Racial Politics and Policymaking in East Asian Democracies
An interview with Erin Aeran Chung

The East Asian democracies of Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan are facing an unprecedented demographic crisis of low birth rates combined with aging populations. Policymakers have a difficult choice: reform their current immigration policies to allow the influx of foreigners or risk continued demographic decline. To better understand how racial politics affect immigration policymaking and integration among East Asian democracies, the Journal spoke with Dr. Erin Aeran Chung, Professor of East Asian Politics at Johns Hopkins University. Dr. Chung also spoke about her forthcoming book Immigrant Incorporation in East Asian Democracies.

Journal: Your research focuses on discrimination, incorporation, and the experiences of minorities in East Asian democracies. How did you become interested in this field?

Chung: I became interested when I was doing my Master's degree at the University of Washington in Seattle. At that time, I was looking at the colonial origins of South Korea's political economy. I was examining the experiences that colonial subjects had and the experiences of Koreans in Japan. During my time in graduate school, I was in Korea when the Los Angeles Uprisings occurred in 1992. I was watching the broadcast in Korean about what was going on in Los Angeles and what was really fascinating to me was that much of the depiction of the African American community was based on a whole host of stereotypes. The dominant narrative was that Koreans were being targeted because African Americans were jealous of Korean American success. The Korean media was characterizing many members of the African American community as lazy and played off of many other deeply rooted racist stereotypes about these communities. I had been spending a considerable amount of time reading about the ways in which imperial Japanese authorities had been characterizing Koreans also as lazy, as being potential looters during the 1923 earthquake in Japan, and as unwilling to work. These stereotypes were coming up in Korea about African Americans.

Based on my own experience as a Korean American, I saw many patterns of racial discrimination and problems that were familiar to me as a minority in the United States. So, I became more interested in examining the similarities and differences in terms of
patterns of discrimination and immigrant incorporation between the United States and Japan. These experiences are what brought me into this field.

Journal: Are there similarities between forms of racism within East Asia and the United States? Are there any misconceptions or false parallels between the experience of racism in the United States and the experience in Japan or Korea?

Chung: I think that we can characterize many of the patterns of prejudice that we see in Japan and Korea as experiences of racism because they are based on ascriptive criteria. These patterns often involve the state institutionalizing forms of discrimination, which translate into highly discriminatory practices in everyday life. In many ways, there are these parallels that marginalized communities face in the United States and these East Asian countries.

One of the central differences is that in the United States discrimination is often centered on phenotype. However, in Japan and Korea it is often focused on alienage and foreign nationality. For example, in recent years, Japanese citizens have discussed the dangers and benefits of diversity with a focus not on phenotypically different populations, but rather on co-ethnic Japanese immigrants. The Nikkei [members of the Japanese diaspora] have been the focus of how Japan is becoming more and more diverse. In the United States, it would blow people’s minds that Japanese discriminate against other Japanese. Even in Germany, people are surprised about Japanese intra-ethnic racism, because Germany has enacted policies that have welcomed co-ethnic immigrants of common descent with open arms. In Japan, nationality is the distinguishing characteristic between populations. So I think that the false parallel is that racism is all about skin color. We need to look further at the actual patterns of racism, which involve not just day-to-day interactions, but also the government policies and power that make these forms of discrimination actually matter. We also need to focus on the consequences of discrimination and how racism can emerge in a number of different forms that go well beyond skin color.

Journal: Some East Asian democracies have developed legislation for the integration of immigrants within their societies. What do you see as the main parallels and differences between these policies and visions? How has the public reacted to these policies?

Chung: What is ironic, is that even as multiculturalism has been pronounced as a failure in countries like Germany, Australia, and sometimes even in Canada, the term “multiculturalism” has become very popular among policy makers and the public in East Asian democracies. Within each of these societies, the focus has not been on the diversity of the Korean populace or the Japanese populace, but rather diversification as the result of the arrival of recent immigrants or different types of immigrants. The kinds of policies that we see are quite different from what you might expect, in that they target specific subcategories of migrants. One example of this is migrant women who are married to native men. The rights that have been institutionalized and the programs that have been created for those subcategories of migrants are not necessarily universal or even accessible by other migrant groups. If anything, they have tended to
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create hierarchies of noncitizens and widened the gaps between some migrants, such as migrant women—so-called marriage migrants—and other migrants like migrant workers. These distinctions have become institutionalized, for example, in Korea with visa categories. Even the term “immigrant incorporation,” I would argue, has become contained within the visa categories. Some immigrants, such as migrant workers, may be considered incorporated when they reach a legal status, whereas marriage migrants would be incorporated when they become good Korean wives.

Journal: Your previous research has examined the presence of Korean schools in Japan. What role do social institutions such as the education system play in shaping racial dynamics in East Asia?

Chung: I think the social institutions and the education system have largely tried to correct the misconceptions that you see in each of these societies. In earlier years, the focus was mostly on integrating and assimilating the migrant population, as well as their children. The primary concern was about social stability. But in more recent years, there have been more efforts to institute “multicultural education” as well, which would benefit not just the particular children of migrants, but also the larger Korean and Japanese student bodies. What is more significant is that the focus has not just been Korean and Japanese language instruction for these children, but also teaching them their native tongues. So, it is very similar to bilingual education in the United States. I think that has had a positive impact on making it normal; that children should know more than one language. Thus, multiculturalism could be seen as a positive thing that has been contributing to society.

Of course, there are some limitations as well. In Korea’s case, “multicultural children” is a term specifically reserved for children who have Southeast Asian or Chinese mothers and Korean fathers. That term does not include bicultural children with a black father, for example. They are considered to be completely different categories. Significant resources have been applied for integrating and helping the so-called “multicultural children.” During my interviews, a number of migrant women and their children would say that they are passing as Korean. However, as schools began identifying them as multicultural children, they were targeted, and sometimes even bullied, by their classmates because they were no longer able to pass as being Korean and [they were perceived as] receiving special privileges. Sometimes there are certain accusations that they were admitted to specific schools because of affirmative action programs. So, it has had a deleterious effect for some of the individual children because it is a top-down model where the national government has devised programs that had been implemented to varying degrees at the local level. Many times, in rural areas, those officials and volunteers are not necessarily well trained. Basically, they use a thumb [when implementing integration policies] when a finger would be more appropriate. It is a very delicate balance between helping versus hindering the development of these children in the school system.
Journal: Earlier this year, you published an article titled “Creating Hierarchies of Noncitizens: Race, Gender, and Visa Categories in South Korea.” What explains what you call the “hierarchy of non-citizens” in Japan and South Korea? Why are certain foreigners treated differently from others?

Chung: In Korea’s case, I argue that visa categories have actually institutionalized the ascriptive criteria that are associated with particular migrants with the rights and legal status that they hold. The rights that are granted to some migrant sub-categories are not necessarily accessible to others. In Korea’s case, the visa categories themselves have been the basis for certain types of rights, like the right to permanent residency, the right to naturalize as Korean, and even the right to long-term residency.

The problem with that model is that because it is based on ascription or a particular type of skill that is desired, whether it is a visa for a migrant worker or a marriage migrant, if the individual is divorced or injured during the job, for example, they lose those rights and they lose that status. For example, some of the Korean-Chinese migrants [ethnic Koreans from China] that I interviewed in Korea told me that they were in Korea as migrant workers, but they were not able to stay as long-term residents because their visas would have expired. There was no other path for them to stay in Korea or to reside in Korea for a longer period of time. So, in some cases, they naturalized because there was no other option available to them. As ethnic Koreans from China who were above a certain age, they were eligible for naturalization. However, they did not really want to naturalize; they did not want to lose their Chinese nationality, but they felt that was the only way they could be legal residents. They were also getting too old to work so they felt like that was a forced choice. Others have said that they have married Korean nationals because that was the only path that was available to them to reside in Korea indefinitely. The same would go for Japan but it is a very different situation, where you have a population of native-born, largely Korean residents known as Zainichi Koreans [ethnic Koreans living in Japan], who are now going into the sixth generation. Those are six generations of ethnic Koreans who have, in many cases, never been to Korea and whose parents, grandparents, great grandparents, and so on, have only been in Japan. And yet they are still foreign nationals. Because of that they have, in many ways, more social and political capital than other noncitizens. Since they have been in Japan longer, they have engaged in what I have called a “noncitizen civil rights movement.” In the 1960s through the 1970s, they demanded rights based on their status as permanent non-national members of their local societies. They were very successful in removing nationality requirements for access to health insurance, unemployment benefits, housing assistance, and even public sector jobs. So you have this category of native-born generations of foreign residents who are Japanese in almost every way and have basically the same rights as Japanese except for in the political sphere, where they do not have voting rights. Then you have the more recent immigrants, who, if they are legal residents, have the same eligibility for social welfare benefits and other institutionalized rights. But because they are recent immigrants, they do not have access to the same services and opportunities that longer-term residents have had. This has also created hierarchies based on length of residency and community, which has created a big divide between the more recent
immigrants, who are now called “newcomers,” and the older, native-born residents, who are now called “oldcomers.”

**Journal:** Recently, mixed-race Japanese people have gained a lot of media attention, like tennis player Naomi Osaka. How are mixed-race people perceived within their communities? How is national identity influenced by the growing presence and integration of a foreign population in East Asia?

**Chung:** This case is very interesting because when we talk about mixed-raced people, there are hierarchies among them too. In Korea’s case, mixed-race people are distinguished between bicultural children who have Southeast Asian mothers and Korean fathers versus an older generation of bicultural children who had black or white fathers and Korean mothers. The former are called “multicultural children” but the latter are called “mixed-race children.” These groups are not eligible for the same social programs. I think the aggressive campaigns by the Korean government to try to incorporate multicultural children has changed perceptions that Korea is an ethnically homogeneous society and has pushed people to be more open-minded about who a Korean is. This is largely due to the demographic crisis in Korea, which has made some of the migrant children and women be seen as somewhat heroic. Some bureaucrats have even said that migrant women who have come to Korea to produce babies are patriotic, even more patriotic than native Korean women who are portrayed as selfishly not getting married and not having children, and instead pursuing their careers. In some rural communities, the “Most Filial Daughter-in-Law” award has been reconstructed just for these migrant women. So, I think that there is an increasing acceptance that it is inevitable that there are going to be more and more ethnically heterogeneous members of the Korean populace, but it is only for this segment of [“multicultural children” with Korean fathers and Southeast Asian mothers].

In Japan’s case, there is a more narrow perception of what being Japanese means. There is an increasing distinction made between co-ethnic Japanese *Nikkei* immigrants who are Peruvian and Brazilian versus Japanese nationals. In more recent years, there was a change to Japan’s nationality law for bicultural children. In this case, it was a lawsuit that was brought by Filipina women who had divorced or had children out of wedlock with Japanese men. The children were not recognized as being Japanese nationals because Japan at the time had what was called a “fetus recognition system,” in which the Japanese father had to recognize the baby in the womb before the baby was born in order for the baby to become a Japanese national. The women brought the case to court and the Supreme Court ruled that the descent-based principle that forms the basis for Japanese-citizenship policies was being applied unfairly to these children. In many ways, this decision made blood lineage more literal. Japanese nationality is determined by the passive transmission of blood as opposed to even co-ethnicity. The *Nikkei* immigrants are actually not eligible for automatic citizenship as you might see in other countries with ethnic citizenship regimes. The *Nikkei* have to go through the same process of naturalization as any other immigrant group in order to become a Japanese national. Even though ethnic preferences are applied to immigration policies for the *Nikkei*, that
doesn’t apply to citizenship. This really says something about how a Japanese citizen is defined and how that category remains extremely closed even to co-ethnic Japanese immigrants.

Journal: In your forthcoming book *Immigrant Incorporation in East Asian Democracies*, you describe how immigration trends in Japan, Korea, and Taiwan differ from historical patterns in the West that have resulted in liberal migration states. In what ways are the trajectories of immigration to these East Asian democracies different from those of developed Western countries? What outcomes can we expect from these different trajectories?

Chung: I disagree with the theory that there is an inevitable convergence toward a particular model that looks a lot like Western Europe and North America. I also disagree that more and more states are recognizing that there is a need to open borders more and a need to grant institutionalized rights to migrant populations. Obviously, this argument has been on hold for the last couple of years and questioned quite a bit. The idea was that, as a result of the so-called democratic revolution of the 1960’s and then as a result of international norms and the rise of supranational organizations, more and more states were liberalizing both their immigration and citizenship policies. This is one of the reasons why East Asian democracies were considered to be negative cases of immigration, because given their levels of development and their relationships to other Asian countries for example, their levels of immigration are actually quite low. Foreign residents make up between two to four percent of the total population in Japan, Korea, and Taiwan. So that is a lot smaller than the average ten to fifteen percent that we see in Europe, for example.

I argue that it is not inevitable that East Asian democracies are going to converge like their Western liberal counterparts, in large part because they’ve been on a different trajectory altogether. It is not [that] immigration is new necessarily to all three countries. All three countries have long immigration histories. Japan is an anomaly among former imperial powers in that most of its immigration occurred during its colonial period rather than after. In fact, by the end of World War II in 1945, Japan already had over two million former colonial subjects within the metropole. This is very different from other former imperial powers that experienced heightened immigration from former colonies after World War II. Japan was dealing with immigrant incorporation well before its European counterparts. South Korea also has five generations of Chinese residents, who have settled in Korea since 1882, known as the *hwagyo* and who are now mostly Taiwanese nationals. Taiwan also espoused itself to be a country of immigration. Although it does have a very long immigration history, much of that “country of immigration” rhetoric is tied to Mainland Chinese immigrants in the 1945 to 1949 period. I think it is a mistake to think that firstly, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan are recent countries of immigration that are going to eventually become like traditional countries of immigration.

Secondly, we have to acknowledge that the model that we are seeing in Japan, Korea, and Taiwan look a lot less like what we see in Western Europe and North America,
and much more like what we see in Singapore. It is what I call a developmental type of migration regime rather than the liberal migration regime. It is based on valuing migrant labor according to the specific contributions they make to the economy, and it is really centered on temporariness. Essentially, they are seen as permanently temporary populations. This process is very cyclical in that these populations are expected to go back to their home countries and then come back at a certain point rather than settle. Basically, this is what I call immigration policy without immigrants. All three countries do not use the term “immigrant” to refer to their foreign populations. They are referred to as “migrants” or “migrant workers” or “foreign residents,” but very rarely as “immigrants.” Even with the new policy change that we’re seeing in Japan, which was instituted earlier this year, the Abe administration has explicitly said that this is not an immigration policy and that these migrant workers are not immigrants. The fact is that all three countries are operating on a guest worker model. This is a guest worker model that has failed elsewhere, especially in Western Europe. The idea that they are creating these guest worker programs that have failed elsewhere tells us something about what kind of immigration model this is. It is not learning from what happened in Western Europe and North America. Rather, it is figuring out a way to create this program or system that selectively allows for some migrants to become permanent settlers and potentially citizens, but the vast majority will be permanently foreign, whether as permanent foreign residents, permanently deportable, or permanently temporary.

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