undocumented migrant workers who have lived in Korea for much longer (sometimes as long as two decades), migrant workers are still considered to be temporary sojourners, and thus not subject to the provisions of multiculturalism⁵.

The sociologist Seonok Lee (2007: 101) writes that by differentiating marriage migrants from migrant workers, multiculturalism provides the South Korean government with a more effective way to control the growing population of foreigners in the country. However, while state strategies of divide and conquer certainly shape the meaning of South Korean multiculturalism, this is not the entire story. In South Korea as elsewhere, popular or grassroots appropriations of multiculturalism reveal its highly contested character. The focus of the remainder of this paper will be on one activist media organization responsible—to paraphrase Rodríguez (1996)—for the “swelling” of multiculturalism in South Korea. This organization—Migrant World Television (MWTV)—has become a harbinger of a more inclusive Korean civil society, a cultural home for minorities, and one of the most vocal groups involved in defining what multiculturalism will mean in South Korea.

Migrant World Television

Unlike most mainstream versions of multicultural broadcasting, MWTV is television made directly by members of South Korea’s (im)migrant community. Many of its key producers, news anchors and community outreach representatives have been undocumented migrant workers who produce programming while attempting to evade the long reach of South Korea’s Immigration Bureau. Reflecting its origins in South Korea’s militant migrant workers social movement, “Migrant World Television” was actually known as “Migrant Workers Television” until members voted to change the group’s official name at a general meeting held on March 6, 2011 in order to better reflect the organization’s wider base of support and focus.

Over the past 6 years, MWTV has produced a wide variety of different programs including a monthly 60 minute discussion and current affairs program called “The World of Migrant Workers” and a news program called “Multi-Lingual Migrant Worker News”, which at its peak broadcast bi-weekly in eleven different languages. MWTV has also organized regular media education programs for migrant workers and international brides through the “MWTV Media Academy” and the annual Migrant Worker Film Festival (MWFF). Each of these endeavours will be examined in more detail subsequently but in order to understand the meaning of this organization there is no better place to begin than from within the recent history of Korean civil society, and in particular the country’s alternative media movement.

During the 1990s, South Korean civil society had moved from a focus on struggles for democracy against a military government to what was called the “Shimin Undong” (Citizens Movements) of which alternative media activism was a key part. In the late 1990s, a few remarkable institutional changes buttressed this movement. The first was the creation of the South Korean Independent Film Association, followed by the establishment of the media education center “MediAct” and the public access TV station “RTV”. MediAct opened its doors in May, 2002. Funded by the Korean Film Council (KOFIC), MediAct provides educational facilities and rents film production equipment to independent filmmakers at low rates⁶. MediAct also offers media education programs and helps citizens to produce their own films and media productions. RTV was founded in September, 2002 as a public access channel of Korea Digital Satellite Broadcasting, or “Skylife”. Created in order to give citizens broadcasting rights, part of RTV’s mandate is to serve socially disadvantaged or minority populations in South Korea and to guarantee media access for minority or disadvantaged peoples. Both RTV and Mediact contributed to a DIY media movement in South Korea and both were crucial in MWTV’s early days as they provided the organization with the initial financial and technical support, and

personal and institutional connections, which allowed it to begin producing regular programming.

However, the precise setting for MWTV's arrival provides perhaps the clearest insight into its founding ethos. In November 2003, at the Myeongdong Cathedral in central Seoul, migrant workers from dozens of Asian nationalities began what would become a 400-day-long sit-in struggle to bring attention to forced deportations, and to call for the legalization of all unregistered migrant workers in South Korea. The difficulties of forging solidarity across ethnic lines was overcome as the migrant protestors fought off repeated attempts by South Korean immigration police to break up the protest. A few months into the sit-in, MediAct began organizing a "Media Education for Migrant Workers" program at the protest site, teaching migrants how to film and edit their own videos. Most of the migrants who participated in this program had already lived in Korea for many years but this was the first time they were able to tell their own stories; the transformative step Rodriguez (2001: 3) refers to as "becoming one's own storyteller". The program was such a success that the participants began thinking about further media projects, such as starting a migrant workers' radio station or making a documentary film. Mahbub Alam, a migrant worker from Bangladesh who participated in the initial program and later became one of the key founders of MWTV recalls,

At first it was just a dream for us to make our own TV programs. During the (sit-in struggle), we did a number of interviews, and we organized conferences and seminars. We criticized the way South Korean media were reporting migrant workers' issues.

(Suzuki, Yonetani & Hyun, 2006)

About a year later, in April 2005, with the help of MediAct and RTV, a group of migrant workers produced a special they called "The World of Migrant Workers". The program received such a great response when it was aired on RTV that the group decided to make it a monthly 60 minute production—and MWTV was born.

RTV agreed to provide the funding for the production of "The World of Migrant Workers" and a bi-weekly news show called "Multi-Lingual Migrant Worker News". At first "The World of Migrant Workers" was targeted at Korean-speaking migrant workers who had resided in the country for many years and who lacked a forum where they could discuss their daily struggles and successes. However, the program soon became a way for migrant workers to reach out to a general Korean audience, to introduce them to the various cultures that make up the country, and to the work and daily life problems faced by migrants.

"Multi-Lingual Migrant Worker News", on the other hand, was seen as a way to provide foreigners in South Korea with important information and news on current affairs in their native tongue. At its peak, this news program was being produced in eleven different languages; Bengali, Burmese, Chinese, English, Indonesian, Korean, Mongolian, Nepali, Russian, Sinhala (Sri Lankan) and Vietnamese. The migrant workers, marriage migrants and foreign students who volunteered as news anchors were paid a small stipend for their efforts until funding cuts in 2008 made this impossible. Since "Multi-Lingual Migrant Worker News" is not broadcast daily, it is difficult to cover breaking news. Instead, the focus of the program has always been on covering news that is "politically and socially necessary for migrant workers living in South Korea" and "of interest to migrant communities" (Park Su-hyun, Personal Communication, May 25, 2008). As one member of the news team stated in an interview, "Because migrant workers have a

problem with communication in this society and this causes so much stress, our role is provide necessary and clear information that they can't get from mainstream news" (Cui Chun-hua, Personal Communication, May 25, 2008). MWTV relies on contacts within the many migrant communities across the country and on Korean volunteers to gather news, with the anchors themselves also participating in determining the content of each broadcast.

While lower-cost and easier-to-use digital technology has helped somewhat to democratize media production, expertise is still required to make quality audio-visual programs. The reality is that there are a limited number of (im)migrants in South Korea who have the skills necessary to produce television programming. As a result, media education and skills development remain crucial ingredients for the future success of MWTV. For this reason, MWTV regularly organizes media education programs to teach migrant workers and international brides how to make their own media. The "Media Academy" brings together migrants from diverse backgrounds who meet weekly over the course of two months. The program concludes with a celebratory screening night where the participants come together to share their films with each other and to receive feedback from their peers. Participants graduate as part of the "MWTV Media Production Team". A production team was envisioned as a way for graduates of the Media Academy to contribute to MWTV in the future by uploading video reports of current affairs in their communities on the MWTV website. In this way, following the popularity of online news sources in South Korea such as *OhMyNews*, MWTV also hopes to create its own base of "citizen reporters"—as ironic as that term may sound for the undocumented migrant participants. Special media education programs for women migrant workers and marriage migrants, and photography workshops for migrants and Korean activists have also been organized by MWTV.

One staff member at MWTV noted that while media education to develop media skills was important, it was equally essential that MWTV puts on regular workshops to discuss and to develop a shared conception of alternative media (Kim Ju Yong, Personal Communication, May 30, 2008). Echoing Rodriguez's (1996, 2001) foregrounding of the practice of alternative media making and the empowerment that can develop out of social interaction, Mahbub Alam says:

Although some of the people participating in MWTV don't understand alternative media, this is not necessarily a bad thing. They just want to join MWTV because it's fun to make media. It's interesting how we all just work together. That itself can be alternative media. Still now, the problem with this society is that people are not mixing. This mixing is one of MWTV's main roles.

(Personal Communication, June 9, 2008)

Through these media education programs, MWTV hopes to amplify the collective voice of migrant workers and marriage migrants in Korean society by teaching them practical and self-empowering media skills and literacy. Media education also allows MWTV the ability to reproduce itself in a difficult and transitory environment. There is always a need to recruit new media activists from the (im)migrant community to fill the holes left by departing members. Some MWTV members decide to return to their home countries while others are targeted by immigration police and deported. In order to survive as an organization and as a movement the Media Academy is a fundamental component of MWTV's activities.

Probably the most well-known of MWTV's productions is the Migrant Worker Film Festival (MWFF), which in 2011 is entering its 6th year. The festival's mission is to expand

dialogue on the issues facing migrants and immigrants around the world and to illustrate how migration intersects with concerns about labour, human rights, race, culture, and gender. A whole range of genres including documentaries, dramas, and comedies from around the world are screened at the festival with amateur productions by first-time Korean or migrant directors screened alongside international or domestic feature length films. In previous years the festival's opening film was usually a popular feature dealing with some aspect of migration. However, at last year's festival short films produced by immigrants and migrant workers themselves were screened at the opening ceremony. MWTV's current executive director, a charismatic refugee from Burma named Aung Tinhtun, explains the reason for this change:

We want to show more films produced directly by migrant workers or immigrants in Korea even if the quality is not so high. We might get criticized because of the quality but we are not trying to be a commercial film festival. We are more focused on expanding the communication between immigrants and Koreans.

(Personal Communication, February 17, 2011)

By organizing a film festival, MWTV is able to engage in cultural action of a more aesthetic and entertaining fare. The opening weekend of films, interspersed with cultural performances and parties, allows for a more condensed and diversified celebration of migrant culture and a way to expand the discussion about migration beyond what is possible with MWTV's regular programs. As Mahbub Alam says, one reason MWTV started the film festival was because, "it is easy to get tired of the rushed and machine-like process of filming, editing and recording another round of 'Multi-lingual News' or 'the World of Migrant Workers' program" (Personal Communication, June 9, 2008).

The film festival typically begins in Seoul over the course of one summer weekend and then, for the next few weeks, moves on to five or six other regional cities around the country where there are large concentrations of migrant workers. The hope is that the films will resonate with Koreans and migrants residing in regional cities and through the act of coming together to watch interesting films encourage the emergence of new multicultural communities. "I am constantly searching for films that represent Korean society and films that show the interaction and integration between Koreans and migrants", says MWTV's executive director Aung Tinhtun (Personal Communication, February 17, 2011).

From Migrants to (Im)migrants

The official adoption of multicultural policy and the popular dispersal of the discourse of multiculturalism throughout South Korean society has placed MWTV in a peculiar position. As already discussed, official multiculturalism in South Korea was implemented in order to facilitate the integration of marriage migrants and their children. It was never intended to serve the migrant worker base that MWTV emerged out of. Yet in reality, there are few groups in South Korea that have been as active in the practice of multicultural values than MWTV. In a recent interview, Aung Tinhtun—who left his homeland of Burma to work in South Korea in 1994, finally receiving legal status as a refugee in early 2011—speaks bluntly on the topic of "official" multiculturalism and MWTV:

Official multiculturalism is different from what we do and from how we understand the term. We have been doing multiculturalism before the government popularized it so it can't be said that we followed the government. But we also can't say that the government has recognized our multicultural activism. If the government wants to enact multiculturalism they should listen to long-staying migrants but they don't. They just listen to researchers and scholars. Scholars just represent us but we aren't able to present our views directly to the government. So they don't know the actual situation and our opinions. So I think the government's multiculturalism is superficial.

(Personal Communication, February 17, 2011)

Many of MWTV's founders were suspicious of the government's discourse of multiculturalism in the early days. One incident from 2005 clearly demonstrates MWTV's early politics. The South Korean Ministry of Culture had organized a Migrant Cultural Festival at the same time that the Ministry of Justice was leading a large-scale crackdown on undocumented migrant workers. In an interview with *AsiaRights Journal*, MWTV co-founder Mahbub Alam criticized South Korea's Ministry of Culture for manufacturing the illusion of unity in "an effort to whitewash the situation". Voicing what was at the time the dominant view at MWTV, Alam argued "If we haven't got the right to work, cultural rights mean nothing" (Suzuki, Yonetani & Hyun, 2006).

A few years into its existence however, a heated debate arose within MWTV over whether to remain true to the organization's roots—in migrant labour activism—or to take a more "multicultural" approach and expand coverage to include all minorities in South Korea. Proponents of this latter view argued that MWTV needed to move beyond its exclusive focus on migrant workers because the problems faced by all ethnic minorities in South Korea were similar. Mabub Alam describes how his perspective has changed over the years:

At that time [in 2005] migrant workers had a really hard time... many migrants were fired or committed suicide. The most important thing for us, as media, was to help migrant workers. But now, I am married to a Korean so I'm a naturalized Korean, but I face a lot of discrimination. I want to do something about this.

(Personal Communication, June 9, 2008)

We can see from these comments that Alam's goal now is to effect cultural change by appealing to a shared sense of human rights rather than focusing solely on building labour solidarity amongst and between migrants and Korean workers.

MWTV's gradual adaptation and appropriation of multicultural discourse is evident in changes to their programming. For example, in 2007 a new 20-minute-long talk show called "All Right, All Right!" was introduced. It was created in order to attract a wider audience and to provide some relief from serious news about crackdowns on undocumented labour. A typical segment of "All Right, All Right!" featured a group of five or six foreigners from different cultural backgrounds discussing topics such as their families and different cultural traditions in a light and humorous manner. As the show's producer Minod Moktan described during an interview, "migrant workers have it tough but they also have fun, and this community has so many talents to offer. So I wanted to make some more entertaining programs that demonstrate this" (Personal Communication, June 4, 2008). Moktan was making the case for programming

that displays the diverse customs of migrant workers and their cultural celebrations in South Korea. He wanted to show Koreans that migrants are unique human beings who are more than just a cheap source of labour. According to Moktan:

We have to try to appeal to a wider audience. If we only complain about serious issues we cannot change Koreans' thinking. If we always talk about sad stories, Koreans consider us servants. It gives us a bad image. That's why we need to talk more about our cultures and other issues.

(Personal Communication, June 4, 2008)

However, it is also clear that he wants to define multiculturalism in his own way - as a celebration of the cultural diversity of migrant workers. In effect, this is a strategic attempt to demonstrate that migrants are more than just workers while at the same time not losing control of the term "worker", since after all it is shared labour conditions and the experience of labour exploitation which serves to unite this diverse population.

Minod Moktan's promotion of a worker-centred multiculturalism, one that celebrates the contributions of the over half million migrant workers in South Korea, ended up costing him. Being undocumented for most of the two decades that he had lived in South Korea hadn't stopped Moktan from becoming a well-known public voice for migrants' rights. As a public speaker he was invited by schools and organizations to talk about multiculturalism. As the lead singer in "Stop Crackdown"—a multi-ethnic activist rock band—he attracted a cult following amongst both foreigners and progressive Koreans. Moktan even won first place in a Foreigner Talent Show put on by KBS, South Korea's main public broadcaster. Interestingly, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism presented him with a special plaque as a token of appreciation after this win. However, the Korean government's patience with Moktan appeared to have run out by 2009. In October of that year he was picked up by immigration police. After a week in a detention centre he was deported back to his home country of Nepal⁷.

Political Change and Continuity

That an undocumented migrant like Minod Moktan could so easily operate within South Korea's public sphere may indicate that the liberal government of Roh Moo-hyun (2003-2008) understood the value of a grassroots multi-ethnic media organization which could ask the more uncomfortable questions that lay behind every celebration of ethnic food and dance. Moktan's arrest and deportation less than two years into conservative president Lee Myung-bak's term could be seen as yet another example of how the current administration has attempted to distance itself from the two liberal regimes that preceded it. Indeed, the arrival of a conservative government in Seoul has had a deep impact on MWTV.

Immediately upon taking office in early 2008, the government of Lee Myung-bak ordered the consolidation of the Ministry of Information and Communication (MIC) and the Korean Broadcasting Commission (KBC) into the new Korea Communications Commission (KCC). RTV's funding was an early casualty of this streamlining as the new governing party saw public access television as an unwanted and potentially threatening liberal institution left over from the opposition's days in power. As a direct result of RTV's sudden downsizing MWTV immediately lost most of its funding⁸. "Multi-lingual Migrant News" was reduced to a once-a-month

broadcast in eight languages (from eleven) and “The World of Migrant Workers” was replaced with a shorter monthly documentary and current affairs program called “MWTV Special”.

In an attempt to generate alternative sources of funding, MWTV has turned to a membership model. To date, roughly 150 “MWTV Members” have signed on. (Aung Tinhtun, Personal Communication, February 17, 2011). Members pay a flexible monthly “membership fee” for the opportunity to participate in MWTV’s general meetings and have a say in the future of the organization. While RTV is still able to provide some limited financial support, a more substantial amount of funding is now received through a public charity called “The Beautiful Foundation”⁹.

However, while South Korea’s current government has staged a frontal attack on many progressive organizations that emerged during the previous decade of liberal rule, when it comes to the overall project of multiculturalism, continuity has been the chosen course. As the population of foreigners in South Korea increases and diversifies, Lee Myung-bak’s government has largely upheld and in some cases expanded the attempt to reform South Korean institutions in accordance with multicultural principles. For example, the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family recently announced that it will increase the number of nationwide “Multicultural Family Center” offices from 159 to 200 and that it will expand bilingual education programs for “multicultural children”. The Ministry also plans to open a call centre to serve foreigners in 8 different languages in the near future (Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, 2011).

As for MWTV, the group is also increasingly expanding its practice and understanding of multiculturalism. MWTV has over the years undergone a gradual transformation in its identity from an initial focus on migrant worker labour issues, to a celebration of the cultural diversity of migrant workers, to its current manifestation as a media home for all minorities in Korea—a cultural big tent for immigrant brides, migrant workers, refugees and “multicultural children”. This transformation was made official at MWTV’s general meeting on March 6, 2011 when members voted to change the group’s official name from “Migrant Workers Television” to “Migrant World Television”. While MWTV still plans to draw attention to the continuing exploitation of migrant labourers and the violent crackdowns on undocumented migrants, opening up more space in the group for marriage migrants has become a top priority. Towards that effort, special media education programs for foreign brides have been organized for the coming year¹⁰. MWTV executive director Aung Tinhtun confirmed this in a recent interview:

Until now there are not that many productions that migrant workers and marriage migrants have worked on together. So this year we hope to encourage more foreign brides to participate in our programs and work together with migrants.

(Personal Communication, February 17, 2011)

However, a focus on the ties that unite does not vanquish the very real differences between migrant workers and marriage migrants. Migrant workers, as discussed earlier, are essentially regarded as guests in the South Korean home, while marriage migrants are mothers for the new generation of “multicultural children”. This presents MWTV with significant challenges to overcome as the organization develops.

Conclusion

The compressed nature of the changes that are taking place in South Korean society present scholars interested in multiculturalism with the fascinating ability to witness, in real-time, some of the same transformations that occurred over a much longer time period in western societies. In South Korea, as in much of Asia as Kymlicka and He (2005) point out, claims for multiculturalism are being adopted in tandem with—and as a crucial component of—wider processes of democratization. For those scholars and activists in the west calling for the rethinking and renewal of multiculturalism (e.g., Parekh, 2000; Georgiou & Siapera, 2006) it appears that much could be gained from close study of the ideals and practice of multiculturalism in non-western societies. Debates about multiculturalism in the west tend to be preoccupied with, as Georgiou and Siapera note, “a focus on the ‘problems of multiculturalism’ rather than an honest discussion on the failures and limitations of the policy” (2006: 245). This is arguably less likely to be the case in non-western societies such as South Korea where the meaning of the “multiculturalism” is not yet quite as fixed. Grassroots activist organizations such as MWTV are crucial sites determining the future meaning and practice of multiculturalism in South Korea. Furthermore, while progressive critics of multiculturalism in Canada and other western nations often argue that “multiculturalism appears to focus on saris, samosas and steel-bands’ in order to diffuse ‘resistance, rebellion and rejection’” (cited in Satzewich & Liodakis, 2010: 161), the story of MWTV and its rootedness in a migrant worker-centred conception of multiculturalism supports Nancy Fraser’s (1997) contention that the politics of multiculturalism always includes both cultural difference and redistributive justice.

South Korea has been praised by international observers for moving away from its previous emphasis on ethnic homogeneity. The Korean State, regardless of the ideological orientation of the party in power, seems to recognize that multiculturalism represents an improved form of governance in a multi-ethnic society. Many of the steps taken have been real and substantial. However, this paper’s focus on Migrant World Television reveals the tensions and contradictions that exist between official and grassroots multiculturalism. As the South Korean government works to reform institutions and practices to align them with the rapidly changing reality of South Korean society, it continues to marginalize organizations such as MWTV which should be a model for intercultural dialogue and communication.

Nevertheless, while the South Korean government promotes its official discourse and application of “multiculturalism”, a more dynamic, everyday form of multiculturalism has taken root in MWTV’s office and makeshift recording studio as different ethnic groups come together to decide what counts as news and entertainment for (im)migrants in South Korea. As MWTV staff member Kim Ju Yong puts it, echoing Rodriguez’s thesis on alternative media in *Fissures in the Mediascape* (2001), “[w]orking together, I think, is a kind of movement in itself”. (Personal Communication, May 30, 2008). It is this everyday practice of multiculturalism which is building a new society in South Korea.

Notes

- 1 Much of the background research for this paper was conducted while the author was working as a reporter and translator for Migrant World Television from 2006-2008 and in particular from 2007-2008 when the author held a visiting researcher position in the Department of Sociology at Sungkonghoe University in Seoul, South Korea. Interviews with five full-time staff members at MWTV were conducted during this period. A follow-up interview with MWTV's executive director was conducted in February 2011 when this paper was being prepared.
- 2 Migrant workers in South Korea mainly come from China, Mongolia, Vietnam, the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, Bangladesh, Nepal, Burma, Uzbekistan, and some other Asian nations. There is also a smaller population of African migrants.
- 3 Andrew Eungi Kim (2009) writes, "the sex ratio of men and women in their most "suitable" years for marriage—i.e., 26-30 year old males and 24-28 year old females—is expected to be 118.9 in 2010, 112.0 in 2020 and 116 in 2030".
- 4 While the government now officially refers to the children of these marriages as "multicultural children", some other organizations refer to them as "Kosians". "Kosian" is a compound word made from "Korean" and "Asian", and indicates those children from foreign wives and South Korean males. Andrew Eungi Kim writes "their number reportedly stood at around 50,000 as of the end of 2006. Nearly a third of all children born in 2020 are expected to be Kosians and their accumulated total will soar to 1.67 million or 3.3 percent of the population by that year...In addition, the number of bi-ethnic/bi-racial children in elementary and secondary school reached 13,445 in 2007, up 68.1 percent from the previous year (7,998). The proportion of bi-ethnic/bi-racial children in total enrollment is expected to rise to 16 percent in 2018 and to more than 870,000 or 26 percent in 2050" (Kim, 2009).
- 5 The line that determines who stands inside, and who remains outside of Korean multicultural policy, also cuts through gender. Seonok Lee (2007) describes how even if a male migrant worker were to marry a Korean woman, he would still not be considered a subject of multicultural policy. South Korean society accepts foreign brides as members of society because they are "considered to be under their husband's control since patriarchy is so deeply entrenched in Korean society" (Lee, 2007: 101). However, South Korean society cannot allow foreign husbands as substitute patriarchs and thus refuses to accept foreign husbands as members of the new "multicultural" society. Indeed, while a foreign woman who gets married to a Korean man has always been able to easily attain a work permit or permanent residency, until as recently as ten years ago, a foreign man who married a South Korean woman was only granted a temporary visitor visa.
- 6 MediAct was established by the Korean Film Council (KOFIC) as an autonomous organization funded by the then-liberal central government to promote Korean cinema within the country and overseas. However on January 25, 2010 the Korean Film Council announced its official decision to offer the contract to run MediAct's facilities to a conservative group called the Institute for Citizen Visual Culture (ICVC).
- 7 In a recent interview, MWTV's current executive director Aung Tinhtun recalls getting a phone call from Korean Immigration the day before members of MWTV had planned to

- 8 speak at a press conference about migrant workers rights a couple of years ago. The immigration official threatened “If you continue to criticize the Korean government we will deport all of you”. Shortly thereafter Minod Moktan, who was then MWTV’s executive director, was arrested and deported. (Aung Tinhtun, Personal Communication, February 17, 2011).
- 8 “Multi-lingual News” and “The World of Migrant Workers” were supported by RTV as part of the public access channel’s production costs for the first few years of MWTV’s existence. MWTV was paid 4,000,000 won (about \$4,000 USD) by RTV every month to produce these two programs. Before the cuts in 2008, RTV’s annual budget totaled 1,500 million won (about \$1.5 million USD). (Aung Tinhtun, Personal Communication, March 10, 2010)
- 9 According to Aung Tinhtun, MWTV received about \$14,000 from The Beautiful Foundation last year and expects to receive \$20,000 in 2011. The Beautiful Foundation’s philanthropy is generated largely through online donations by netizens. According to a CNN article on the foundation “Nearly every donation received by the foundation—more than 90 percent—comes through its Web site. And most of those donations are given in tiny amounts, by individuals”. (Mollman, 2007; see also <https://www.beautifulfund.org/eng/sub01/06.jsp>).
- 10 In the past, MWTV’s “Media Academy” has been funded by limited grants from the Ministry of Public Administration and Security. MWTV has also received some funding from the Ministry to produce teaching material for multicultural media education. In recent years support for the Migrant Worker Film Festival (MWFF) has come from the Ministry of Public Administration and Security and to a smaller extent from the South Korean Film Council. The National Human Rights Commission gave \$10,000 for the MWFF last year (Aung Tinhtun, Personal Communication, February 17, 2011).

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