

“We Are Not Foreigners”: Constructing Migrant Subjects through Korean Chinese Migrants’ Claims-Making in South Korea*

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Introduction

In 2020, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, Korean Chinese people residing in South Korea, organized as the Coalition of Overseas Koreans against Discrimination and Driving a Wedge between Koreans,¹ publicly condemned the Korean government for failing to introduce policies to mitigate their difficulties, such as having to return to China to renew visas. Denouncing how “discriminatory” and “exploitative” the

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1 *Chaeoedongp'oe taehan ch'abyōlgwa minjogiganūl pandaehanūn kungnaech'er yu chaeoedongp'o yōndae 재외동포에 대한 차별과 민족이간을 반대하는 국내체류 재외동포 연대*

“motherland” had been in not granting them the freedom to travel and treating them like “multicultural foreigners,”² the alliance, led by Korean Chinese civic-group leaders, called for state policies that would “guarantee secure and stable residence in the motherland.” In November 2020, the Korean Ministry of Justice (KMOJ) announced an emergency policy to allow the family members of co-ethnic (H-2) visa holders to remain in South Korea while the visa holders renewed their visas in China. Shortly thereafter, in December, the Ministry announced another emergency policy allowing co-ethnic (H-2) visa holders to reside in South Korea beyond their visa expiry dates, providing they did not engage in economic activities (i.e., work).

In this article, we critically engage with the growing literature regarding contemporary citizenship regimes in East Asia by examining a case of Korean Chinese workers in South Korea. Scholars have claimed that East Asian democracies have “a more particularistic vision of citizenship”³ than that espoused by universal citizenship based on liberal principles of equality and democracy.⁴ Scholars have highlighted civil society’s role as a key dynamic shaping emerging citizenship regimes in East Asia,⁵ emphasizing the pivotal role of South Korea’s “contentious civil society”⁶ in the expansion of migrant rights. They have examined how civil society in South Korea, which was born out of the fervent bottom-up democratic movement of the 1970s and 1980s, has resisted the state-imposed citizenship regime by pushing the state toward alternative visions of citizenry, thus contributing to the rapid expansion of migrant rights through the enactment of major policy reforms.

However, as the largest migrant group in South Korea, Korean Chinese migrants have detached themselves from the mainstream migrant rights

2 *Tamunhwa Oegugin* 다문화 외국인

3 Chung 2020.

4 Kim 2008; Seol and Skrentny 2009.

5 Chang 2012; Chun 2016; Chung 2020; Lim 2014; Yamanaka 2014.

6 Chang 2012.

movement led by South Korean activists and (non-co-ethnic) migrant workers, instead claiming their rights vis-à-vis the state as ethnic kin, who are *entitled* to more preferential treatment than “foreigners,” (i.e., migrants without Korean ethnicity). Over the decades, Korean Chinese migrants have gradually expanded their labor-market participation and increased their political leverage by defining themselves as a distinct group that differs from other non-co-ethnic migrants. Their resistance to the state-imposed citizenship regime has not been fully recognized by the dominant scholarship focusing on migrant rights advocacy groups in civil society.

This article draws on the voices of migrants on the margins of civil society to discuss how Korean Chinese migrants and immigrants construct their migrant subjectivity by mobilizing a collective understanding of ethnonational belonging and thereby deploying distinctive strategies to support their claims. We consider this group, not only because they comprise the largest group of foreign nationals in Korean society, but also because of their unique way of positioning themselves in relation to various actors in civil society—such as immigrants, migrant workers, non-migrant citizens, and the state. Our discussion aims to illuminate the complicated power dynamics of why and how certain rights claims are heard, while others are neglected. By shifting our analytical focus from the state and civil society to the migrant subjectivity that emerges through day-to-day negotiations, we aim to unpack the complicated dynamics of social constructions of citizenship.

Methodology

To analyze the interactions involved in Korean Chinese migrants’ claims-making, we used two sets of ethnographic data. In 2015, we conducted semi-structured interviews with Korean Chinese migrant workers, activists, South Korean bureaucrats, and policymakers and, thereafter, conducted ethnographic fieldwork between 2015 and 2016 in metropoli-

tan Seoul, South Korea. We carried out participant observations in two of the most prominent Korean-Chinese organizations in South Korea, then facilitated focus groups and conducted in-depth interviews with participants we recruited through those organizations. The *Chosŏnjok* Coalition, which was one of the oldest Korean-Chinese advocacy group in Korea, is the organization through which we recruited most of our interview participants. Established in 2000, when most of its members were undocumented migrant workers under the industrial trainee system (ITS), the coalition has been a leading voice of Korean Chinese workers in Korea against restrictive immigration and overseas-Korean policies. The organization started its collective struggles in collaboration with the migrant workers' movement in 2003, then diverged independently. The other organization is a Korean Chinese women's organization established in Korea in 2013 by the younger generation of Korean Chinese women entrepreneurs. While the coalition's struggles in the 2000s were dramatic, including hunger strikes and sit-in protests, this women's organization engaged in activities such as volunteer work and public campaigns to improve the image of Korean Chinese people in Korea, host events for them, and develop partnerships with the government. Overall, we conducted one hundred in-depth interviews that provided important insights into how Korean Chinese migrants construct their subjectivity and assert their social membership and citizenship rights. In this article, we use the personal names of only those who gave prior consent; the rest are pseudonyms.

Citizenship as Claims-Making

Immigration scholars have traditionally focused on citizenship as a formal legal status, exploring the link between legal status and rights, the importance of state power, and the relevance of legal status. Seeing citizenship as a legal status creates a dichotomy between citizens and non-citizens, which is further embodied in questions such as who can have access to a passport, who can unconditionally and legally reside in a terri-

tory, and who has access to resources distributed by the state. Since status and rights depend on legal legitimacy, social scientists have highlighted the difficulties immigrants face because of what Douglas Massey has phrased as their “categorically unequal” status.⁷

Scholars have recently criticized this approach for overlooking the importance of immigrants’ agency in their day-to-day struggles.⁸ Rather than seeing citizenship as a legal status conferred by the state according to place of birth (*jus soli*) or parental origins (*jus sanguinis*) involving a set of formal rights and obligations, recent scholarship on citizenship has suggested seeing citizenship as “a cluster of practices” that is constantly negotiated and contested by multiple actors.⁹ These scholars have asserted that citizenship is a relational social process through which citizenship is continually contested and negotiated. This approach emphasizes the individual agency of immigrants and highlights the daily interactions between immigrants and other social actors who are engaged in the construction of citizenship. Viewing citizenship as a social construct produced by ongoing political struggles, scholars have taken a relational approach to the formation of citizenship regimes, examining how various actors—including the state, organizations, migrants, and non-migrants—contest who qualifies for what rights and on what basis in everyday life.

This theoretical shift toward a relational approach in studies of citizenship has redirected scholarly attention to who is involved in the construction of citizenship and the processes through which related interactions and negotiations occur. Researchers have pointed to the crucial role of civil society in how citizenship is conceived and renewed over time, investigating the role of civil society in shaping unique citizenship regimes and paying attention to how civil society actors—such as students, labor activists, and grassroots organizations—have historically defied “the

7 Massey 2007.

8 Bloemraad, Korteweg, and Yurdakul 2008.

9 Choo 2016; Chung 2020; J.E. Kim 2018; Korteweg 2006; Ong 1999; Stasiulis and Bakan 2005.

state-centered citizenship regime and proposed alternatives.”¹⁰

In this vein, Bloemarrd suggests a claims-making approach to citizenship, focusing on how citizenship claims are made and recognized.¹¹ By acknowledging the socially constructed nature of citizenship, this approach focuses on how individuals or groups construct themselves as legitimate members of society in a way that resonates with society’s ideals of citizenship. To appeal to citizenship ideals, citizenship claims must invoke not only the state’s legal definition, but also claimants’ positionality according to various social factors such as gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic status—that is, whether they are “closer to” or “further from” embodying certain citizenship ideals.¹² Immigrants may call upon blood ties and ethnic affinity, continued allegiance and economic contributions, or human rights and gender equality in constructing themselves as legitimate candidates for citizenship. As Bloemrard explains:

Considering citizenship as claims-making draws attention to the agency of individuals and groups, to the relational dynamics of recognizing claims, and to the question of what sorts of claims resonate in a particular place and time for an individual, group, or society (2018, 8).

In the context of East Asia, Erin Chang suggests “developmental citizenship”¹³ to explain why and how citizenship in East Asia under a developmentalist political culture has prioritized collective obligations to support national development over rights, thereby not following a Thomas H. Marshallian expansion of citizenship—that is, the acquisition of successive civil, political, and social citizenship rights. Despite a political culture through which the state has coerced civil society “to exchange

10 Chang 2012.

11 Bloemarrd 2018.

12 Bloemrard 2018, 6.

13 Chang 2012.

democracy for development,”¹⁴ civil society has resisted state-centered citizenship regimes by promoting alternative political visions and mobilizing grassroots organizations. The political, symbolic, and material legacies developed by civil societies in East Asia—termed “civil legacy” by Chung¹⁵—have served as driving forces and key variables explaining the expansion of migrant movements in East Asian countries. Chung views the migrant movements in South Korea as shaped by the traditional democratization movement of the 1970s and 1980s, which claimed moral and political legitimacy based on human rights. Applying human rights and anti-exploitation rhetoric to migrants, migrant advocacy groups in Korea have claimed that migrants are allies of ongoing democratic inclusion.

In summary, this relational concept of citizenship as claims-making social practices appeals to, or makes demands on, ideals and values, both vis-à-vis the state and with respect to other citizens. Seeing citizenship as claims-making highlights possible “citizenship mechanisms based on social identity and solidarity, increased empowerment and mobilization, and recognized standing as a legitimate claimant,”¹⁶ taking seriously the agency of immigrants and their day-to-day interactions with other actors in relation to immigrants’ demands.

Migrant Subject-making

While civil society is crucial for understanding how multiple actors engage in contesting citizenship, we focus on the specific interactions of civil society actors and explanations of how such interactions shape migrants’ sense of citizenship. Although the term ‘interaction’ seems power-neutral, everyday interactions are affected by existing power relations and

14 Chang 2012, 67.

15 Chang 2020.

16 Bloemrad 2018, 3.

the political culture—especially interactions between non-citizens and a receiving country’s civil society.¹⁷ Citizenship as shaped by social construction practices means that citizenship claims are structured by power relations. If we were to investigate how migrant citizenship is constructed and emerges from ongoing interactions between civil society actors, and how migrants perceive the political characteristics of such interactions, we need to inquire into the power dynamics embedded in those interactions.

To investigate the characteristics of interactions between the civil society actors that shape migrant citizenship, we focus on migrant subject-making. If migrant citizenship is not simply granted by the state according to a person’s legal status or visa category but through collective contestation, who is a legitimate subject of such claims-making? As what subjects and under what logic are migrants perceived as legitimate rights bearers? What sort of claims count as legitimate claims? Rather than assuming a natural alliance between migrants and civil society actors, we critically examine the power dynamics embedded in the interactions between them.

Wendy Brown strongly asserts that tolerance in multiculturalist discourse implies “something other than a happy community of differences.”¹⁸ The power relations underlying tolerance in multiculturalist discourse mean that the majority gives “license of its existence” to various minority groups, such as migrants. In other words, asymmetric power relations exist between those who need the “license of [their] existence” and those who do not. In the case of migrant advocacy groups in a host civil society, organizations play a key role in framing the moral ground for migrants to claim the “license of its existence.” In South Korea, migrant advocacy groups have developed political leverage by framing migrant issues as human rights issues,¹⁹ women’s issues,²⁰ or issues linked

17 Choo 2016; Chung 2020; Jun 2016; Y.S. Kim 2018.

18 Brown 2006.

19 Choo 2016; Jun 2017.

to the nation's colonial past.²¹

However, migrant movements that use advocacy groups' language, networks, and symbolic and material resources are not free of power relations; in return for being rendered visible, migrants are expected to embody a distinct migrant subjectivity (or a certain image of "good migrants") that is constructed by interactions. For example, Choo argues that gender ideology entrenched in native-born organizations often circumscribes morally stigmatized women workers' rights claim-making²² (i.e., female factory workers cultivated pride and a sense of honor through everyday encounters with staff and fellow workers in migrant advocacy groups, but female club hostesses, whose work was not dignified as work by advocacy groups, did not develop such a sense of self). While Choo points to gender relations as a main axis of power shaping gendered migrant subjects, Jun²³ and Kim²⁴ highlight that migrant subjects are constructed as permanent *others* in relation to native-born citizens in South Korea. Sharply pointing out that the paternalistic gaze aimed at migrant workers in South Korea mirrors past perceptions of migrants from developing countries as poor and thus shameful, Jun has argued that migrant advocacy groups' efforts to "ethicize" migrant workers' issues (claiming "migrant workers' issues are not only their issues but Korean society's moral issues") produce "good migrant subjects" according to South Korean "developmental narcissism."²⁵

Context: Reparation Co-Ethnic Politics in the Face of Capitalist Expansion

Korean Chinese people, also known as *Chosŏnjok*,²⁶ are Korean de-

20 Choo 2013.

21 Park 2015.

22 Choo 2016.

23 Jun 2016, 2017.

24 Y.S. Kim 2018.

25 Jun 2016, 2017.

26 The term *Chosŏnjok* (朝鮮族) originated from *Chosŏn* (1392–1910), referring to

scendants of people born in the People’s Republic of China (PRC). These people, who originally came from the northwest regions of China, have been migrating to South Korea since the late 1980s due to Korea’s economic growth after the end of the Cold War. Their massive migration from their ancestral homeland has continued for decades, now making Korean Chinese people the largest migrant group in South Korea. In 2018, the Korean Chinese population accounted for around 30% of 2,367,607 foreign residents in South Korea—almost five times the number of marriage migrants (159,206). They also accounted for 82.9% of Korean descendants residing in South Korea on co-ethnic visas, comprised around 34% of 528,063 migrant workers²⁷ with various temporary work permits for low-skilled occupations, and made up 41% of the migrant labor force in low-skilled occupations when added 37,539 co-ethnic (F-4) visa holders. In other words, this group comprises the most migrants in South Korea.

Although co-ethnic migrant workers are generally seen as a by-product of Korea’s ethnocentrism, the preferential treatment given to Korean Chinese people is historically specific. Despite the long history and considerable scale of the Korean diaspora,²⁸ ethnic Koreans residing outside the

the last dynastic kingdom on the Korean peninsula, which lasted until the Japanese colonial era (1910–1945). People migrated from *Chosŏn* to northeastern China (during the Qing dynasty) and were later officially recognized by the PRC as one of 55 ethnic minorities. The term *Chosŏn* is widely used by Korean Chinese people themselves; however, some Korean Chinese migrants, especially the younger generation in Korea, prefer other terms such as co-ethnic or overseas Korean (*tongp’o* and *kyop’o*). Some scholars have also taken a critical stance toward the term *Chosŏn* as a category imposed by the Chinese Communist Party (see, for example, Loh and Cui, 2014).

27 Statistics Korea categorizes C-4, E-1–E-7, E-9–E-10, and H-2 visa holders as “migrant workers.” While F-4 visa holders are not considered part of the migrant workforce because their visas are not tied to an employer, a considerable number of them engage in precarious employment such as low-paid care work or in the service sector and construction.

28 According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Korea, around 7,012,492 overseas

Korean peninsula gained scant public attention until the 1980s. If anything, Koreans living overseas were encouraged to settle in the countries where they resided rather than return to their country of origin.²⁹

In the late 1980s, the Korean Chinese diasporic community started gaining public attention in South Korea. The rapid economic development during the 1970s was followed by an expansion of the care industry, but native-born Korean workers' reluctance to work in so-called "3D" (dirty, difficult, and dangerous) jobs led to chronic labor shortages in this sector.³⁰ Increasing migration within Asia emerged as a solution to the dire labor shortage, and workers from neighboring Asian countries, such as the Philippines, Bangladesh, and Nepal, started migrating to booming South Korea in the late 1980s. Along with other foreign nationals, Korean Chinese people also started migrating to Korea through various informal channels, such as being smuggled, overstaying their tourist visas, or making marriages of convenience. Korea's diplomatic relations with Russia and China were normalized in 1991 and 1992, encouraging overseas Koreans to return to Korea. Such returns began with visits to relatives but led to increasing numbers of overseas Koreans rushing to Korea in pursuit of the "Korean Dream."³¹

Between Foreigners and Full Citizens

Crossing borders involves engaging with immigration policies that categorize individuals according to different statuses, such as foreigners and kin, that dictate who has what rights and on what basis. South Korea's

Koreans (*Chaeoe Tongp'o*) resided in 181 countries in 2013. This figure corresponded to 14% of the Korean population. After China, Israel, and Italy, South Korea ranks fourth in terms of its diasporic population and first in terms of the percentage of its homeland population.

29 Lee 2010.

30 Yang 2010.

31 Freeman 2011; Yang 2010.

Overseas Korean policies locate co-ethnic migrants between native-born South Korean citizens and non-co-ethnic migrants (foreigners), allowing co-ethnics to enjoy relatively better mobility across borders and in the labor market. Given this institutional structure, whether they are labeled migrant workers, casual laborers, or members of a transnational Korean nation becomes the central axis of their struggles in South Korea.

In 1999, the Korean government introduced the Act on Entry and Exit and Legal Status of Overseas Koreans—the very first systematic policy regulating overseas Koreans. Under the law, people legally recognized as “overseas Koreans” (*chaeye tongp’o*) were given F-4 visas, enabling them to work³² and reside in Korea indefinitely. However, the law tactically excluded Korean Chinese people from the legal category of overseas Koreans by defining overseas Koreans as those who had citizenship of the Republic of Korea before emigrating, together with their descendants. Given the fact that most first-generation Korean Chinese people emigrated to China before the establishment of the Republic of Korea in 1948, and therefore never possessed Korean citizenship, Korean Chinese people were automatically excluded from this category.³³

The creation of co-ethnic visas and the exclusion of Korean Chinese people from the legal category of overseas Koreans re-directed Korean Chinese struggles in South Korea. In the 1990s, the burgeoning migrant workers’ advocacy organizations fought fiercely to abolish the exploitive ITS, and the Korean Chinese disputed with other migrant workers. Korean Chinese workers joined a hunger strike against the deportation of undocumented migrant workers in 2001, but later stopped collaborating with

32 F-4 holders were strictly banned from holding low-skilled manual jobs when the policy was created, but in 2010 the government made exceptions for the care sector. F-4 holders can now work in four areas: domestic work, childcare, patient care (간병인 *kanbyöngin*), and as helpers in welfare facilities (복지시설 보조원 *pok-chishisöl pojowön*). Workers in these areas are eligible for permanent residence (F-5) if they work for the same employer for more than three years (Lee and Chien 2017).

33 Lee and Chien 2017.

migrant workers. Instead, they tried to change the legal status of overseas Koreans to improve their working conditions. When President Rho visited the hunger strike site and promised a revision of the law, the strike ended. The migrant workers' union constantly emphasized that Korean Chinese people faced the same problems as migrant workers, claiming that policies that privileged Korean Chinese workers constituted a government divide-and-conquer strategy by creating a hierarchy among migrant workers. Nevertheless, despite their appeals, Korean Chinese workers did not join the coalition with migrant workers.

In 2001, the Constitutional Court decided that the Act on Entry and Exit and Legal Status of Overseas Koreans broke constitutional law. The court cited the unfair exclusion of ethnic Koreans in China and the former Soviet Union from the legal category of overseas Koreans as the basis for the law's unconstitutionality. In response to the decision, the Korean government established the Working Visit program, which issued co-ethnic (H-2) visas, valid for five years, to overseas Koreans from China or the former Soviet Union, even if they had never held Korean citizenship. The state also awarded F-4 visas to increasing numbers of Korean Chinese migrants, allowing more of them to stay in South Korea indefinitely.

Korean Chinese Immigrants' Claims-Making

In the following, we present three themes that emerged from a thematic analysis of our ethnographic data, offering insight into claims-making strategies based on the construction of migrant subjects. These themes are: (1) Korean Chinese are special migrants who do not owe South Korea anything, but are *entitled*; (2) Korean Chinese migrants do not need to prove their integration; and (3) Korean Chinese migrants are positioned between full citizens and foreigners. Our analysis reveals that Korean Chinese migrants try to elevate their status and construct their migrant subjectivity as a special type of migrant—not foreigners or full citizens, but nevertheless legitimate members of the nation.

Who should be grateful for what? “We do not owe—we deserve.”

How people see themselves and others shapes what will seem like a gift and what will not; for example, when motherhood makes a woman the primary caregiver at home, her husband’s help with housework becomes a gift—something not expected of husbands—and therefore deserves gratitude.³⁴ The perception of what constitutes a gift then shapes interactions between people through what Hochschild and Machung call, “the economy of gratitude.” In the relationship between migrants and the host society, migrant women who marry South Korean citizens receive paternalistic state support under the rubric of multiculturalism (i.e., they receive the South Korean state’s and people’s gratitude for marrying rural bachelors), but the state also expects these migrant women to be grateful for state support and to perform their reproductive duties in return.³⁵ Church-based migrant advocacy activists often claim that helping “deserving people” (i.e., “good” migrant workers) “with ethics of sacrifice for the family,” aligns with their mission, whereas helping migrant women working as hostesses in clubs is outside the remit of Christian charity.³⁶ Similarly, Korean policy makers we interviewed often expressed a paternalistic view of Korean Chinese, portraying them as migrant workers who benefit from South Korea’s burgeoning economy. For instance, Sae-Hoon, a former director of the immigration bureau, emphasized many Korean employers treat their *Chosŏnjok ajumma*³⁷ caregivers well, implying they should be grateful for the opportunities.

The Korean Chinese immigrants we met, however, were critical of the unspoken expectations of gratitude imposed by migrant advocacy groups

34 Hochschild and Machung 1989; MacDonald 2010.

35 M.J. Kim 2018.

36 Choo 2016.

37 A generic term that refers to a middle-aged woman in Korea. The term denotes a dominant social perception of older groups of women in Korea: de-sexualized women’s bodies that are suitable for un(or low)paid care work in the home.

and the state; for example, Mi-Rae, a 64-year-old Korean-Chinese domestic worker and an active members of the *Chosŏnjok* Coalition, explained why Korean Chinese workers accept “unfair” working conditions, including lower wages and longer working hours: “we have no choice but to endure it... Korean workers would just quit when they don’t like the job. But quitting is not an option for us because every time we quit, we would be unemployed for months. Plus, we have to pay the brokerage fee again.” Mi-Rae still has distant relatives in South Korea, but she entered South Korea through an arranged marriage with a homeless man she had never met because she was not eligible for a co-ethnic visa at the time. For her, with existing family ties in South Korea, immigration policies limiting her mobility across borders were unnecessary and unjust. She felt that the arduous immigration process to “not be illegal,”—involving heavy brokerage fees, time, and humiliation—was something that Korea should abolish. Rather than expressing gratitude for being allowed, as a Korean Chinese person, to enter and work in South Korea, she condemned the state policies, claiming: “I say this Korean policy is a trick. It just leads us to spend a lot [of money] on flights going back and forth between Korea and China. This is a trick to make money; it’s not that the policy is generous to us.”

What was notable about Mi-Rae’s account was her strong sense of entitlement and refusal to be grateful to Korean society and the state. Foreign marriage migrants (mostly from developing countries) who do not have Korean ancestral heritage but have married Korean men often internalize expectations of gratitude in their struggles to achieve a sense of belonging in Korean society, trying to be good wives and daughters-in-law.³⁸ However, there was no sense of indebtedness in Mi-Rae’s account to a visa system that required regular renewal. Like Mi-Rae, most interview participants expressed their sense of entitlement to travel to Korea freely as ethnic kin. Most participants were born in China, but strongly endorsed the idea of genetic ties existing between themselves and South Korea,

38 M.J. Kim 2018.

reiterating expressions such as “the same blood” and “ancestral homeland,” and thus constructing their Korea-bound migration as a *return to home*.

One of our interviewees, Nuri, used the metaphor of an adopted child. She described Korean Chinese immigrants as resembling “a child who was raised by another family due to unfavorable circumstances,” who should be reunited with their original family. She emphasized the natural bond between parents and their children, claiming that Korean Chinese people naturally belong to Korea; therefore, returning to their original home and “biological parent” (in this case, South Korea) is a fundamental right that should not be restricted by laws.

Ethnic ties, however, are not self-evident, but are, in fact, rather historically specific, as we explained in the previous section. Mi-Rae, like Nuri and most of our participants, was born in China and had never visited South Korea before she migrated for work, yet she actively promoted her Korean ethnicity and her natural tie to Korea, connecting it to the idea that a *return to home* was her birthright—not something she needed approval for.

Korean Chinese workers’ perceptions of their contributions to South Korean society were another factor underpinning their sense of entitlement to better treatment. Korean Chinese workers are the primary labor force for unregulated, unprotected, and low-paid jobs in South Korea, such as in domestic service, eldercare, and childcare.³⁹ Knowing that Korean society relies on Korean Chinese care workers, these workers felt that the visas granting exclusive access to the precarious care sector to co-ethnic migrants simply repackaged an unequal capitalist relationship between South Korea and Korean Chinese people, contesting the idea of motherland’s “benevolent inclusion” of its diasporas; for example, a Korean Chinese eldercare worker pointed to the exploitation of Korean Chinese workers, saying, “If we *kyop’o* (overseas Koreans) don’t do this work, will you [non-migrants] handle it? Hospitals hire *kyop’o* because

39 Freeman 2011; Kwon 2013.

Korean people don't want to do work like this." Workers argued that members of Korean society and the state should recognize they are the ones doing essential work that Korean-born citizens scorn.

Drawing boundaries between us and them: "We are not foreigners."

Korean Chinese migrants draw a clear boundary between themselves and "foreigners," refusing to be treated as subjects of multicultural policies. In this narrative, non-co-ethnic migrants are constructed as (potentially) problematic migrants who need to prove their compatibility with South Korean society under the policy rubric of multiculturalism, whereas Korean Chinese migrants are constructed as "good migrants" with innate compatibility. During our fieldwork, we encountered leaders of Korean Chinese groups who expressed frustration about the view of Korean Chinese people as subjects of multicultural policies; for example, Min-Jeong, a successful entrepreneur and leader of a Korean Chinese women's organization, was trying to register her organization as an NGO in Seoul in 2016. Her application, however, was rejected because the organization's mission lacked "elements of multiculturalism," which was essential for becoming eligible as an NGO for city funding. Venting her frustration over Seoul City's attitude in an organizational executive meeting, she exclaimed with rage, "This is nonsense, isn't it? Are we [part of] multiculturalism?" Despite all the executive members in the room sharing her anger, I had to probe why being a subject of multicultural policy made her and her fellow members so angry. She replied, "We are not foreigners who write Korean language tests to come here. We are not!" According to her rationale, being a subject of multicultural policy means that you are considered a foreigner who is required to demonstrate integration into Korean society. For Korean Chinese people who highlight their retention of a Korean cultural heritage in China for generations, such an assimilation process built into South Korea's multicultural policies is an insult to their collective efforts rather than a support.

The phrase, "we are not foreigners under multiculturalism" was reiter-

ated by many of our interview participants. In the Korean Chinese organizations’ public condemnation of the government for its failure to provide protection for *tongp’o* (ethnic Koreans)’s survival and health in Korea during the pandemic, they pleaded that “the government must not treat the million *tongp’o* in Korea like foreigners under multiculturalism.”⁴⁰ Implicit in the strong denial of being a subject of multicultural policies is that Korean Chinese people should not have to demonstrate integration into Korean society. Korean Chinese people’s emphasis on their Korean language fluency, retention of Korean culture in China, and maintenance of kinship ties with their relatives in Korea were all recast as evidence of themselves as subjects for whom an integration process was not necessary, resting on a distinction between “full citizens” and “problematic” foreigners who need to prove integration under paternalistic multicultural policies. By constructing Korean Chinese migrants as a special group of migrants or “good migrants,” Korean Chinese people demand that the state take care of their issues, which are located at the “blind spots” between multicultural policies and migrant-worker-supporting policies.⁴¹

Adopting and rearticulating an institutionalized in-between status.

Korean Chinese people position themselves between full citizens and foreigners. If they can emphasize their *Koreanness* and employ it to improve their status in South Korea, why not pursue full citizenship (of South Korea) to meet their needs? Previous studies on Korean Chinese subjectivity have pointed to a tendency for these people’s narratives about

40 “*Chǒngbu-nŭn kungnae ch’eryu 100man chaeoedongp’o-rŭl tō isang chaehan tamunhwa oeguginŭroch’wigŭp’aji malgo idŭr-ŭi mogug-esōi anjōngjōgin ch’eryu-rŭl wihan pōpchōng kŭn’gō-rŭl chosok’i hwakpo-hara.* 정부는 국내 체류 100만 재외동포를 더 이상 제한 다문화 외국인으로 취급하지 말고 이들의 모국에서의 안정적인 체류를 위한 법적 근거를 조속히 확보하라.”

41 Kim and Yim 2018.

Koreanness to shift toward cosmopolitan *Koreanness*.⁴² Rather than seeking membership of South Korean society through formal citizenship, they claim broader membership of Korea as a nation. In other words, they claim their inclusion through the lineage, history, and culture of the Korean peninsula, including North Korea. As Helene K. Lee aptly points out, such emphasis on the de-territorialized membership of the Korean nation allows Korean Chinese to “push back on South Korea’s claim as the cultural and political center of *Koreanness*.”⁴³ In other words, Korean Chinese claims around broader membership are not simply rooted in their nostalgic view of the homeland. Instead, they use the counter-identity to resist the hierarchical relationship between homeland and diaspora, and to further enhance their status in the homeland.⁴⁴

Indeed, some participants in this study recalled their childhood memories of visiting North Korea when they recounted their migration journey to return home, and many others consciously used the word “*Chosŏn minjok* (people)” when they described their ethnic membership, distinguishing it from narrowly defined South Korean citizenship “*han’guk saram*.” By not limiting their social membership to legal citizenship of South Korea, they located themselves in a triadic relationship between citizens, “ethnizens,” and non-citizens (foreigners) under the South Korean immigration policy regime, with fewer rights than full citizens but more than foreigners. In this way, they retained their sense of belonging as legal citizens in China but claimed rights in South Korea based on broader ethnic membership as well; for example, Na-Hui, a Chinese citizen who was born and raised in China, found the anti-Chinese sentiment among South Koreans offensive. She felt entitled to make rightful claims concerning the wage gap between Korean Chinese people and non-migrant South Koreans based on her membership in Korea as a nation. She said:

42 Kwon 2019; Lee 2018.

43 Lee 2018:113.

44 Park 2015.

I was born in China with *Chosŏnjok* blood in my veins, and at times, when people here say something bad about China, I feel really bad. I don't hate South Korea, but sometimes I think, Okay, you South Koreans are like that. You and I have the same blood, yet you look down on me just because I came from China, and you give me stress. Why do you give us lower wages? Why do people from China do more work and get paid less?

Interactions with different government ministries and mixed signals from them reinforce the Korean Chinese people's view of their in-between status. Different government ministries have distinct policy agendas and, therefore, different views of *Chosŏnjok* migrants. One government official at the Korean Ministry of Labor (KMOL) highlighted the economic aspects of why *Chosŏnjok* migrants come to South Korea:

For us [the Korean Ministry of Labor], it is clear that *Chosŏnjok* migrants come here to make money. They are here because the average pay is almost twice the amount they can make in China. *Twice!* If it were not more than twice, they wouldn't be here. They don't have to risk everything to come here—they can just move to other urban cities in China.

When we asked why KMOL insists on imposing quotas on *Chosŏnjok* migrant workers instead of providing more labor mobility, the government official responded:

If we allow all the *Chosŏnjok* to come and work here, they will all come, and the lower-class Korean citizens will not be able to work anymore, because *Chosŏnjok* migrant workers will dominate the entire Korean labor market. We need to protect our labor market and our citizens.

Since one of KMOL's important objectives is to regulate the labor market and protect the interests of local Koreans, undocumented or unau-

thorized *Chosŏnjok* migrants working in the informal labor market pose a substantial threat to the Ministry's governing capacity, resulting in KMOL's rather negative view of *Chosŏnjok* migrant workers. From the Ministry's perspective, *Chosŏnjok* migrant workers are often portrayed as self-interested, profit-oriented, and uncontrollable by the state; therefore, they are harmful to South Korea and local Koreans.

Activists recognize KMOL's negative view of *Chosŏnjok* migrant workers and argue that it is the other way around—it is KMOL that treats *Chosŏnjok* migrants as profitable objects:

For them [KMOL], we were only migrant labor. The Korean Ministry of Labor viewed us as disposable workers. It thought nothing of our co-ethnic kinship lineage. It was all about making profits from the most vulnerable and exploitable migrants. We are here to return to our motherland, not to be exploited. This is morally wrong!

This *Chosŏnjok* migrant activist highlighted the co-ethnic kinship lineage that distinguishes *Chosŏnjok* migrants from other groups of migrant workers, employing the ethical reasoning that it is “morally wrong” to treat co-ethnic brothers and sisters as economic, exploitable subjects.

The claims-making strategy that highlights the co-ethnic kinship ties between Koreans and *Chosŏnjok* migrants has been effective in improving the legal status of *Chosŏnjok* migrants, especially with the KMOJ. One bureaucrat from the KMOJ stated:

Personally speaking, I feel a sense of guilt because many *Chosŏnjok* migrants come to me and say, “South Korea is our motherland. Why do we not have the right to come to Korea freely?” This has always made me feel very guilty; therefore, although it is hard for us to give them the right to work here [because of pressure from other ministries], we try our best to provide more legal pathways for them to come to Korea.

However, because the KMOJ oversees immigration control and the legal system, it often faces criticism when court cases about *Chosŏnjok* migrants are covered by the media:

Honestly, I am fully aware of the hardships that *Chosŏnjok* migrants face in Korean society. I am happy to support them in improving their legal and social status, but at the same time, whenever there is negative media coverage of *Chosŏnjok* migrants [e.g., accusing them of homicide or sexual harassment], it puts us in a difficult position.

While recognizing that the KMOJ has a friendlier stance than the KMOL, a *Chosŏnjok* activist pointed out that the KMOJ’s attitude could easily change under different presidents:

Their [KOMJ’s] attitude was more pro-*Chosŏnjok* under President Roh Moo-Hyun’s [progressive, central-left] government. President Roh came to our protest, instituted policy reform, and granted us amnesty. The KOMJ implemented its policies, but as soon as a conservative, right-wing president came to power, everything was overturned; for example, President Lee Myung-Bak immediately canceled the amnesty and deported Korean Chinese people who voluntarily returned to China in exchange for legal status under the Roh government. They all had legal status after the amnesty, so why did the KMOJ deport them after Lee came to power? This was a serious scam targeting *Chosŏnjok* migrants.

The activist also pointed out that, over the years, they have learned to be low-key under conservative governments and push harder when a progressive president is in office.

Conclusion

In this study, we approach citizenship as a claims-making process consisting of social construction practices that emerge from ongoing negotiations and contestations around who is a member of society and who is not, who has rights, and on what basis. We examined the migrant subject-making process of Korean Chinese migrants in South Korea. Since migrant citizenship is not simply granted by the state according to legal status or visa category but is achieved through collective contestations, we argue, by unpacking the political characteristics of interactions, that migrant citizenship is constructed by and emerges from ongoing interactions between the state, civil society actors, and migrants.

Korean Chinese migrants have called upon blood ties and ethnic affinity, continued allegiance, economic contributions, and human rights to construct themselves as legitimate candidates for citizenship in South Korea. Our analysis of the data gathered from ethnographic observations in the two organizations and interviews with policymakers shows that Korean Chinese migrants present themselves as legitimate rights bearers and as members of Korea as a nation. Resisting the image of them constructed by a “benevolent” state that provides paternalistic protection to migrants under the banner of multiculturalism, the Korean Chinese people we interviewed showed a strong aversion to perceptions of them as foreigners who must demonstrate successful integration. In their claims-making vis-à-vis the state, they present themselves as members of an ethnic nation—legitimate rights bearers who deserve preferential treatment. At the same time, they emphasize their contribution to Korean society during chronic labor shortages, emphasizing that their ethnic capital is built on their Korean ancestral heritage. However, Korean Chinese people always call for equal treatment with overseas Koreans in wealthier societies, rather than South-Korean-born citizens. By positioning themselves in this way, Korean Chinese migrants follow the ideology that people are placed into hierarchical categories by the host society’s visa system, further justifying differential treatment for different categories. By position-

ing themselves as in-between citizens, or “good migrants” between full citizens and problematic migrants (i.e., racial “others”), Korean Chinese migrants achieve apparently better treatment than “foreigners.” However, they actively embody the ideals of the host society’s citizenship regime, which places people in hierarchical categories, further justifying the biopolitical ideology entrenched in the hierarchical structure of citizenship in South Korea. By focusing on Korean Chinese people’s subjectivity in relation to others—how they construct themselves as “good migrants” in opposition to “bad migrants”—our findings show that these people embody a hierarchical nationhood to navigate the normalized racism and institutionalized ethnocentrism in South Korean society.

As Korean immigration policies continue to expand, more diverse groups of Korean Chinese migrants are entering Korea in recent years. The landscape of Korean Chinese communities has been changing rapidly: from active political advocacy in the 1990s to hundreds of civic groups today.⁴⁵ While many participants of this study are older groups of Korean Chinese who work in precarious jobs, the younger college-educated generation’s views and experiences might differ. Therefore, more future research is needed to examine the growing diversity of the Korean Chinese communities.

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<Abstract>

“We Are Not Foreigners”: Constructing Migrant Subjects through Korean Chinese Migrants’ Claims-Making in South Korea

Yang-Sook Kim, Yi-Chun Chien

In this paper, we approach citizenship as a claims-making process consisting of social construction practices that emerge from ongoing negotiations and contestations. We examine the migrant subject-making process of Korean Chinese migrants in South Korea. We draw on the voices of migrants to discuss how Korean Chinese construct their migrant subjectivity by mobilizing a collective understanding of ethnonational belonging and thereby deploy distinctive strategies to support their claims. Our analysis of the data gathered from ethnographic observations and interviews with Korean Chinese migrant workers, activists, South Korean bureaucrats, and policymakers show that Korean Chinese migrants have called upon blood ties and ethnic affinity, continued allegiance, economic contributions, and human rights to construct themselves as legitimate candidates for citizenship in South Korea. By shifting our analytical focus from the state to the migrant subjectivity that emerges through day-to-day negotiations, we aim to unpack the complicated dynamics of social constructions of citizenship.

Keywords: Korean Chinese, citizenship, claim-making, migrant subjectivity

〈국문초록〉

“우리는 외국인이 아니다.”: 중국동포들의 이주민 주체성 만들기에 대한 연구

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이 연구는 시민권은 단순히 국가로부터 수여되는 권리의 총체라고 보는 전통적인 법적 접근을 넘어 어떻게 시민권이 다양한 행위자들 간 상호작용 속에서 확장되고 재구성되는지를 재한 중국동포 이주민들의 사례를 통해 고찰한다. 이주민의 시민권을 둘러싼 끊임없는 정치적 투쟁과 협상을 분석함에 있어 저자들은 특히 중국동포들이 누가 한국 사회에서 정당한 공동체의 일원으로서 (외국인들보다) 더 나은 처우를 받아야 마땅한가를 주장하는 논리에 주목한다. 이주민들과 이주민 관련 시민단체 활동가들, 관련 정책 담당 공무원들과의 심층 인터뷰를 분석한 결과 중국동포들은 분단 이전으로 거슬러 올라가는 한반도의 역사적 서사와 혈연적 연속성, 문화적 친화성, 한국 경제에의 실질적 기여와 인권이라는 논리들로 한민족 공동체의 정당한 일원으로서 자신들의 주체를 재구성한다. 이러한 논리는 이주민들을 인종적, 국가주의적 논리로 타자화 하고 차별하는 한국 사회에서 영원한 타자인 ‘외국인’이 되지 않으려는 이들의 인식을 반영하지만, 동시에 그러한 위계적 질서에 동조함으로써 그 질서를 공고히 하는 데 기여한다.

주제어: 중국동포, 조선족, 시민권, 이주민 주체성, 주장하기(claim-making)