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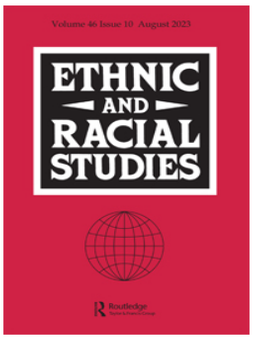

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Migrant racialization in South Korea: class and nationality as the central narrative

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the significance of class and nationality in relation to South Korea's migrant integration policy and the racialization of migrant groups within everyday policy practices. As an emergent destination country for regional migration, South Korea offers an interesting case to look at the specific mechanisms through which different migrant groups are received by the "native" ethnic majority, relative to shifting demographic circumstances and the politics of national belonging. Drawing on ethnographic data from state-sponsored migrant integration centers and in-depth interviews with migrants and Korean staff, this article shows how a hierarchy of different ethnic/national migrant groups is established through a logic of class and conferred cultural values, determined largely by conceptions about the economic status of the migrants' country of origin. The intersection of class and nationality in everyday narratives generates the racialized framing of migrant "others" and crucially informs migrants' diverging experience of integration in Korea.

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Introduction

One consequence of the unprecedented scale and diversity of contemporary global migration is the need for more precise conceptualization of migrants' adverse experiences at their places of destination. Emerging research focused on the racialization of migrants in Asia, particularly concerning co-ethnic groups, illuminates this point. Although Asia has been relatively marginalized within the wider body of literature on racism and migration, recent research on the region has demonstrated how not only migrants' different racial/ethnic backgrounds but also their class, gender, citizenship, and nationality all contribute to the racialization processes and their experience of racism (Raghuram

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2022). For example, in Japan and South Korea, co-ethnic diaspora migrants coming from the Americas, China, or Central Asia are treated as second-class citizens within society while being simultaneously hierarchically organized depending on their national origin (Seol and Skrentny 2009; Tsuda 2022; Denney and Green 2021). In Singapore, recent Chinese immigrants, despite their supposedly shared ethnic and cultural background with the majority Chinese population, are differentiated from the established, "native" population who prefer to identify themselves within a notion of Singaporean national identity that transverses the various longstanding ethnic populations of the island (Liu 2014).

Growing empirical research on the attitudes of host states and natives to migrants has further exposed such multifaceted patterns of racialization that go beyond logics of "race" and ethnicity. This work demonstrates that not all migrants are equally perceived as "others" to the same degree; a process constructed through varying logics that frame why certain groups are more acceptable than others (Verkuyten, Mepham, and Kros 2018; Bonjour and Duyvendak 2018; Hellwig and Sinno 2017; Şimşek 2021). Given this apparent complexity, addressing how processes of racialization operate for different migrant groups within a nation is a topic that demands further investigation.

This article therefore aims to engage with the growing literature on racism and migration, by examining how migrants of different national, ethnic, and class backgrounds are racialized in South Korea, an emergent migrant destination that is rapidly (and by national self-definition) becoming "multicultural". Racialization is understood here as a process by which migrants are constructed as immutable cultural "others" by non-migrants through varying logics (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1992). It draws on intersectionality as an analytical tool to explain how multiple social categories position people differently in the context of global migration (Collins and Bilge 2020), specifically considering the diverse extent to which migrants in intersecting positions are perceived and racialized.

The research orientation here is particularly influenced by Pratsinakis' (2018) call for intersectional research on immigrant–native relations and migrant integration processes, including not only on state migrant integration policy but also, crucially, everyday interactions and relations. This orientation is privileged here, as it encourages the examination of macro-level state policy and ground-level social relations through ethnographic study of integration policy practice and a range of directly related quotidian narratives. By observing the interactions and relations between the Korean policy practitioners and migrants at state-sponsored migrant integration community centers, this article uncovers how different official and informal narratives are used to position migrants divergently in society and the impact of these discourses on migrants' lived experience.

Examining the practices related to the "Multicultural Family Support Policy", one of the state's major efforts to address the growing migrant population's

integration in Korea, offers a particularly suitable context to investigate the intersectional processes of racialization enacted against migrant groups. Established in 2008, the policy explicitly aims to integrate migrants married to a Korean spouse, mostly women, who form the nucleus of what the Korean state specifically terms "multicultural families".[1] Interestingly, the multicultural families who "benefit" from the policy come from a diverse range of ethnic, national, and class backgrounds. This diversity makes it possible to examine in detail the mechanisms by which migrants of varying backgrounds are perceived and treated, and how their experiences converge or diverge in relation to their social positions. Additionally, since Korea's integration policy is based on the target notion of a "multicultural" (mixed-ethnic) family, which specifically involves arriving migrants in tandem with Korean spouses, examining everyday narratives surrounding this policy helps to create a clear picture of how the racialized boundaries between "native" citizens and migrants are intersectionally produced and experienced.

Migration and new forms of racism

In the historical context of immigration, particularly within Western society, race and ethnicity have been crucial ideas framing the processes of integration and discrimination (Hargreaves 1995; Lucassen 2005; Panayi 2014). Yet, the term "racism" occupies an ambiguous position in migration literature (Grosfoguel, Oso, and Christou 2015). For example, in scholarly discussions on discrimination against migrants, terms such as "xenophobia", "anti-immigration sentiment", "ethnic discrimination", or "religious discrimination" (islamophobia) are far more common than racism or racialization. Disciplinary traditions seem to matter here. For instance, in the study of U.S. immigration, research on the racialization of migrants has been overlooked mainly because an assimilationist perspective dominates the field, rendering migrants' negative experience as the result of their failure to assimilate rather than stemming from racism (Sáenz and Manges Douglas 2015). It is only recently that studies in the U.K. have begun to consider xenophobic experiences of "White" Polish migrants as a form of racism (Fox, Moroşanu, and Szilassy 2012; Rzepnikowska 2019; Nowicka 2018). According to these new works, since migrants' culture and ethnicity are increasingly viewed as fixed and unassimilable, their experiences of discrimination and xenophobia justifiably constitute a form of racism.

How we conceptualize migrants' adverse experience in host societies also hinges on an understanding of the role of nationalism in relation to racism, as migrants who are considered external to the existing nation are often confronted by the forces of nationalism articulated in racial terms. Balibar (1991, 53) theorizes "the cycle of historical reciprocity of nationalism and racism", contending that the specific articulation of racism exists within

nationalism. In the contemporary context of global migration, where national boundaries are constantly contested and negotiated, and migrants' integration into "the nation" has become a common matter of debate across countries, conceiving of racism in terms of the phenotypical distinctiveness of victims alone leads to a "poverty of conceptualizing racism" (Miles and Brown 2003, 6). Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1992) similarly maintain that racism should not be conceptualized as purely based on common-sense notions of "race" alone (however they might be framed), but in relation to practices and discourses within a range of social categories, including class, gender, ethnicity, citizenship, and nation. Migrants can be viewed as being "racialized", when they are branded by an externally applied notion of their "identity", subject to discrimination, and accordingly excluded from national membership (Modood and Salt 2011). Addressing how national boundaries and membership are both officially and informally constructed in response to an influx of different migrant groups can therefore provide a valuable insight into how a given society goes about the process of racialization.

In this respect, recent research on migrants' status relative to respective "native" populations in Asia has already provided a further understanding of the diverse forms of racism and their relations to politics of national belonging (Raghuram 2022). Compared with the contexts of colonial and post-colonial racialization in Western countries, which usually draw upon longstanding ideas of racism and racial hierarchy (Winant 2001; Goldberg 2002), contemporary forms of discrimination against migrants in Asia often operate without necessarily invoking "race" in a similar way. For example, in Singapore, "native" Singaporeans emphasize national identity and political allegiance to challenge the presence of more recent immigrants, despite their shared cultural heritage and co-ethnicity (Liu 2014). In Japan, co-ethnic migrants are discriminated through "co-ethnic racism", which simultaneously hierarchizes American Japanese into a more privileged status, while positioning Brazilian Japanese as lower within the national hierarchy (Tsuda 2022). Similarly in Korea, co-ethnic migrants are hierarchized both in the legal system and within public perceptions, forming a framework of "hierarchical nationhood" (Seol and Skrentny 2009), which extends to the racialization of North Koreans (Hough 2022). Shin (2016), through the experiences of Korean Chinese migrants in Korea, further observes the cultural hegemony of the dominant ethnic group embedded in the racialized discourses and their impacts on social exclusion of migrants.

These previous studies commonly indicate that even if migrants have the same ethnicity, not to mention hypothetical racial ancestry or "bloodline" as the local native population, this does not safeguard their automatic acceptance within the national imaginary or their exemption from racialization. Nevertheless, since these recent works on Asia are largely limited to the study of co-ethnic migrant groups, there remains a substantial gap in

understanding how migrants beyond a co-ethnic frame are racialized and through what logic.

Furthermore, empirical research on the different attitudes held towards migrants by the "native" citizenry has highlighted the role of the established nationals in defining how a specific group of migrants are received. For example, migrants are more accepted when perceived as involuntary/forced arrivals rather than voluntary (Verkuyten, Mepham, and Kros 2018). In the UK, the public's concern for groups/types of migrants varies according to their ethnicity or regional background, with Muslim immigrants being more negatively characterized according to security fears, and Eastern Europeans following economic concerns (Hellwig and Sinno 2017). The perception of migrants' deservingness to access welfare support varies for different migrant groups depending on their racial, ethnic, and social position, through a discourse grounded in nationalist and racist diatribe (Faist 1995; Nielsen, Frederiksen, and Larsen 2020). For instance, in the debates surrounding migrants' civic integration in the Netherlands, migrants' cultural differences and the assessed extent of their potential to integrate successfully into Dutch society are critically informed by migrants' class and their assumed "ability" to contribute productively (Bonjour and Duyvendak 2018).

However, most of these studies on migrant integration tend to be based on either state-level policy discourse, or examinations of aggregate group-level attitudes towards migrants without exploring the full "ground level" accounts and explanations behind the varying attitudes. The specific narratives that are used to construct the boundary-making processes of the nation and its membership requirements, and how these affect native-immigrant social relations and different racialization processes for diverse migrant groups are less well understood. To address this gap in the literature, this article examines the ground-level practices of Korea's migrant integration policy and the everyday narratives of migrants and "native" policy practitioners in direct relation to this institutional dynamic. I focus on what social categories are at play in the racialization processes at different levels, and specifically how they are deployed against different groups of migrants.

Korea's migrant integration policy: the multicultural family support policy

Ethnic nationalism, constructed based on common "blood" and ancestry, has been one of the central forces in modern Korean history (Shin 2006; Pai 2000), but the recent influx of migrants into Korea has unsettled the deep-seated ideas of national ethnic homogeneity (Lee 2009). The overall number of two million "foreign" residents in the country over the last decade, a clear upward trend, represents roughly 4–5 per cent of the entire population, with most coming from East Asia or Southeast Asia (Korea Immigration

Service Statistics 2020). However, compared with many other immigrant-receiving countries, the pathways for migrants to acquire citizenship are still largely restricted in Korea, particularly for groups who are not of Korean ethnicity (Hollifield, Martin, and Orrenius 2014; Chung 2020).

The exception to the more reserved approach to immigration by the Korean state is for marriage migrants. This group, consisting of predominantly women married to South Korean men, can acquire permanent residency and citizenship relatively readily. Notwithstanding that obtaining national belonging remains "elusive" given the monoethnic parameters of Korean society (M. Kim 2018) and that their citizenship is conditioned by husband's approval (Chung 2020), it is undeniable that those married to Korean citizens have comparatively benefited from the state's specifically orientated migrant integration policy.

The influx of marriage migrants into Korea started in the 1990s as bachelors in rural areas found it increasingly hard to persuade local Korean women to become spouses. Regional governments then implemented programmes to help find these bachelors co-ethnic wives from China (Lee 2008). In parallel, private marriage brokers also started to flourish by exploiting this situation, and women from countries such as China, Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, and the Philippines and others began to settle as spouses to Korean husbands (Lee 2012). Reflecting the ongoing expansion of this trend, since the early 2000s conjugal formations between Koreans and migrants have constituted about 10 per cent of all marriages in Korea (Ministry of Gender Equality and Family 2016).

Following the Multicultural Family Support Act enacted in 2008, marriage migrants and their family are officially categorized as "multicultural families" and provided with various social benefits and programmes for integration, including the nationwide establishment of Multicultural Family Support Centers (hereafter Centers) specifically designed to aid their settlement. Since their inception, over 200 such state-sponsored Centers have been set up and continue operating today. These Centers are locally based, government run spaces, providing social integration programmes for migrant spouses, and they are primarily used by migrant women for things such as Korean language classes, organizing social gatherings, spousal relationship counselling, support for childcare and their children's education.

Korea's Multicultural Family Support Policy, a governmental approach to migrant integration and the promotion of multiculturalism within the nation, has been critiqued for its patriarchal, ethnocentric approach (H.M. Kim 2012; M. Kim 2013; Yu 2020). Such critiques particularly focus on how the overwhelming national interest in patrilineal family centeredness has led the state to privilege marriage migrant women's gendered responsibility as caregivers and mothers to native Koreans, a direction undertaken through largely an assimilationist approach. However, an examination of migrants'

quotidian experience of the policy in relation to racialization, particularly in intersectional relation to any social categories beyond gender, has not been fully investigated. It is this context that I explore in detail here.

Methods

The analysis in this paper is based on participant observation and interviews that I conducted at two of the Multicultural Family Support Centers between 2016 and 2017 over a period of 16 months. As a volunteer, I taught classes that helped to prepare migrants for citizenship testing and supported in staffing the many regular and ad hoc events and programmes that the Centers ran. The Centers provided a suitable space for me to observe how migrant integration and multiculturalism are practiced through daily interactions between the staff and the migrant users.

The employees at the Centers were not officially civil servants, nor did they identify themselves as such. They were highly critical about the approaches undertaken by the government and the implementation of its policy, demonstrating that the accounts of Koreans shown in the study are largely independent from the official state discourse.

My positionality within the Centers was both as an insider and outsider. The Korean staff perceived me as a fellow Korean with shared ethnic/national identity, different from the migrants. On many occasions during my fieldwork, they used the term "we" to refer to us (myself and staff), and "they" to refer migrants. Although, as an outsider of the institution, I had partial access to information, I was able to gather substantial information about the Centers and witness social interactions within them.

From the migrants' perspectives, being a volunteer positioned me differently from the regular Korean staff, as someone with whom they could more freely discuss criticisms of the Centers with. I felt even more accepted by migrants when I introduced myself as a fellow member of a "multicultural family". Migrant women welcomed my background of having a foreign husband and become more enthusiastic in participating in the interview after I mentioned it as a cause of my interest. Further, because some of my questions addressed their negative experiences of the policy and life in Korea, many migrants understood my own "multicultural family" circumstance as a sign of my allied interest in problematizing discrimination against them, despite my belonging to the majority ethnic group.

Once I established a rapport with individuals at the Centers, I conducted semi-structured interviews with twenty-one migrants and nine Korean staff. During the interviews, I asked questions about each person's individual account of the policy and experiences from their respective positions as users and workers. Most interviews were conducted in Korean, but Japanese and English also featured in some cases. My interviewees were all women

aged between twenty and sixty. Some migrant informants had arrived in Korea as recently as two years ago, while others had lived in Korea for over two decades. The countries that they originally came from were diverse and included China, Japan, Cambodia, Vietnam, the Philippines, Uzbekistan, and Thailand.

Determining migrants' status and experiences of racism: the significance of class and nationality

Although the state's Multicultural Family Support Policy and the Centers' services are open to all "multicultural family" members legally, including any migrants who are spouses of Korean citizens, how the Korean staff view the idea of a "multicultural family" is more specifically applicable to certain migrants. For them, migrants of multicultural families were essentially divided into two types: Migrants from "poorer" countries (compared to Korea) and those from "richer" countries. Most staff considered that an "authentic" multicultural family consisted of migrants from the former category, and that such families were the targets of the migrant integration policy they practiced. Kyunghee, a staff at the Center in her forties, compared the Korean term *gukje gyeolhon* (international marriage) with *damunwha gajok* (multicultural family) to explain the different connotations attached to these two similar, but distinctive terms.

> When we were young, we called it "gukje gyeolhon [international marriage]", but then since the Korean Chinese and Vietnamese started to come in, the term "damunwha [multicultural]" took off. [This was because] there was no specific term to refer to them, and [they were] not Koreans … Previously if you were married to a foreigner, say an American, it was called an international marriage. And it sounds fancy. But if you say multicultural [it doesn't sound so impressive]. I think it depends on the countries. It is an international marriage if [married to] an American or a U.K. national, but if Vietnamese, then it becomes multicultural.

For Kyunghee, the difference between the multicultural family and the family of international marriage was clear. It is determined mainly by the migrants' original nationality, and the global economic status of the country as a singularly important factor. Korean staff believed that coming from a lower-income country meant that the migrants in question had arrived in Korea through commercial brokering services, whilst those from "richer" countries were always assumed to have been affluent and their relationship formed through *jayu-yeonae* (free dating).

This image of "mail-order brides" initially formed in media and public discourse continues to dominate here, combined with the earlier state approach where marriage migrants were often assumed as being "economically disadvantaged" (Bélanger, Lee, and Wang 2010). Whilst all the Korean interviewees

agreed that these stereotypes of marriage migrants had declined, and that migrant demographic heterogeneity in nationality, class, and migratory pathway was evident during my fieldwork, the notion of a "multicultural family being economically inferior", in Youngsun's terms, strongly endures in Korea. Based on the economic status of their home nation, certain migrants are assumed to be economically comfortable and begin their relationships with Koreans without the financial necessity to migrate to Korea, while others are presumed to be poor and desperate to migrate to Korea to gain new opportunity. Following this simplified formula, Korean staff perceived that a migrant's home country relayed definite clues about their class background and the social/commercial channel they used to find their Korean spouse.

Rather than racial phenotype, ethnicity, or the actual individual socioeconomic background of the migrant in question, national origin was the primary factor for Koreans in determining their social status, and whether they were suitable for the pejorative appellation "multicultural" and not the more positive "international". Jungyun, a manager at one of the Centers, stated that "multicultural but from which country?" was the first question that she would ask when she wanted to characterize whether somebody was authentically "multicultural". She elaborated this point in the following way:

> You know the solid image of multicultural family and the associated (negative) stereotypes, so it always starts from (the question of) which country migrants are from, and then it is decided whether they are multicultural or not.

In short, Jungyun's conception about a multicultural family is common across Korean society at a quotidian level, and certainly the standard idea held by staff I encountered at the Centers.

The Korean tendency to frame a migrants' social location specifically based on their national origin is not limited to a judgment made about their inferior economic status. For Korean staff, migrants within multicultural families are also assumed to be socially inferior, due to their perceived embodiment of lower-class values, a perspective which constitutes the basis of their racialization. The strong perception of migrants regarding their supposedly inferior social and domestic customs was firmly grounded in the default notion of the normative homogeneity of Korean culture. For example, Kyunghee, based on her work experience at the Centers, told me how amazed and startled she was when she found out the similarities (or even as she perceived it the occasional superiority) of multicultural families when compared to her own experience of Korean family life.

> Some households, when we visit for the program, they are really well-off, well maintained and clean, compared with our Korean households. Almost to the degree that I would say "your house is tidier than mine!"

Despite her intention to illustrate the positive, stereotype defying, aspects of multicultural families she had personally witnessed, Kyunghee's comment exposed her attitude that hierarchically separates "Korean life" from that of the migrant "others" that she worked with everyday. Here multicultural households are racialized based on their assumed social status and associated life practices, wherein details such as the extent to which one might maintain a tidy house becomes part of a wider web of intrinsic cultural and social difference applied to migrants in contrast to Koreans. In Kyunghee's account, "our Korean households" (assumed as a homogeneous group) were supposedly "well off, well-maintained and clean", but instead she was surprised to find that migrants' homes were also clean, and sometimes cleaner. In her statement, the habitual customary use of the Korean word "*woori* (we, us, our)" was used to naturally imply that essentially no differences in domestic practice exist between Korean families. Particularly in comparison to an "external" group, such as marriage migrants from lower-income countries and their "multicultural" families, "we", the Korean family, are all middle-class and clean to roughly the same degree.

The simplified understanding of difference between a multicultural and non-multicultural family was therefore always framed in terms of the Korean norm against non-Korean migrants from "poorer" countries. Misuk, a staff in her fifties who worked for the Center since its inception, strongly believed that migrant parents within multicultural families had little competence when it came to helping with their children's education, compared to their able Korean counterparts. This was made clear a few times during interview, when she mentioned how worried she was about the "learning development of multicultural family children".

> You know in the Korean family, there are lots of books at home even before the kids go to school. In the houses of multicultural families, there are no books even by the time the kids go to the kindergarten … In the Korean family with Korean parents they try their best to raise their children even they conflict sometimes. Fathers and mothers within multicultural families, they are just not as capable as parents.

Like Kuynghee, who generalized homogenous Korean families as wealthier and tidier in comparison to multicultural families, Misuk also described that the parents within a Korean family would naturally be far more competent. This she reasoned relative to her firsthand experience of witnessing the disparity between Korean families having many books and multicultural families lacking books in their homes.

While she was clear in pointing out that both the "fathers and mothers" in the multicultural family were incapable, not just the migrant mothers, the clear divide between homogenous Korean families and multicultural families in her account was entirely suggestive of Misuk's supposition of the natural

inferiority of the migrant mother as a parent. Because Misuk perceived such migrants as naturally different and inferior, it was easy for her to then assert that a multicultural family would place much less value on education in comparison to a Korean one. The parents within the multicultural family, and implicitly the mother (as the non-Korean) responsible for the pre-school education of the child, were typified by Misuk as inherently incapable (and culturally inadequate) parents who would not try to develop their children's literacy.

For some Korean staff, the idea of the multicultural family therefore encompassed not only economic notions of lower class, but also importantly a familial unit that did not function in the way a normative Korean family would. Koreans were assumed to belong to superior class, not only in their economic positioning, but also in their associated social and cultural attitudes, practices, and customs – as regards quotidian contexts such as childcare and domestic upkeep. The fact that this racializing tendency was so prevalent among the individual policy practitioners who frequently emphasize their desire to support migrants' integration served to surreptitiously maintain the stable and unequal power relations between Koreans and migrants, and deeply informed the everyday experience of tacit racism for migrants in their activities at the Centers.

Migrants at the intersection of class and nationality

The tendency to reductively consider that an authentic multicultural family, as recipients of the government policy support, should consist of mothers from economically poorer countries placed migrants from Japan in an ambiguous location. As a neighbouring economically "advanced" country that is "richer" than Korea in terms of its global economic status, Japanese spousal migrants were one of the most discrepant national/ethnic groups who regularly used the Centers. One day during my volunteering/fieldwork, I engaged in a telling conversation at a "Japanese co-ethnic gathering", a regular event where people from the same ethnic/national context informally socialize. One of the Japanese migrants was talking about the Korean language textbook that the Centers used in class, bringing up the fact that it had Chinese and English translations in the glossary but not Japanese. She was wondering why this would be the case, given the large number of Japanese people who belonged to multicultural families and were users of the Centers. Then, a Korean staff intervened casually and said with a smile, "Well, Japanese people are not really multicultural, you know".

Another staff member, Suyeon, similarly commented in her interview when talking about the "two types of multicultural families", offering that Japanese migrants were "a different kettle of fish". She added, "Why would a Japanese woman bother coming to Korea to get married to a Korean

man?" Here, she implied that Japanese migrants were considered as an outlier or exception to the typical notion of multicultural migrants, normally understood as being women coming from a lower-income country, who were married to Korean men, usually of comparatively low economic and social status. Suyeon confirmed that her notion of an authentic multicultural family precluded any that included Japanese women, due to their "higher-class" national status.

In my interviews with migrants, a clear pattern emerged: those from countries that are popularly perceived to be economically less "developed" than Korea (such as Vietnam, Thailand, China, Uzbekistan) had more direct experience of unambiguous discrimination and racism than those from economically more "developed" countries (such as Japan). The kind of discrimination these migrants were subject to was the fact that they were thought of as "poor", for coming from what Koreans considered "poor countries", that is, less economically and "socially" developed.

While all users of the Centers were identified as non-Koreans and multicultural (to different extents), their racialized experiences as migrants significantly differed depending on their national background. For example, Japanese migrant interviewees were unable to recall any direct experience of discrimination based on their original nationality, apart from the general stereotype of the multicultural family that did not include them anyway. Yet, those from Cambodia, Thailand, the Philippines, Vietnam, and China shared their experience of being characterized as poor and less capable specifically because their home countries were perceived as being less developed. Hoang, from Vietnam, for example, commented:

> I get discrimination all the time just because I am from Vietnam. On the street, the market, at work. When I said I was from Vietnam, Korean people looked at me immediately as poor and desperate, married to an old Korean man for money. They asked where I live and if I can afford this and that. Even when Koreans were sympathetic, their concerns are all based on the assumptions about me coming from Vietnam, a poor country.

Yan, a Korean Chinese woman who lived in Korea for 12 years, and who used a nativized Korean version of her name and was perfectly proficient in Korean, added:

> I stopped going to the Center as their default assumption for us (as a) multicultural family is that we are poor. They think we need money and help … We are not treated as equal, but not just in terms of perceptions. I was shocked to find that one of my Chinese friends who worked at the Center was paid less money than the Koreans doing the same work.

It is also notable that being "White" did not prevent racialization based on their country's economic status. For instance, Daria, a blonde and blue-eyed migrant from Uzbekistan, recounted a frequent experience she suffered:

> On my way home from shopping, some men chatting in front of a convenience store asked me where I was from. I said Uzbekistan. And they said "oh, I know there are many pretty Russian and Uzbekistani women at the night clubs close by." Basically, they think of me as a prostitute as soon as they realized that I wasn't from a country in Europe or America.

Although the Korean version of racism based on one's nationality and class left migrants from lower-income countries with many comparable discriminatory experiences, it also triggered some migrants' distinctive experiences of multicultural policy and their wider life as immigrants. The most noted examples included the cases of lower-class Japanese and upper-middle class Chinese migrants, whose individual class status did not match the general perception of their national economic status in Korea. Mayumi, a Japanese woman, was uncomfortable with the Korean staff's supposedly positive comment that the Japanese would not be considered as "multicultural", a term that most migrants consider derogatory. Identifying herself as being from a lower socio-economic background, she objected to this arbitrary divide of multicultural family by nationality.

> Koreans don't consider any Japanese people as "multicultural". They think only those from the economically poorer countries are multicultural … My family is actually not wealthy at all. Just because I am Japanese doesn't meant that I am well-off or even middle class.

Another Japanese migrant, Sachiko, with scant income, understood that her national origin prevented her from being subject to the pejorative notions that surrounded other Asian "multicultural" marriage migrants. She argued,

> Japan is treated separately, just because it is not one of these "poor" countries. I don't agree with this divide. Koreans differentiate Japan from other poor countries, even though we are all "multicultural".

For both Sachiko and Mayumi their lower-class background did not correspond to the higher status accorded to Japanese migrants in Korea. As such, they had not been directly affected by racialization that affected other multicultural families.

Zhou, an upper-middle class Chinese migrant and university graduate, was confounded by the fact she was framed at the opposite end of the social spectrum in Korea. With her outgoing personality, she seemed to know everyone at the Center including the Korean staff, so I was surprised to hear her negative accounts about the Centers. In my two interviews with her, Zhou stated that she appreciated the opportunity that the Centers offered, particularly to socialize with other migrants from all around the world. However, she was personally dissatisfied with the Center's focus on low-income families, which, from her perspective reflected Korean society's wider tendency to view all multicultural migrants as poor and low-class. Yet, unlike her co-

ethnic/national migrant friends and other Chinese interviewees who constantly feared potential discrimination based on their nationality (and the Korean perception of its less "developed" socio-economic status), Zhou was unconcerned:

> I noticed that all my Chinese friends seemed to hide their Chinese original nationality because if known, they worried that their children could get discriminated against or something. It did make me sad, but I never understood that. It's maybe because I am just that kind of person, or because my family is actually wealthier than most Koreans. I am not poor as they think I am.

Lea, originally from the Philippines, shared her similar experiences of racialization based on her assumed class status in Korea.

> A classmate of my daughter flipped over my daughter's lunchbox at the picnic, apparently because she didn't like her for coming from a poor country, the girl later admitted. When I spoke to her mother to discuss the incident, her tone was really condescending up until the moment when she realized that I was living in the same apartment block as her. She changed her attitude straight away and was saying sorry. It was clear that if I was poorer and not the similar class status as her, I wouldn't have gotten any apologies or respect.

Like Zhou, the Chinese woman who was able to react to Koreans' discriminatory attitudes casually by referring to her own financially enfranchised background, Lea revealed that her relative class status safeguarded her from the full effect of racism in Korea.

Zhou and Lea's accounts were suggestive of the reality that many migrants faced, that is, having to deal with racialization based on their non-Korean national background and the accompanying assumption of their low-class, financially disenfranchised status. From migrants' perspective, the Korean version of racism is essentially based on economic hierarchy, complicated by most Koreans' preoccupation with nationality as a primary group category. Due to Koreans' general tendency to make strong presumptions about migrants' class and financial status based on their national origins, migrants, particularly those whose presumed "national status" does not match their individual class status, are faced with different experiences, and offer differing responses to Koreans' racialization of them.

Articulating migrants' class: the social welfare recipients who are actually wealthy?

Consistent with the general tendency to view the multicultural family as in need of economic assistance, the Korean staff considered the multicultural family support policy and the Centers as comparable to a low-income family welfare policy. Yet, the notion that "many multicultural families are not poor, and some of them are actually well-off", was commonly held by

Korean staff, particularly when discussing whether state support for the Centers was justified. "Too much talk about the justification of keeping the Centers", as Jungyun put it, existed even amongst the staff themselves, contributing to the precarious status of the Centers. In this respect, despite the overall sympathy they openly expressed for migrants, the Korean staff also understood, if not agreed with, the ethno-nationalist rationale used by many anti-multiculturalists and anti-immigrant movements.

Heejeong, a staff member in her forties, carefully specified why she thought some Koreans would feel uncomfortable about the social benefits and integration services given to multicultural families, maintaining a relatively neutral position on the matter:

> Actually, there are some multicultural families who are far more well-off than Koreans. Although there are many multicultural families who have no economic problems, the multicultural policy tends to consider all multicultural families as one group and offer the services for free. I believe that there is a line of thought [in Korean society] that there are many more Koreans who are in much worse situations [than the migrants].

Jiyeon explained why some Koreans would justifiably oppose the multicultural policy in a similar manner:

> I think Koreans might want to complain about the multicultural family benefits given to marriage migrants regardless of them being well-off or poor, whilst the Koreans whose equivalent benefits could only be granted if they are officially categorized as in poverty or low-income family.

While the notion of "the poor and low-income multicultural family" dominated the interviews I had with Korean staff, both staff members in these excerpts independently brought up the same point that many of the multicultural families were economically better off and of relatively higher class than many low-income Korean families.

This "reverse discrimination discourse", apparently evidenced by the existence of some relatively wealthy multicultural families, verifies the Koreans' construction of a clear separation between Koreans and non-Koreans and the racialized narratives against migrants. For Korean staff, the multicultural family was here again considered "different" from the normative Korean family, because one of the spouses in the family was not a member of the national ethnic group (regardless of their current status of "naturalized" citizenship). In this context, although class was crucial in determining the perceived status of migrants across different ethnic and national backgrounds, when considering who is a deserving member of the national citizenry, migrants' class becomes less important, as essentially none can become authentic Korean citizens. Due to this primary notion of group division stressing the genealogical and ethnically centred element of the Korean national membership, the class category of "low-income family" was only applied to the

normative Korean family, not the multicultural family. While the initial construction of the policy specifically targeting marriage migrants might have informed the notion of the multicultural family as separate from the "normative" Korean family, it is through ground-level racializing narratives that migrants have become firmly positioned as undeserving beneficiaries of the national policy. Here, the Korean husbands of the multicultural family who would likely to be both "low income" wage earners and "Korean" became invisible, while the migrant wives from the other countries were marked as the sole beneficiaries of the multicultural policy and the Centers' integration programmes.

Although most Korean interviewees underlined that they were just speculating about anti-immigration perspectives held by many within Korean society, some staff were more explicit in their sympathy for those who opposed the multicultural policy. Jiyeon uttered her own negative opinions about the migrant policy: "There are too many ad-hoc events and programs offered by various governmental agencies for multicultural families in addition to the Centers, but migrants just take [all this] for granted".

Jungyun was even more explicit in her sympathy for anti-multiculturalists:

> Anti-multiculturalists do have a point. They say, "they are not disabled, apart from the fact that they can't speak Korean; they even have husbands and family. Why should we give our tax money to these people?" These words are not wrong really.

Suyeon similarly commented on why some Koreans (including herself) would understandably criticize the state's multicultural policy:

> Before I worked for the Center, I thought: our tax money is wasted again; can our tax go this far? There are so many difficulties [for people] in every corner of the society other than the migrants.

In confessing their hesitance to support the migrant integration policy that they themselves were working to enact, Korean staff seemed to ignore that these benefits were not solely given to the migrants but to their family. It is ironic that Korean husbands and the wider Korean family members of the "multicultural" family, such as co-habiting parents-in-law and children, were removed from the list of the benefit recipients from the Koreans' perspective, given that this multicultural family support policy was only established because of the existence of these Korean members.

The separate construction of an imagined "Korean low-income family" versus the "multicultural family" within such perspectives represented Koreans' preoccupation with the migrants' alien identity and their racialization based on such. The tendency to concentrate on the migrant members' "foreignness" was also apparent in the comments of staff who disapprovingly compared state support for multicultural families with the lack of such for

Koreans in "much worse situations", or those who voiced ideas such as: "Why should we give our tax money to these people?" Despite that this governmental policy was clearly functioning to benefit the whole "multicultural family" including the Korean spouse and any of their Korean dependents, the blame for the apparently unjust nature of the policy was placed only on migrants. In this conflicting framing offered by Korean staff, the migrant's status within the Korean multicultural family was largely qualified by their positioning as low-class social beneficiaries from less economically developed countries – albeit that they were also occasionally depicted as wealthier than impoverished Koreans. Here, regardless of the migrant's class position, all marriage migrants were equally racialized as un-deserving, or highly fortunate beneficiaries of the policy, who received support that was due to low-income "Korean" families.

Most experiences of discrimination and racialization that my migrant informants experienced were due to their assumed "low class" status. This was understood as a direct consequence of their coming from countries less economically developed than Korea, signifying the intimate connection constructed between the two categories of person and nation. Nevertheless, the Korean staff's contradictory comments about some of these same migrants being "wealthier than Koreans" and multicultural policy thus being a type of "reverse discrimination" made explicit the malleability of this link between class and the nation/nationality. Essentially, all migrants within multicultural families, whether high or low class, from a high-income country or not, lacked equal rights as "native" Koreans, even though most of the migrants interviewed ironically had acquired Korean citizenship.

By constantly modifying and fluidly manoeuvring the form and substance of the discourse and relative positioning of their framings, the Korean staff, as both representative of the dominant ethnic Korean perspective, and as those tasked with directly helping migrants to settle in Korea, came to racialize migrants in numerous ways. Sometimes Koreans selectively racialized migrant groups that they assumed to be low class, both in assuming migrants' purely financial motivation for migration and their inherently inferior social and cultural customs, while at other times they came to racialize all migrant groups as an alien group within the nation, less deserving of support than authentic Koreans, irrespective of their nationality and class. In common all these racializing perspectives served to maintain their ethnic/national group privilege as authentic "Koreans" and preserve their power in difference to migrants as the only justified members of the national citizenry.

Conclusion

This paper aims to understand how migrants of different national, ethnic, and class backgrounds become racialized in South Korea, and what narratives are

employed against them to facilitate this process. Focusing on everyday narratives and practices relative to Korea's migrant integration policy, this paper illuminates various ways that migrants are categorized, hierarchized, and racialized. The analysis finds that migrants in Korea are racialized mainly through their assumed inferior class position and social and cultural customs, a perspective based on the relative economic standing of their country of origin. In intersectional terms, this created dissonant experiences for migrants whose actual class status does not match the class imposed by Koreans. The examples of low-class Japanese and the high-class Chinese and Filipina given here highlight the clear intersectional workings of racialization in Korea, and migrants' diverse experiences and responses.

While recent literature has increasingly focused on how social categories other than race or ethnicity are also crucial to an understanding of how racism functions against migrants, this paper critically reveals a detailed context of the specific narratives utilized in this process, and demonstrates how the social categories of class, nationality, and ethnicity are fluidly invoked and articulated by the native population. It also shows how the complex social process of racialization involves reference to multiple social categories, leading to diverging lived experiences of racialization for migrants.

Although contexts such as class and national origin play a central role in determining migrants' experience of racialization in Korea (a process through which migrant groups from lower-income countries are subject to more discrimination), the analysis here also illustrates that all migrants are subject to exclusion and racialization through prioritizing the importance of ethnonational Korean identity in determining an individual's imagined and actual right to citizenship in Korea. Migrants who lack any cultural or "biologically" provable connection to the Korean ethnonational identity of the "native" population are deemed less-deserving members of the nation, irrespective of their legal status as citizens. This perspective, which considers all migrants as intrinsically alien, is commonly held in Korea, even by people who are more sympathetic towards migrants such as the Korean staff who work to support their integration. Migrants in Korea are selectively racialized through the logic of their original nationality and class, but also subject to universal processes of racialization through Korean "natives'" emphasis on their "non-Korean" alien identity. This intersectional formation suggests that social categories of class, nationality, ethnicity, and others are fluidly articulated within and relative to the external construction of an individual's racial identity. The consistency of this racialization process in Korea enables the continuity of discrimination against migrants within a hierarchical spectrum.

Relative to the increasing interest in migrant integration and national boundary making processes, this paper has also illustrated how the state

policy and discourse play out within everyday interactions and social practices. While the existing literature on this topic has largely focused on state or media discourses, here I have shifted attention to the actual workings of the migrant integration policy. The examples within the paper include an analysis of how the Korean staff who carry out the policy have understood the constructed term "multicultural family", how their individual interpretations concur or differ from those offered by the state, and how they articulate their conflicting positions on whether migrants are worthy beneficiaries of the policy. This elucidates the "everyday" contexts of the contested nature of migrant integration. People's attitudes and narratives are not just a reflection of macro-level discourses but also formed through their everyday interactions and the politics of belonging they themselves pursue. The paper suggests that to capture the full dynamics of migrant integration and the racialization of migrants, it is crucial to consider the quotidian ways these processes are practiced and experienced at a ground level, in combination with a wider awareness of state-level discourses.

Note

1. "Multicultural Family" in Korea refers to a family based on a marriage between a Korean and a foreign national, a term used in the establishment of the legal policy documents. (http://www.law.go.kr/lsInfoP.do?lsiSeq=85988&chrClsCd=010203&urlMode=engLsInfoR&viewCls=engLsInfoR#0000). This definition of multicultural family, limited to the unison between a Korean citizen and a foreigner while excluding other forms of families such as those of two foreign partners, has been considered as de facto discriminatory and hampering migrants' integration in society by the UN's committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) (UN CERD 2012).

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Ethics statement

This study is approved by the IRB (#843783-2). Informed written consent was obtained and all the names of the participants are anonymized.

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