

## 4 Migrant and Immigrant Labor

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### *Redefining Korean Identity*

The history of modern Korea has been shaped by harsh colonization, participation in a series of wars—the Asia–Pacific Wars, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War—national division, and rapid industrialization, all of which entailed a violent social upheaval. Given this context, it is not surprising that one of the persistent themes in modern Korean literature is indeed that of exile, migration, and diaspora. Whether in “domestic” or “transnational” contexts, the sorrows of exile, nomadism, and homesickness pervade colonial and postcolonial literature, all the way up to the 1980s. And the experience of migration has always had, of course, material linkages to the conditions of labor. Post-liberation South Korea exported a variety of labor, including soldiers to Vietnam, construction workers to the Middle East, nurses and miners to West Germany, and emigrants to North and South America in the period from the mid-1960s to the early ’80s. Most recently, however, South Koreans are experiencing the migration of others into their country—laborers, mostly from China, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. In an extremely short span of time, South Korea has moved from position of labor exporter to that of labor importer.

While the South Korean working class served as a transnationalized workforce for the U.S./Japan–dependent economy of the 1960s, ’70s, and ’80s, since the late ’80s South Korea’s emergence as a subempire has transformed other Asians into a transnationalized labor force for South Korean multinational capital. Politically, the year 1987 saw the end of over a quarter century of consecutive military dictatorships and the beginning of a gradual transition into liberal democracy. Economically, the Seoul Olympics of 1988 also marked a historical juncture in which South Korea became one of the more affluent parts of Asia, a destination for migrant workers.

Moreover, as South Korean companies also moved their production to offshore locations in less developed parts of Asia, South Korean capital—both conglomerates and small-to-medium-sized businesses—came to employ a large non-Korean labor force. Since South Korean capital turned to migrant and offshore labor in order to continue to grow and maintain profitability, the bottom of the “South Korean” working class no longer consists of ethnic Koreans, but of other Asians, both within and outside of South Korea.<sup>1</sup> While the accumulation of wealth, made possible through the transnationalized, ethnicized labor of the South Korean working class (ethnicized vis-à-vis U.S. or Japanese capital) of the '60s, '70s, and '80s, laid the foundation for South Korea's “Democratization” in the late 1980s, South Korea's liberal democracy of more recent years has also been maintained by a new influx of ethnicized labor (ethnicized vis-à-vis South Korean capital and populace), that is, Chinese, Korean Chinese, South Asians, and Southeast Asians.

Migrant workers began arriving in South Korea in the late 1980s, and in the past twenty years, except for during the so-called IMF crisis from 1997 to 2000, the number has been steadily increasing. Though it is difficult to estimate the exact population figures, due to the fact that the overwhelming percentage of migrant workers are compelled to reside and work in South Korea illegally, the number of these workers is clearly on the rise and is projected only to increase at a more rapid rate in the future.<sup>2</sup> Migrant workers come from a great number of countries—over fifteen—from various parts of Asia, including South Asia and Southeast Asia, Central Asia, and some from as far as North Africa. South Korea is now home to migrant workers from China, Mongolia, Bangladesh, Thailand, Myanmar, Pakistan, Vietnam, the Philippines, Nepal, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Morocco, Iran, and Russia. The majority of migrant workers are employed in the so-called 3D tasks, “dangerous, dirty, and difficult,” in various manufacturing industries. There is also a critical shortage of construction workers needed for continuing urbanization. Through a special provision made in 2002, the shortage of service workers is being met by allowing Korean Chinese (ethnic Koreans from the PRC, often known in Korean as Chosŏnjok) to work in the industry.<sup>3</sup> While this particular ordinance excludes Korean Chinese employment in the “entertainment industry” (*yuhŭng ōpso*), such as sex or sexualized service work in bars or the prostitution business, other ethnicized groups of women, such as Filipinas and Russians, are being imported for this particular sector through the government's issuance of “entertainment visas.”

I argue in this chapter that South Korean migrant labor activism reacts to and engages with coexisting and overlapping historical conditions and systems. It is situated within the context of South Korea's transition from a mono-ethnic nation into a multiethnic immigrant nation, whose "labor import" is premised on its new status as one of the Asian subempires. Simultaneously, migrant labor activism emerges out of the recent rapid globalization process—which has encompassed all spheres, including international politics, transnational capitalism, and multinational culture industries—of which South Korea is part. This chapter pays attention to dual historical processes, in which South Korea as a nation-state still operates powerfully, governing and controlling various dimensions of "labor import" and migrants' work, while at the same time contemporary globalization has been eroding the nation-state system, disrupting the isomorphism among territory, people, and nation-state sovereignty.<sup>4</sup> I argue that the South Korean state functions simultaneously as a racial state that plays a major role in creating and maintaining a racially segmented labor market, and as a multicultural state that facilitates management of diverse ethnized populations.<sup>5</sup>

The chapter then goes on to explore the ways in which migrant labor activism can appropriate both national and transnational structures and networks in order to push for progressive reforms and formulate resistive subjectivities. South Koreans and migrant worker-activists have recently begun to reconceptualize South Korea's labor importation around issues of immigration, social entitlements, and political representation, that is, matters of citizenship. In making the subject of transnational migrant work a domestic or intranational (rather than international) issue, a small minority of South Korean activists and migrant workers expedite the process of what they perceive as an inevitable outcome of continuing labor migration, that is, the reconfiguration of South Korea into a multiethnic nation. Following Appadurai and Sassen, this chapter illustrates the ways in which certain dimensions of globalization, such as the expansion of cultural and communication networks, the development of migrants' complex transnational and translocal subjectivities, and the emergence of a "new international human rights regime,"<sup>6</sup> operate subversively to counteract the powers of South Korea as a nation-state. Lastly, this chapter explores the ongoing process of the multiethnicization of South Korean society, in which Korean-ness or Korean identity has incipiently begun to be decoupled from its exclusive association with the biologicistic conception of ethnicity and ancestry

on the one hand, and the performativity of Korean identity is being brought out through cultural assimilation and a Koreanization of the migrant population and their Korean-born and raised children on the other. I conclude the chapter by discussing the dual dimension of migrant subjects, who attempt to reterritorialize themselves in South Korea through cultural integration and “inflexible citizenship,” while simultaneously maintaining themselves as deterritorialized subjects of multiple locations and nation-states, as they recreate and reinvent their translocal cultural identity.<sup>7</sup>

### THE STATE, CAPITAL, AND LABOR TRAFFICKING

#### *The South Korean State as a Racial State and a Multicultural State*

While the South Korean state of the industrializing era played a central role in exporting labor, its transformation in recent years to a labor importer has created and maintained a racially segmented labor force through a range of laws and regulations that are designed to supply cheap labor for South Korean capital, bar social entitlements for migrant workers, and prevent their permanent settlement. The contemporary South Korean state, thus, heterogenizes the population by allowing labor migration in order to serve the needs of national economy, while continuing to insist on the conception of South Korea as an ethnically homogeneous nation by legislating political and social exclusion of migrant workers. Many state laws and government labor practices regarding migrant workers have either been inherited from the Japanese colonial period or borrowed from contemporary Japan. Either way, they constitute anachronisms that do not abide by the standards set by international human rights guidelines. Similarly, the pattern of collusion between the state and capital that we recognize in contemporary South Korea is also continuous with that of the previous era of South Korea's rapid industrialization. If the state collaborated with the conglomerates to extract cheap labor from the domestic population then, it now works with small to medium industries to import, manage, and govern the foreign migrant workforce. Through various legal provisions, and also by refusing to provide regulations or refusing to enforce them, the South Korean state sanctions and underwrites a racialized and racist labor exploitation of the migrant population; racism and state power are welded to each other.<sup>8</sup>

The South Korean state as a “racial state,” to borrow Omi and Winant's term<sup>9</sup>—one that performs a key role in the ongoing racial formation of

South Korea—is further complicated by the ideologically complementary and compensatory role it plays in its purveying of official multiculturalism, which, Lisa Lowe reminds us, “takes up the role of resolving the history of inequalities left unresolved in the economic, political domains.”<sup>10</sup> While the Justice Department of South Korea oversees the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), which for the most part bases its legal and illegal actions, such as arrests, detention, and deportation, on explicit racism and racial violence, at the same time, South Korean officials urge their “citizens to shift to a multicultural social consciousness.”<sup>11</sup> The state demands that South Korean society embrace multiculturalism for the purpose of managing its diverse laboring population effectively, while disavowing the necessary political and social changes to support the multiethnic population. Just to name a couple of instances of its recent multicultural policies, the state makes special visa provisions for the children of migrant workers, offers Korean language classes for migrant workers and their children,<sup>12</sup> and sponsors multicultural events and festivals. One of such festivals in 2005 was even named “Migrant Workers’ Arirang,” after the traditional folksong *arirang*, which had been associated with Koreans’ ethnationally based oppression since the Japanese colonial period.<sup>13</sup> The highly precarious status of migrant workers in South Korea further raises the stakes for the compensatory function of official multiculturalism in South Korea. Furthermore, migrant workers’ organization as laborers, as residents, and as (future and current) citizens, and their active resistance and contestation vis-à-vis the state and the South Korean mainstream society contribute, subversively, to the ongoing process of racial formation in contemporary South Korea, as we will see in the last section of this chapter.<sup>14</sup>

#### *Laws and Regulations on Labor Migration and Migrant Labor*

The most widely used, systematic method of exploiting foreign migrant workers is called the “Industrial Trainee System” (*sanöp yönsusaeng chedo*). An “Industrial Trainee” is also called *kyoyuksaeng*, an apprentice or student. Under the pretext of technology transfer and the training of industrial workers,<sup>15</sup> this system imports a large number of workers from various Asian countries and offers salaries, stipulated by agreements between South Korea and the respective source countries, that are substantially lower than those of South Korean workers who perform similar types of work. Despite these fabricated rationales, the Industrial Trainee System is mainly used as a source of cheap and unskilled labor from other less developed

Asian countries. Under the pressure of labor activists, migrant workers, and even about half of the small to medium business employers, in July 2003 the South Korean National Assembly passed a law that began to allow a combination of two systems for foreign migrant labor, the existing Industrial Trainee System and the new Work Permit System (*koyong hōgaje*). This new law also includes a provision for legalizing some of the undocumented migrant workers by offering amnesty for those who have stayed in South Korea under four years, while others with over four years of illegal residency were asked to leave the country voluntarily. This new law also made it possible, at least and only for migrant workers with legal status, to have rights equivalent to those of South Korean workers, including the right to strike.<sup>16</sup> However, the consensus since the implementation of the Work Permit System has been that the availability and acquisition of legal status for some of the migrant worker population has not accomplished much in terms of improving their overall working and living conditions.<sup>17</sup>

One of the ideological premises of the Industrial Trainee System in particular—but also, to a lesser extent, the Work Permit System and the general system of use of migrant labor—is this dis/connection between the workers' bodies and the location of their labor performed on the one hand, and their citizenship and the location of their nativity on the other. While their bodies are located in Korea, working, consuming, and living there, migrant workers are treated as if they were living in their own countries, where the cost of labor and living is cheaper than in Korea. In calculating their wages, the South Korean state and capital dissimulate that migrant workers' bodies, work, and life are somehow discontinuous with Korean society and the Korean territory where they are physically located. Their laboring and living bodies and their communities seem to constitute a deterritorialized colony within South Korea, or a colonized extraterritoriality, that is, a virtual island that is segregated from their surroundings. If the logic of this linkage between the laboring body and his or her native country, deemed indissoluble, operates to justify the low wages of migrant workers, the wage difference between receiving countries, like South Korea, and sending countries is experienced by migrant workers as a temporal issue. On the part of migrant workers themselves, an enormous motivation and temptation for them to come to South Korea, despite the hardship they expect, is this sense of temporal compression. That is, they can earn in one month in Korea and in other wealthier nations what they would

have earned in ten years in their own countries. So if they could move from an industrial trainee job—that is, they are lucky enough to escape the “island” that the Industrial Trainee System constructs within Korea—to better paying jobs in Korean space and time, and then return to their own countries, their earnings from Korea can be calculated in terms of a temporal gain. But, more often than not, this gamble fails since, because of the harsh life and labor they endure, one year in Korea can be felt and experienced as ten years at home. Or one month in Korea can also mean the loss of all of their time, their future, if they lose a limb, their health, or their life. As a Nepali worker in Pak Pöm-sin’s novel *Namaste* puts it, “The three and a half years I lived through in South Korea is much longer than twenty years I lived in Nepal.”<sup>18</sup>

For the undocumented migrant worker population in South Korea, labor laws are separate and unequal. While the South Korean constitution and labor laws prohibit discrimination based on nationality, unenforced laws are as good as nonexistent. The goal of migrant workers and labor activists is to have government authorities guarantee three major labor rights—the right to unionize, the right to strike, and the right to collectively bargain—by enforcing the laws guaranteeing them on behalf of the migrant worker population. Under these circumstances, one of the demands of workers and activists is for the state to legislate special laws that would protect at least the most minimal rights of migrant workers. For example, one of the most serious problems that migrant workers experience is delayed and unpaid wages. When this occurs, there are no official channels through which workers can address the issue, as a large percentage of migrant workers remain undocumented, which places them in a very vulnerable position. Currently, there are no fines or penalties for employers who fail to pay wages, nor are there any government agencies that administer or oversee the labor practices of the companies that employ migrant workers. Another example of an unenforced law is the state regulation established in 1995 that requires the employer to provide health insurance and compensation for industrial accidents. However, employers are either unaware of such laws or they simply do not comply with them, and the state turns a blind eye to such situations. Through its negligence and indifference, the South Korean state ends up being a silent and complicit partner to the criminal activities of the businesses that exploit migrant workers. The contemporary South Korean government repeats the notorious actions of its predecessors of earlier decades, who also actively and

passively colluded with South Korean capitalists by refusing to enforce labor laws on behalf of South Korean workers.

While South Korea as a sovereign state still wields much power over the working conditions of migrant workers, through laws and regulations, globalization has precipitated the emergence of a “new international human rights regime” in which “human rights override the distinctions between citizens and aliens, undermining the authority of the state.” Sassen argues, “Under human rights regimes states must increasingly take account of persons qua persons, rather than qua citizens. The individual is now an object of law and a site for rights regardless of whether a citizen or an alien.”<sup>19</sup> While this is certainly a growing trend, and migrant workers in South Korea can and do appeal to these international rights and institutions, in reality the sovereign state’s control, rather than the influence of the international human rights regime, still dominates migrant workers’ lives and labor.

### *Government Crackdowns*

State authorities carry out periodic crackdowns, rounding up undocumented migrant workers. Once they are captured and arrested by INS officials and the police, they are often detained in correctional facilities, despite the clear violation of international human rights that such a process constitutes. The brutalities committed against migrants by INS officials and the police seem to be common enough occurrences.<sup>20</sup> These general crackdown periods, also informally referred to as “big clean-up operations,”<sup>21</sup> are for the ostensible purpose of complying with the law—that is, identifying workers whose status is or has become illegal due to the expiration of their visas, and dealing with them accordingly—but they function, in fact, as a strategy of disposing of those who have stayed in Korea for an extended period time, that is, over a few years, in order to make room for a new crop of migrant workers—workers more vulnerable and more willing to work for cheaper wages. Needless to say, “big clean-up operations,” the cleansing of the ethnicized workforce, serve as a powerful disciplinary mechanism.

During such periods of intense crackdowns, many migrant workers often opt to go underground rather than leave the country. Because they have spent already a large sum of money to come into the country, they simply cannot afford to return home without paying back the money that they owe their brokers, friends, and family. They also know that periodic

crackdowns must stop in order for the supply of cheap labor to continue. The conditions of their hiding out during these “clean-up operations” are as miserable as their working conditions. They usually spend the majority of their time indoors, in cramped rooms where several workers live together. Since they have to use their savings, they often try to live on as little as possible, skipping meals and limiting their movements as if they were hibernating. Other survival strategies include living by such rules as having curtains drawn at all times, not using electric lamps at night, not gathering together with fellow migrant workers, and not using public transportation.<sup>22</sup> Hwang Sök-yöng’s novel *Children of Darkness*, which I discussed in chapter 2, describes a very similar type of situation, where petty street criminals, mostly teenage males, young men, and prostitutes, must also lie low during periodic “cleansing” operations by the local police. If Hwang’s novel portrays the authoritarian state’s criminalization of the underclass in late 1970s South Korea, the contemporary “liberal” state criminalizes the racialized migrant population who now make up the very bottom of the South Korean underclass. If migrant workers’ labor takes place in carceral conditions, their waiting for the chance to work is also an imprisonment. Not only is their work made illegal, but their very existence in South Korea is also rendered illegitimate by a series of regulations of the state and the laws of the market economy. Just as “free labor” at the worker’s disposal, in fact, means the opposite—that is, a condition of extreme constraint—“migrant labor” actually signifies the severe restriction of movement; workers migrate along predetermined paths, whether these paths are from periphery to semiperiphery or metropole, or from one job to another within a given country. Migrant workers who are deported are often forced to leave Korea without their wages, though they protest that with their fingers cut off and without their wages they cannot leave Korea. In the end, the crackdowns become a means of turning cheap labor into free labor. For example, in 1998 unpaid wages amounted to over 100 million dollars and the number of uncompensated victims of industrial accidents reached over five thousand.<sup>23</sup>

### *South Korean Employers*

The fact that state authorities have not made a point of cracking down on the employers who use migrant labor, while simultaneously implementing harsh policies of detainment and deportation of migrant workers, eloquently reveals the state’s intention to assist in the businesses’ exploitation

of foreign labor. Again, the situation is oddly similar to the state's position on prostitution: while it performs periodic and often severe crackdowns on female sex workers, it rarely if ever bothers with the other half of the business—the male users. Migrant workers themselves articulate this obvious contradiction: “If we are illegal, what of our Korean bosses who employ us? And what of the Korean economy, which uses our labor? Isn't South Korea itself illegal?” One of their slogans at rallies is, “Illegal Workers=Illegal Republic of Korea” (*Pulböp ch'eryuja=pulböp taehan minguk*).<sup>24</sup>

The Democratic Labor Union (*minju noch'ong*) points to the Industrial Trainee System as the most prevailing, legalized, structural cause of the exploitation of migrant workers and of the violations against their human rights in South Korea.<sup>25</sup> The system revives a Japanese practice from the colonial period that was used to recruit Korean workers for factories in Japan proper. Its systematic nature of exploitation stems from the collusive network of multiple agents, the South Korean government (and, to some extent, the governments of the sending countries), South Korean employers, and, not the least of all, a South Korean organization called Chungso kiöp hyöpdong chohap chunganghoe or Chungkihyöp (The Central Association of Small to Medium Businesses). While it is a non-governmental organization in the private sector, in the tradition of crony capitalism that has flourished in South Korea, its connections with the government enables it to exert a significant amount of influence on labor policies. Chungkihyöp functions as an intermediary between South Korean employers and the governments and labor brokers of the sending countries. In this process, the association ends up making a profit of roughly three hundred dollars per industrial trainee that it imports for South Korean employers, while also taking three hundred dollars from the overseas labor brokers. In 2001, the association's total profit from labor trafficking amounted to 3.6 million dollars.<sup>26</sup>

The low wages of industrial trainees, who make about half of South Korean workers' pay, is justified under the pretext of “technology transfer,” the idea that South Korean companies teach these workers skills to take back to their countries. Their status as apprentices or trainees, not full-fledged workers, thus rationalizes their low wage. It is further argued that industrial trainees are paid the wages they would have been paid in their own countries. In fact, the companies who do business with the countries of industrial trainees' origin are legally exempted from paying them the Korean minimum wage, according to a Labor Department provision.<sup>27</sup>

When industrial trainees arrive and start working in Korea, a large percentage of them breach their contracts in order to take better-paying jobs. Their passports are taken away from them when they arrive, precisely to prevent such escapes. Sometimes they are locked inside their dormitories at the end of a workday. These companies also make use of a strategy called “forced savings deposit” (*kangje chöknip*), devised for the express purpose of limiting the number of runaway trainees, whereby a fixed amount of money is automatically deducted from a worker’s monthly salary and (supposedly) deposited in his or her savings account.<sup>28</sup> Again, this was a tactic used by Japanese companies in the colonial period against Korean factory workers. Workers have complained bitterly about the fact that they have never seen their savings account statement, nor do they have any kind of access to it. After deductions for their “forced savings deposit” and payment for room and board, industrial trainees are left with appallingly small amounts of money from their already low wages; the actual take-home pay for some can be as little as half of their official salary. One worker commented, “I have nothing left after I spend money to buy international calling cards to talk to my family back home.”<sup>29</sup> Once workers run away from their trainee jobs, they have no way of recovering the monies put into these accounts. The forced savings deposit system provides the employers with one more way of making use of migrant labor for free.

#### RACIALIZATION, RACISM, AND RACIAL VIOLENCE

In a survey of eleven Asian nations that measured the quality of life for migrant worker populations in areas such as housing, education, health services, and entertainment, South Korea was ranked in the late 1990s as the number 1 nation in terms of the inconvenience and discomfort that migrant workers experienced in their work and living situations.<sup>30</sup> While the survey does not seem to have included questions directly related to racial discrimination, race is a central issue that affects all of the areas of living and working mentioned above, whether these aspects are regulated by laws or remain outside state governance.

##### *Racialized Working Conditions*

In February 2007, nine people died and eighteen were seriously injured in a fire at a detention center of the Yösu branch of the INS. The ironically named Yösu Protection Agency is a detention facility where migrant workers who have been arrested for their illegal status are incarcerated

temporarily until their deportation. The rooms have windows with bars and doors with heavy double padlocks. Surveillance cameras are installed everywhere, including inside toilets, and those held here are let outside only for thirty minutes of exercise per day. Without a sprinkler system, when the building caught fire the detainees could not escape from their rooms, which were no different from prison cells.<sup>31</sup> While this tragic fatal fire happened to take place in a detention facility, migrant workers' day-to-day living and working conditions, in fact, constitute a continuum with the prisonlike conditions of the "protection agency." These conditions are most accurately described as carceral labor (*kamgŭm nodong*).<sup>32</sup> In order to prevent the workers from running away, their workplace is locked from the outside, just as their dormitories are bolted after work. This particular system of carceral labor reverses, in a way, Angela Davis's concept of a "prison-industrial complex," whereby a racialized population is first imprisoned for criminal offences, and then put to work while incarcerated.<sup>33</sup> In the case of migrant workers, the very premise of their labor in South Korea is incarceration based on their nationality and racialized status—the condition that predicates the import of their labor power into South Korea.

Another key factor that contributes to racialized working conditions for migrant workers is their South Korean coworkers' racism. In the construction businesses, where many Chinese and Korean Chinese workers are employed, South Korean workers have come to resent their presence as competitors. In some instances, South Korean workers have resorted to racial slurs, calling for "driving out the Chinks."<sup>34</sup> One migrant worker relates the story of how his boss started to beat him with a bat when he declined the cup of coffee offered to him.<sup>35</sup> This type of situation is comparable to both colonial Korea as well as to the immigrant labor market of the United States. Labor organizers and activist leaders try to remind workers of the need for their solidarity, but Korean workers are reluctant to be equated with workers of other races, whom they perceive to be racially inferior. In Puch'ŏn where a large number of migrant workers work and live, migrant residents of the city put together their own cultural event, to which they, as hosts, invited the Korean community. The event was named "We, too, Love Puch'ŏn." Yi Ran-ju, a Korean activist who works with migrant workers, calls this festivity a kind of *kōming autū* ("coming out") of migrant workers.<sup>36</sup> Her use of this term, borrowed from English and used mainly in the context of the South Korean gay and lesbian movement, reveals racialized migrant labor in South Korea to be clandestine.

While the South Korean state is actively involved in bringing in migrant labor, the state's production of migrant workers' political invisibility, economic disposability, and social segregation simultaneously renders migrant workers and their labor clandestine. Its clandestinity intersects with that of other labors we discussed in the previous chapters: military labor and its paradoxical invisibility as a labor in contrast to its visibility as a national service; domestic prostitution and the irony of its ubiquity and clandestinity; and military prostitution and the contradiction of its simultaneous prominence as a national issue in "high" literature and its obscurity and erasure as a socially stigmatized labor.

### *Racialized Neighborhoods*

In the past decade, migrant workers in South Korea have gradually begun to form their respective ethnic enclaves. Following Sassen, South Korean scholar Kim Hyön-mi calls Seoul a "global city" that now incorporates several districts occupied by various ethnic groups, including Vietnamese, Filipinos, Chinese, Korean Chinese, Mongolians, Russians, Central Asians, Nigerians, Ghanaians, and Egyptians.<sup>37</sup> Small cities, like Söngnam, Ansan, Yangju, Koyang, and Tongduchön, which have attracted migrant workers from various Asian countries and as far as from Africa, are now multiracial cities. For example, the Korean Chinese, who make up about 60 percent of the entire migrant worker population, have formed "Chosönjok streets," also known as *chaina taun* ("Chinatown"), in the Karibong District of Seoul. The Karibong District, a neighborhood near the major industrial complex called Kuro Industrial Complex, on the outskirts of Seoul, was a place where South Korean factory workers once lived and worked in the 1970s and '80s. During the period of rapid industrialization, it was a place where domestic migrant workers from the impoverished rural areas made a living—a home away from home, and a refuge that was not a refuge. It is a place that appears often in South Korean literary works of that period, as well as those that rewrite the history of the labor and dissident movement, works that deal with the hardships of the industrial proletariat.<sup>38</sup> The kind of housing that migrant workers can afford in these areas is known as *pöljip*—"beehives"—or *tchokbang*, which may be translated as a "sliced room." They are literally a sliver of a room, where one person can lie down with little extra space. And such small rooms line each floor, indeed constituting a beehive-like formation. While South Korean factory workers were occupants of this type of housing in the 1970s and '80s, in

recent years 80 to 90 percent of “beehive houses” have been occupied by migrant workers as the cheapest housing available.<sup>39</sup> Another type of housing the companies provide for migrant workers is called in Korean *konteinō*: these are metal shipping containers that have been converted into rooms. As these containers have no heating system built into them, in winter people can only use electric mats and blankets to keep warm.

There has been an increase in crime in these neighborhoods, including burglary, possession and sale of illegal drugs, assault, and murder. As the case often is in ethnic neighborhoods in other contexts, such as the United States, these crimes are committed against migrant workers by other migrant workers, usually within one ethnic community. This rise in the crime rate can be directly linked to the fact that migrant workers so often experience economic hardship due to unpaid wages.<sup>40</sup> As in other racialized contexts, the stress and pressure that migrant workers experience is taken out on the members of their own ethnic community, rather than being directed against those who are responsible for their racial degradation, exclusion, and misery.

Furthermore, migrant workers are also victims of racially motivated crimes committed by Koreans. Because of their illegal status, which makes them unwilling to report crimes to the police, migrant workers in these neighborhoods have become targets of local Korean gangs. As migrant workers resort to arming themselves as the only means of self-protection, the local authorities are concerned about the potential for racial violence between these two groups.<sup>41</sup> It is reported that victims of racial violence by South Koreans are most often migrant workers who are darker skinned, usually South Asians and Southeast Asians rather than Chinese, Korean Chinese, or other lighter skinned workers, such as Iranians.<sup>42</sup>

The city of Ansan is populated by a large number of migrant workers working in the so-called 3D industries, as well as by the very bottom of the Korean working class, who have also become domestic migrants.<sup>43</sup> It is known among Korean workers as the very end point, a place where one ends up when there is nowhere else to go. Ansan became the only and last place for these Koreans to be able to make a living, alongside foreign migrant workers, because of its abundance of “difficult, dirty, and dangerous” jobs and day laboring opportunities. However, in Ansan, such Koreans make up a minority. Ansan is not only a place where the majority population, migrant workers of various nationalities, live and work, but it is also

a destination for migrant workers who work in other parts of South Korea, who pay monthly or biweekly visits in order to get together with their respective compatriots to exchange information, to eat their own ethnic food, and to share their homesickness. The streets of Ansan are lined with various ethnic restaurants, and there are more signs in Chinese and other languages than in Korean.

Invoking the title of a famous poem by Pak No-hae, "The Dawn of Labor," from the days of the South Korean labor movement of the 1980s, one newspaper article calls contemporary Ansan "The Dawn of Labor in Ansan." The lines cited from the poem that speak of the rural migrants to Seoul of the 1970s and '80s—"though we are neither migratory birds nor floating clouds . . . we came to Seoul"—are now applied to migrant workers from overseas. The newspaper article draws our attention to the transient nature of their lives. The instability, precariousness, and insecurity of rural migrants of Korean ethnicity of the earlier era are now made more profound by the racialized experiences of migrant workers. These ethnic ghettos are semicolonial or internal colonial territories. Migrant workers in contemporary South Korea remind us of Koreans as colonized migrants driven out to Manchuria, Japan, the South Pacific, or the United States. Their ghostly presence in South Korea, both indelible as well as fleeting, brings us back to the former era that has not yet gone by, back to a poem by the colonial poet Han Yong-un.<sup>44</sup>

The Karibong District was a place associated with "bitterness" (*han*, 恨) for South Korean workers, but now their *han* is being replaced by the even more intense and deeper *han* of migrant workers. The changing history of the Karibong District offers us a very clear example of this process of substituting workers of a formerly peripheral nation, South Korea, with (migrant) workers of currently peripheral nations. It illustrates the racialized surrogacy and serial replaceability of transnational proletarian labor. As in the U.S. immigrant context, such ethnic enclaves testify to the isolation and segregation of the ethnic population from the mainstream, while such areas become not only economic centers that provide various necessary services, but also communal havens that offer emotional respite and cultural interaction among the ethnicized residents. The racial ghettos of South Korea constitute these clandestine spaces of a subimperial nation-state, one that is multiethnic, and yet one that refuses to acknowledge its multiethnicity. However, they are not just disavowed multiethnic national

spaces, but also transnational and globalized spaces that offer also unexpected resistances, as we will see in the next section.

### *Industrial Accidents, Injuries, and Deaths*

About half of migrant workers fall victim to industrial accidents within the first year of their arrival.<sup>45</sup> Migrant workers say that their fingers that have been cut off and thrown out would fill up several hundred rice sacks. The haunting image of lost body parts once again alerts us to the continuity between South Korean workers of the previous era, and migrant workers who currently fill these dangerous jobs no longer wanted by Koreans. One of Hwang Sök-yöng's famous portrayals of rural migrants-turned-urban poor, "A Dream of Good Fortune," describes a young male worker's loss of fingers at a furniture factory, and his meager compensation of thirty dollars for them.<sup>46</sup> As victims of industrial accidents, migrant workers often return home dead, arriving as a box of ashes or in a coffin. Some die from the violence committed by South Korean coworkers or bosses.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, migrant workers' deaths are not limited to direct dangers to which they are exposed at their workplaces. Their deaths are often a result of a combination of related physical and psychological factors, such as overwork, malnutrition, depression, and alcoholism. Others return home as permanently disabled and mutilated bodies that carry the memories of their physical hardship and psychological pain that they suffered in South Korea. While South Korean law provides for financial compensation for the victims of industrial accidents and deaths, for both legal and undocumented migrant workers, a large percentage of victims and their families are unable to collect the money that they are due from damage to their bodies and the loss of their lives.

Much of the literary and popular cultural productions on rural migrants to urban areas from the 1970s highlights the sorrows of living and dying away from home in line with the traditional Asian worldview that considers death away from home as one of the worst misfortunes. South Koreans will also remember the return of their fellow citizens, soldiers, or construction workers, whether from the Vietnam War or from the Middle East as a handful of ashes. A book of photography of migrant workers, titled *Borderless Workers*, ends with a series of pictures that capture migrant workers' funerals. One sequence of pictures concerns "The Funeral of Nuzrül Islam, a Bangladeshi worker, 2001," as the caption below reads. It tells us that he became a victim of an industrial accident within the period of two and a

half months of his arrival in South Korea. This sequence contains a picture of the preparation of his dead body, another of the grim looks of his fellow workers, and finally a picture of his coffin at the airport before it is loaded onto the airplane. His coworkers and compatriots stand around to say their final goodbyes to him as they wipe their tears. The caption tells us that the minister/activist Kim Hae-sŏng has become an expert in the required procedures for such funerals. A couple of other pictures show the basement of the Ansan Migrant Workers' Association building, in which boxes of the ashes of migrant workers lie stacked up on top of each other and next to each other. Next to the boxes, wrapped in Korean-style wrapping cloths, we also see photo portraits of migrant workers, which we assume were used for their funerals. One large picture shows the face of a middle-aged East Asian man, broadly smiling, in the darkness of the basement. The caption explains to us that the workers' illegal status during their lifetimes prevents their remains from leaving South Korea. They must continue to be exiles, even in death. Minister/activist Kim Hae-sŏng writes, "Every time I open the basement door, my ears ring with the murmurings of the dead, their stories of injustice, here in this place where we don't even have enough time to help the living."<sup>48</sup> Whether dead or mutilated, migrant workers and their suffering will forever connect them, materially, to South Korea as a community, a nation, and a place.

## ORGANIZING MIGRANT LABOR

### *South Korean Labor Activists: Assimilationism and Semiperipheral Discipline*

Suppressing its earlier internationalist tendency in the colonial period, leftist ideology in South Korea underwent a process of intense ethnonationalization in the context of the authoritarian states' mobilization of ethnonationalism for their developmentalist and anticommunist nation-building through the 1960s, '70s, and '80s. While the ideological premise for the dissident struggle was to situate South Korea and its authoritarian regimes in relation to U.S. neocoloniality, and thus to grasp the role of the South Korean working class as serving the interests of the neocolonial, comprador, capitalist structure, the student movement in its scholarly activities and politico-economic activism remained largely and staunchly ethnonationalist, unable, or unwilling, for the most part, to make transnational or

international connections. As South Korea transitioned into a liberal democracy in the 1990s, it also saw gradual dissolution of the student movement and the subsequent reformulation of the South Korean left in general, and labor activism in particular.

With the influx of migrant workers from overseas starting in the late 1980s, a sector of the South Korean labor movement began to turn its attention to organizing the racialized workforce, changing its direction from an ethnonationalist to a transnational or internationalist struggle. The discourse of class and ethnonation from the '70s and '80s has recently changed to that of human rights, the multiethnic nation, and internationalism. It was in May 2001 that the Democratic Labor Union (Minju noch'ong) launched a new division for migrant workers, holding a ceremony in the student union building at Yonsei University.<sup>49</sup> Those who are carrying on the legacy of the democratization movement of the '70s and '80s are now attempting to reinscribe the very meaning of the famous June Struggle of 1987, endeavoring to recast it from a nationalist struggle against military dictatorships and class polarization to a struggle for the broader global peace and antiwar causes and the "guarantee of human rights for migrant workers."<sup>50</sup>

Below, I explore whether the racial hierarchy created and maintained by the South Korean state and capital in the labor market might be duplicated, however unwittingly, in the sphere of labor activism, even as South Korean labor activism consciously and assiduously contests such dominant racial ideologies and policies. Can the legacy of South Korean labor activism from the 1970s and '80s become a "subuniversalist," and thus "subimperialist," internationalism, in the process of its "transmission" to migrant workers and its "export" to parts of Asia to which migrant workers will return? I examine the tension between South Korean activists' leadership as a form of semiperipheral assimilation and discipline, and migrant worker-activists' multiple strategies of resistance vis-à-vis both mainstream domination and the problematic aspects of the progressive agenda.

In anticipation of a deadline approaching for forced deportation in 2004, organized migrant workers began a demonstration at Myōngdong Cathedral in the heart of downtown Seoul. In November of 2003, workers, along with their South Korean supporters, camped outside the cathedral and went on a hunger strike, which lasted for over a year.<sup>51</sup> Migrant workers' labor activism is very much influenced by that of South Korean workers of the earlier era. The similarity is immediately striking, for example, in all

aspects of the rallies and demonstrations. They seemed to have inherited many of the same militarized styles of protest, such as wearing headbands, shouting slogans, thrusting their arms forward, and so on.

In addition to instruction on Marxist theories, organizational methods, strategies of resistance, and Korean language and culture,<sup>52</sup> the curriculum for migrant worker-activists at Söngkonghoe University—one of the centers of South Korean activism in earlier decades, which is continuing the traditions of social movements with its efforts now focused on migrant workers—includes the history of South Korean labor activism of the 1980s. The South Korean activists' goal is to foster a group of migrant worker-activists who will take part in the domestic struggle and who, upon return to their native countries, will take on the role of leaders, internationalizing the lessons learned in South Korea. The linkages made by Korean activists between the struggles of South Korean workers of the earlier era and the challenges faced by the migrant workers of contemporary South Korea are meant to advance international and interethnic/interracial solidarity and to promote education, acculturation, and assimilation of migrant worker-activists. But given the hierarchy of both the economies and the levels of democratization between South Korea and other Asian peripheral nation-states, the history of the South Korean labor movement, offered as part of the "curriculum," implicitly establishes the South Korean case as an archetype or a model to be followed by contemporary migrant worker-activists. The lessons of the South Korean labor movement seem to function here as ideologies of semiperipheral normalization and subimperialist universalism in their very progressivism, unintentionally replicating the hierarchy that exists in the sphere of global capitalism and international politics.

However, we also want to acknowledge the extent to which South Korean labor activism of earlier decades had been keenly aware of the problematic and contradiction-ridden nature of the relationship between the student leadership and workers.<sup>53</sup> This vigilance on the part of South Korean activists, which has been extended to their contemporary relations with migrant worker-activists, has helped to transfer the leadership role to migrant workers themselves, in organizations such as the Migrant Workers' Unions of the Seoul, Kyönggi, Inch'ön Area and various Migrant Workers' Broadcasting Stations. Nonetheless, the rhetoric of "autonomy of migrant workers" (*chajujök ijunodongja*), often and emphatically urged by Korean activists, still leaves us with a sense that the issues of cultural, national, and racial

hierarchy, and the potential problem of progressivist subimperial universalism, are far from having been resolved.

*Migrant Workers' Resistance: Assimilation, Anti-Koreanism, and Death*

While nationality does serve as a basis for forming communities among migrant workers, it cannot function as the sole basis for solidarity and organization, due to the multinational, multiethnic nature of the migrant workforce. It is their anti-Koreanism—stemming from the contingent and situated basis of their shared experiences of exploitation by, and their rage against, the South Korean government, businesses, and society at large—that unites them and produces them as a pan-Asian, pan-ethnic, anti-subimperial collective. South Koreans, whose ethnonational identity has been shaped by the continual shoring up of a sense of victimhood in relation to Japanese colonialism and U.S. neocoloniality, now must grapple with their new position in the present global order that has created an anti-subimperial population, an anti-Korean political entity. For South Koreans, the familiarity and everydayness of such words as “anti-American” (*panmi*) or “anti-Japanese” (*panil*) are related to the history of Japanese colonialism and the U.S. hegemony. But now, it is time for South Koreans to add a new concept, one that places them at the receiving end of similar anti-(sub)imperial resistance—namely, “anti-Korean” (*panhan*) sentiments from migrant workers. Those who must leave South Korea with more debt than savings, with disabilities, with missing fingers and legs, and broken backs, and family members and relatives of others who leave South Korea as a handful of ashes, have only resentment and enmity for Korea and Koreans. In one of their protest rallies, Korean Chinese workers changed one of their placards to read “Taehan minguk” (大恨民國, Republic of Great Bitterness), rather than “Taehan minguk” (大韓民國, Republic of Korea). Their slogan plays on the homonymic characters “韓” (*han*, Korea) and “恨” (*han*, bitterness). Another slogan equates the characters, Republic of Great Bitterness/Korea, 大恨/韓民國 with the “Great Republic of Exploitation” (*ch'akch'wi taeguk*).<sup>54</sup>

Articulation of such powerful anti-Korean sentiments sometimes takes the form of various kinds of threats. Thai workers who once worked in South Korea and have now returned to Thailand have organized an anti-Korean association. Korean Chinese workers vow their revenge on South Korea. In fact, such intensity of hatred among former migrants to South Korea, both Chinese and Korean Chinese, has resulted in some danger for South Koreans who reside in China; there has been a series of kidnapping

incidents targeting South Korean businessmen and their families.<sup>55</sup> Furthermore, such incidents receive a great deal of attention in the South Korean media, while criminal and exploitative actions of South Korean companies and employers are rarely reported. This, of course, further angers Korean Chinese and Chinese migrant workers. While the mainstream South Korean media reports incessantly on the so-called “Hallyu” phenomenon (the Korean Wave), marveling at how South Korean cultural products are loved in Asia, they do not ask why Korea is also hated both inside and outside of Korea among migrant and offshore workers.

Migrant workers’ resistance takes multiple forms, as their very sentiments and emotions about Korea are necessarily ambivalent and conflict ridden. A recent novel by Pak Pöm-sin, *Namaste*, highlights the aspects of migrant workers’ resistance that articulate their desire for integration into Korea. One of the novel’s central events is a fictionalized account of the long-term demonstration by migrant workers in 2003 at the Myöngdong Cathedral. *Namaste* has migrant workers shouting four key slogans: “We, too, are workers” (in Korean in the original); “We make Korea” (in English in the original); “We love Korea” (in English in the original); and, “We have arrived in this land together” (in Korean in the original).<sup>56</sup> Their declaration of their status as *nodongja* (“worker”) situates migrant workers in the broader historical development of the South Korean labor movement of the 1970s and ’80s, which succeeded in creating a working-class consciousness, by specifically demanding that they be treated according to the workers’ rights that South Korean workers had won for themselves earlier.<sup>57</sup> While this working-class consciousness was once very much bounded by ethnonationalism, migrant workers’ claims today break open this boundary, placing *all* South Korean workers in the larger category of the international proletariat.

The next slogan, “We make Korea,” brings attention to the fact that migrant workers’ labor contributes to the South Korean economy and thus necessarily also to South Korea as a society and a national community. In repudiating South Koreans’ treatment and misunderstanding of migrant workers as strangers, menial laborers, and sojourners, the third slogan, “We love Korea,” in its expression of affection, articulates not only their desire for integration, but also their claim on South Korea. Their last slogan, “We have arrived in this land [*ittange*] together,” can be interpreted as a call for uniting migrant workers. The ambiguity of the notion of arrival, implicitly countering the notion of autochthony often associated

with ethnonational identity in South Korea, however, enables us to include South Koreans in the pronoun “we” in the sentence. Just as South Koreans have arrived from somewhere else, migrant workers have also arrived in this land. Migrant workers happened to be the most recent migrants to the Korean peninsula. In the words of Sin-u, a Korean character in the novel, “This is also Kamil’s country.” Kamil, a Nepali protagonist, replies, “I know. It has already become my country. That’s why I protest. Because I love it.”<sup>58</sup>

In the fall of 2003, in anticipation of an upcoming deadline for the voluntary departure of undocumented migrant workers that the government had set, there was a series of suicides committed by those who found no alternative to death. The meaning of such deaths cannot be reduced to cases of exceptional desperation. Rather, their suicides necessarily take on a collective political import in the context of exploitation and persecution. For example, the suicide of a Sri Lankan worker, Dakara, became a rallying point for an organized protest by migrant workers in the fall of 2003. A suicide note by a Korean Chinese worker, “Korea is sad!” (*Hangugi sūlp’ūda!*), offered a political indictment of South Korea.<sup>59</sup> In addition to the already desperate financial situations that most migrant workers are forced to put themselves in to be able to come and work in South Korea, once they are captured, they must pay a fine to the INS for each month that they have stayed illegally in order for them to be able to leave South Korea. This puts them in the bizarre situation where they have to go work illegally again in order to earn enough to pay the fine. Or sometimes the only way they can leave the country is to commit a minor offence and be forcibly deported. Given the fact that illegal work in South Korea has often been made possible by the heavy debt incurred not only by the workers as individuals but also by their family and friends, neither their bodies nor their labor power has been truly theirs to freely dispose of in the first place. And when the opportunity to work and thus to buy themselves and their labor power back is taken away, they can only release their bodies and discharge themselves of their indenturedness by disposing of their body itself. Their financial and social death is actualized or literalized through their physical death. As one worker stated, “I have no hope for the future. If I am going to die anyway, I am going to die in Korea.”<sup>60</sup> A newspaper article interprets migrant workers’ suicides as crying out, “In death, we will remain in Korea!”<sup>61</sup> This kind of negative investment in Korea works as a vindication for the part of their lives spent in the country. Another worker reasons that

if he went back home now, his entire seven years in South Korea would be rendered “meaningless.”

The meaning of such “meaninglessness” that forced deportation produces also lies in the fact that forced deportations destroy the sense of self-worth and identity created by the accumulation of time spent in Korea and the specific goals they set for themselves. When their lives in Korea as migrant workers have been reduced to the labor they perform, taking their jobs away through forced deportation is indeed to take away their lives, which exist only as hopes and dreams that years of hard labor in Korea might bring to realization in the future. Under such circumstances, those migrant workers who participated in the long-term protest at the Myōngdong Cathedral stated that they went into the struggle “ready to confront death.”<sup>62</sup> The progressive South Korean media places the dead migrant workers whose suicides articulate a vehement critique of South Korea in the category of “martyrs” (*yōlsa*), along with many other South Korean workers who sacrificed themselves in the cause of their struggle in the 1970s and ’80s.<sup>63</sup>

In their desire to remain in South Korea in death, we recognize vengeful ghosts who refuse to leave alone the living who have wronged them. A story from the colonial period, “The Homecoming of Bellybutton Pak,” tells the experience of a peasant who leaves his village for Japan and dies in a flood upon his return home.<sup>64</sup> The short story is in the form of the peasant ghost’s monologue, addressing one of the village elders as he is walking by the stream where his remains happen to lie. He implores the village elder to dig up and give to his family a bag of coins, which is buried under his ribs alongside the river rocks. The first-person narrative of the ghost, in his desperate and yet humorous appeal and complaint to his neighbor, leaves the reader, who is invited to identify with the village elder, with the voice of the peasant ringing in his or her ear. The picture I mentioned above of the remains of migrant workers in a basement in South Korea similarly speaks to the viewer of their *han*.

Once migrant workers participate in labor disputes, they immediately become targets of systematic efforts by INS officials and the police to deport them. This particular tactic of blacklisting workers-turned-unionizers was a powerful tool in deterring the spread of subversive ideas during the 70s and ’80s. The authoritarian regimes deployed their bureaucratic, military, and police forces at all levels to carry out such functions as rounding up, interrogating, and torturing suspected labor activists, but now the

INS performs these tasks on migrant worker-activists. A South Korean activist notes that, both then and now, members of labor movements often mysteriously disappear. The difference now is that those migrant worker-activists who disappear will eventually find themselves on a plane returning back home, forced out of the country altogether. One article pointedly observes that to persecute and penalize those who are struggling against the violation of their human rights as workers is an added infringement on their human rights, their right to protest.<sup>65</sup>

In 2002 immigration authorities tried to forcibly deport a migrant worker from Bangladesh, Mr. Kobil, who had participated in a demonstration lasting over seventy days against labor abuses in South Korea. While migrant workers' right of assembly is not recognized by South Korea's racially discriminatory laws, which do not confer the status of laborer on migrant workers, his right to free assembly is, in fact, protected by international human rights regulations (in Korean, *kukje inkwon kyuyak*). Mr. Kobil refused to cooperate with the authorities, indeed charging the South Korean government with violation of international law.<sup>66</sup> Although the extent to which international regulations and laws can be enforced within the specific jurisdictions of a particular sovereign nation-state still remains in question, nevertheless, such international interdictions, at the very least, can be appropriated by workers and labor activists as a strategic weapon of empowerment and negotiation.

#### MULTIETHNICIZATION AND MULTICULTURALISM

In 1993 Chandra Kumari Kurüing, a Nepali "industrial trainee" working in South Korea, was picked up by the police; despite her repeated protest that she was a Nepali, the police decided that she was a mentally deficient Korean vagrant (*hangnyöja*). She was first sent to a woman's shelter, and then eventually transferred to a psychiatric hospital, where she spent six years and four months. When one of the psychiatrists finally recognized the egregious mistake made by a series of institutions and their officials, including doctors and nurses, she was released and returned to Nepal. Subsequently, she was able to sue the Korean government and the psychiatric hospital that had detained her; the Seoul District Court ruled in her favor and ordered payment of a monetary compensation.<sup>67</sup>

This incredible story is indicative of the particular racial prejudices of South Koreans. On the one hand, many are very quick to discriminate

against South and Southeast Asian workers, whose skin color and physical appearance are quite different from theirs, but they simply refuse to recognize differences—ethnic, cultural, and linguistic—when it comes to someone whose appearance resembles Koreans, like Chandra Kurüŋ. Rather than seeing these differences in her, they can only see an inferior version of themselves—in this case, a mentally deficient Korean. Kurüŋ’s repeated pleas in her broken Korean that she was a Nepali worker apparently could not break through this barrier of prejudice.

### *Deracializing Oppression and Koreanizing Migrant Workers*

In this context of South Korea’s historical shift from a mono-ethnic to a multiethnic society, the terms that distinguish Korean nationals from foreigners are being readjusted and redefined. There seem to be essentially two separate categories of “foreigners”: the term “foreigner” (*oegugin*) refers mainly to whites residing and/or working in white-collar jobs in Korea, while the term “foreign workers” (*oegugin nodongja*) seems to be reserved for nonwhite migrant workers. The difference between *oegugin* and *oegugin nodongja* is one of contrast between visibility and invisibility. Gradually gaining in use, we have also seen the term *naegugin*, which may be translated as “Korean national” or more literally “domestic or internal person.”

In this new historical context, in which South Korea has become a multiethnic community, if not yet a multiethnic nation-state, the very determinations of what constitutes “Koreanness” are changing—at least within the small sector of progressives and labor activists. “Koreanness” can no longer be defined by blood, ancestry, or biologicistic notions of ethnicity, but by residence occupied, material circumstances shared, and the language and culture acquired by a migrant worker population. In other words, “Koreanness,” beyond its exclusive association with a single ethnicity, must be defined as a social, cultural, economic, and political identity that would include subjects of multiple ethnicities. We may call this process the “multiethnicization” of Koreanness. One of the ways in which this multiethnicization of “Koreanness” is illustrated is by a deracialization of language, by which I mean the decoupling of Koreanness from certain concepts and expressions that have been intensely and exclusively associated with Korean identity. Such common words as “hometown” (*kohyang*), “loss of hometown” (*manghyang*), “homesickness” (*hyangsu*), and “foreign (other) place” (*t’ahyang*) have been closely associated with the hardship and oppression

that Koreans as an ethnic collective have experienced since the colonial period and through the periods of industrialization. The discourse of “han” that emerged in the 1970s is another prime example of such a racialized notion. The subtitle of a Korean book of photography on migrant workers, *Borderless Workers*, is “The Record of Tragic Bitterness of Foreign Workers and Korean Chinese.” This use of “*t’onghan*” (tragic bitterness)—previously associated with ethnonational tragedies, such as the Japanese colonization of Korea, national division, or the Korean War—for non-ethnic Koreans disrupts the close linkage between the Korean language and the Korean race. The deracialization of the Korean language occurs when common phrases used in the 1970s and ’80s at the height of labor and antidictatorship movement, such as “alienated people” (*sowoedoen saramdül*) and “workers of this soil” (*ittangüi nodongja*), are applied to the migrant workers of contemporary South Korea. Another key word of that era, *minjung* (“people”), has expanded its referent now to include multi-racial migrant workers residing and working in South Korea.<sup>68</sup> The comparability of the material histories and experiences of various ethnic and racial groups has necessitated this delinking of these concepts and sentiments from their exclusive association with Koreans as an ethnic collective.

The deracialization of these concepts points to a simultaneous process of Koreanizing migrant workers, demonstrated by migrant workers and their children who speak Korean, eat Korean food, and act Korean—that is, perform Koreanness. While the performativity of Korean ethnicity, embodied in the acculturation process of migrant workers, unravels the exclusivist notion of Koreanness, Koreanness is simultaneously in the process of being reconstituted as relatively inclusive and heterogeneous, ready to serve the interests of the South Korean state and capital. If Korean ethnic homogeneity was once essentialized for the purpose of postcolonial nation-building under the neocolonial circumstances in the earlier decades, the heterogenized, multiracialized Koreanness, differently and differentially essentialized, is starting to prove a more effective strategy in advancing the interests of the contemporary South Korean state and capital. On the other hand, the exclusionary form of Koreanness is not transcended but rather reformulated as a dominant ethnicity and culture, one that is subimperialist and subuniversalist, in relation to other Asian ethnicities and cultures that become minoritized, racialized, and suborientalized. South Korea has clearly made a transition from a mono-ethnic nation divided by class, to a multiethnic nation whose class stratifications are determined by, and

intersect with, racial hierarchy. However, both the South Korean state and mainstream South Korean society's simultaneous disavowal of this historical shift renders the racialized migrant labor force and the issues of race and multiethnicity clandestine.

### *Multiculturalism and its Limits*

The gradual multiethnicization of South Korea in recent years has brought about the emergence of multiculturalism as a broad principle, not only in the policies and practices of the government, but also in other kinds of public spheres, such as the mass media, education, and the activism of progressive NGOs; multiculturalism as a whole has now become an indispensable strategy for managing and expanding South Korea as a subempire. However, we certainly cannot equate all multiculturalisms. As I mentioned earlier, while certain dimensions of the activities of progressive NGOs and labor groups might have unintended subimperialist effects, their multiculturalist policies must be carefully distinguished from the much more conservative multiculturalism of the government and businesses. If in the 1970s, South Korea saw the appropriation of traditional Korean culture, especially folk culture, as an instrument of resistance against the state and capital, there is a way in which various national-cultural traditions of migrant workers are being deployed both by the state and capital on the one hand, and by the progressives on the other hand for opposing though sometimes overlapping purposes. Below I examine two examples in which we see the limits of South Korea's growing multiculturalism.

#### Educating Migrant Workers' Children:

##### A Tree that Grows without Roots

A picture of young Sri Lankan parents at a ceremony marking the beginning of the school year for first graders at an elementary school on a cold spring day offers a revealing look at the psychological trauma involved in parenthood for migrant workers.<sup>69</sup> In the center of the photo, we have a close-up of a couple, a father and a mother, in formal attire for the occasion, both of whom wear a look of extreme anxiety and worry. To be exact, we read a look of anxiousness muted by fear. As if in a concentric circle, we also see rows of Korean parents, whose faces constitute an obvious contrast: as they are smiling and chatting with one another, they look relaxed, happy, and proud of becoming parents of first graders. Because the Sri Lankan couple have their backs to the other Korean parents, from the

viewer's perspective it looks as if the couple's frightened look is caused by the gazes of the Korean parents who are facing the couple's back. The Sri Lankan couple's eyes are fixed on, we assume, their child, who is not part of this photo. The absence of the child further enhances the effect of the fearfulness that their faces exhibit.

Another small picture on the left side of the page shows, we assume again, their child. The Sri Lankan first grader is wearing a fairly large nametag, like the other Korean children. It shows his Korean name in Korean script, "Kim I-san." The caption explains to us that his Korean name was given to him by a local minister/activist, and that the name means "to move a mountain"—a symbolic articulation of the difficulty involved in finally winning the legal and bureaucratic battle of gaining permission for migrant workers' children to attend school. The child, standing alone and looking sad, appears even more frightened than his parents. His Korean name, though given through the good intentions of the activist minister, nonetheless alienates him further from his own identity in this assimilationist gesture. His look of fright sets him apart from his surroundings, and especially his Korean classmates, who are happily chattering away with each other.

The South Korean government has recently allowed the children of migrant workers to attend school, although they are not able to earn credits or graduate. In other words, they are being permitted to audit classes. To be able to offer full educational opportunities to the children of migrant workers is not quite feasible without much more serious financial support from the government. For now, NGOs are doing what they can by establishing nonaccredited schools taught by volunteers. One section on migrant workers' families in a book written by a South Korean labor activist is titled *A Tree That Grows without Roots* (*Ppuri öpsi charanün namu*). This phrase alludes to the name of a cultural magazine (now defunct) that was started in the mid-1970s and that was associated with the dissident movement; its name, *A Tree Whose Roots Are Deep* (*Ppuri kip'un namu*), attempted to reappropriate Korean tradition and culture for opposing both the authoritarian state and the neocolonial power that supported it. The contemporary labor activist's rewriting of the magazine title as *A Tree That Grows without Roots* affirms the nature of the lives of the children of migrant workers, who are placed in adverse and hostile conditions. Challenging the organicist metaphor of the nation, it suggests that migrant workers' children and families can and will grow, despite the lack of cultural and

social support from Koreans or Korean society. The image of a rootless tree is a powerful image, perhaps one uniquely appropriate for the age of deterritorialized and translocal identities. I will explore such dimensions of the migrant worker community later in this chapter.

### World Cup Nationalism and the Multiethnic Korea

In June 2002 South Korea and Japan cohosted an important world soccer event, the World Cup. This sporting event became an occasion for the fiercest resurgence of South Korean nationalism in recent memory. While the South Korean national team's continuing victories were creating fervor among South Koreans, one South Korean reporter interviewed migrant workers. To his surprise, they said that, naturally, they always root for South Korea. Feeling a pang of guilt, in acknowledgement of all the ill treatment and inhospitality that they endure, he characterized their love of Korea as "unrequited love."<sup>70</sup> Migrant workers were shouting alongside Koreans what became the most common cheer sung by the audience, "Tae~han~minguk," which simply means "Republic of Korea." They cheered on the South Korean team with South Korean flags in one hand and their respective national flags in the other hand. This type of dual or bicultural national allegiance is something new and unfamiliar to South Koreans.

What is of more interest to us is the transformation that this singsong cheer, "Tae~han~minguk," underwent after the World Cup games were over. Soon after, in July of that year, the South Korean government declared that it would forcibly deport undocumented migrant workers who had stayed over four years, while offering amnesty to those whose stay in Korea amounted to less than four years. In gatherings protesting this declaration, migrant workers and their supporters used the same rhythm to which they had sung "Tae~han~minguk," this time to shout and sing "Ch'u~bang~ch'ölp'ye" (Abolish Deportation).<sup>71</sup> The fervor with which the cheer "Tae~han~minguk" was sung during the World Cup was a crystallized expression of a fascistic ethnonationalism that is very much alive and well in this age of multiethnic and multicultural South Korea. The combination of the rhythm, so familiar to the ears of Koreans, with a critical slogan, produced a disturbing jarring effect, bringing together the rhythm that stands for a supposed ethnic homogeneity and the motto that promotes racial diversity and equality. The discrepancy between the old rhythm and the new slogan dialogizes "Republic of Korea" with "Abolish Deportation."

## SOUTH KOREA AS SUBIMPERIAL IMMIGRANT NATION

*"The Korean Dream"*

Vladimir Tikhonov's pointed critique of South Korean subimperialism notes that South Korea functions as a surrogate power for American, European, and Japanese capital.<sup>72</sup> In this section, I briefly survey a few aspects of South Korean society that point to its changed status from a monoethnic neocolony to a subimperial immigrant nation. The frequency of a term used in the Korean media, "the Korean Dream," referring to the desire of migrant workers from overseas to come to South Korea to work, seems at first puzzling.<sup>73</sup> Echoing the more globally famous term "the American Dream," the South Korean counterpart implies a certain desire for equation between Korea and America as a destination for immigrants and migrants, as the term "the Korean Dream" recognizes Korea's new place in the global hierarchy as a semiperipheral metropole. It reveals South Korean triumphalism, subtly reflecting a Korean desire to subordinate migrants of other races and nationalities. South Korea's interpellation into the "free world fantasy," its dream of development, has resulted in creating a Korean version of the "free world fantasy" for other countries that are less "developed" and less "free."<sup>74</sup> In the U.S. context, "the American Dream" has operated as an ideological apparatus that has promoted the assimilation of immigrants, while functioning as an instrument of racial rehabilitation and creation of an interiorized exclusion of immigrants of color in particular.<sup>75</sup> "The Korean Dream" operates in a similar fashion: the fantasy of "Korea," consisting of images, stories, and commodities, that fuels migration is the very mechanism of interpellation and discipline by dissimulating and camouflaging the reality of institutionalized racialized labor exploitation.

The emergence of Korean as a subimperial language, that is, a language that can help one to realize one's "Korean Dream," both within the domestic and overseas contexts, is becoming an undeniable historical phenomenon. In July 2003 the South Korean National Assembly passed a law that made it mandatory for migrant workers to take a Korean language examination as part of their qualification requirements.<sup>76</sup> In the communities of migrant workers and their Korean labor activists, public contests for Korean language speaking have become a common enough event. While the intentions of South Korean activists are positive and supportive, and

we can even acknowledge the kinds of benefits that migrant workers themselves draw from participation, such events necessarily confirm the status of the Korean language as a subimperial language, as the need and desire to learn Korean is directly linked to better jobs and wages, and to realizing financial goals and personal dreams. Their passion for Korean might be said to resemble Koreans' fervor for English as an imperial language in the post-1945 era. Just as the Korean protagonist of "Kapitan Ri," first a Japanese colonial subject, then a neocolonial subject in North Korea under the Soviet Union, and then again a neocolonial subject in South Korea under U.S. hegemony, had to learn, in turn, Japanese, Russian, and English in order to deracialize, empower, and assimilate himself,<sup>77</sup> for migrant workers the Korean language has become a language that can help them integrate better into the power structure. Korean language books and Internet sites specifically designed for migrant workers of various nationalities have become very easily available. The *Hangyöre* newspaper reports on a Korean language instruction book created by a Vietnamese labor brokerage firm; many Vietnamese workers in South Korea carry this book around with them for its usefulness. It includes the following Korean phrases: "We are also human beings"; "Please don't hit me"; "Can we have such and such things in writing?"; "The company must deal with this problem"; "We cannot tolerate such actions"; and, "If you hit me again, I will move to another company." Vietnamese workers stated that, although there are many other Korean language books published by Koreans, all containing the usual nice phrases, they are not suited for their specific needs.<sup>78</sup>

The Korean language that migrant workers in South Korea use shares certain commonalities with the English language that residents of South Korean camp towns had to pick up around the military bases, or the English South Korean immigrants must learn for their survival, or the kind of Korean language that Latino workers must acquire for their jobs at South Korean immigrant businesses in the United States. If a (sub)imperial language, as an instrument of oppression, makes it possible to partake in the power structure by enabling assimilation, it can also be mobilized as a strategy of resistance. Like the Korean language used by Vietnamese workers in South Korea and Latino workers employed by Koreans in the United States, Koreans' Japanese of the colonial period, and Koreans' English under the U.S. occupation and in South Korean camp towns possessed such similarly resistive dimensions.

*Economic Membership, Reterritorialization,  
and Inflexible Citizenship*

While ethnicity and citizenship are being decoupled, economic participation and citizenship are being linked. At the same time, we are mindful of the fact that the growing linkage between economic contributions and citizenship does not necessarily promote racial equality, but rather advances the racial segmentation of labor. In many immigrant contexts, notably the United States, the state and capital have traditionally utilized the labor of immigrant and migrant workers while simultaneously withholding their citizenship and civil rights.<sup>79</sup> As immigrants have done historically in the United States, migrants and immigrants to South Korea also invoke strategies of resistance, by which they situate themselves squarely within the framework of an immigrant nation-state and seek their rights as laborers, residents, and citizens.

One of the most immediate goals for the migrant worker community is to acquire the same basic three labor rights as South Korean workers—the rights to strike, organize, and collectively bargain. Migrant workers and their South Korean colleagues have recently won a small victory in the area of political participation by gaining the right to vote in local elections and run for local offices. This recent shift in demographics is beginning to interrupt the equation between ethnicity and citizenship that has been naturalized since 1945. The illegitimacy of their identity, which the South Korean state and capital have colluded to create, must in turn come to disrupt the legitimacy of the concept of an ethnically and culturally homogeneous Korea. In order for South Korea to move beyond the model of ethnonational community, the concept of citizenship must move toward the European model of postnational citizenship that recognizes economic contributions as a basis for social entitlements and political rights. Though deterritorialized and interstitial, migrant workers nonetheless seek to reterritorialize themselves as members of their adopted national community. While in limited ways migrant workers exercise the flexibility of their membership in multiple national communities as we will see below, they simultaneously try to establish themselves as inflexible citizens of their new location in a nation-state, that is, to reclaim a level of isomorphism among their territorial residence, their political rights as legal national subjects, and their social and cultural integration into South Korea.

*Pak Pöm-sin's Namaste: South Korea as an Immigrant Subempire*

This section first examines a novel by Pak Pöm-sin, *Namaste*, which was serialized in the *Hangyöre* newspaper in 2004. Since the publication of *Namaste*, other South Korean writers began to treat the subject of migrant workers, while at the same time encouraging and promoting migrant workers and activists to offer their own self-representations, as the earlier generation of student activists had done with South Korean workers in the 1970s and '80s.<sup>80</sup> Like *Namaste*, other literary works authored by South Korean writers also illustrate the serious political limits of mainstream representations of racial minorities. As has been the case with Asian American writing, we will have to wait for the second generation multiethnic Koreans to write the history and stories of migration and immigration in South Korea.

*Namaste* describes the contemporaneous labor struggle of migrant workers; the serialization of the novel overlapped with migrant worker-activists' 380-day-long demonstration at the Myöngdong Cathedral. The novel is indicative of the overall adjustment of direction in South Korean leftist politics, from the intensely ethnonationalist labor movement of the 1970s and '80s to the contemporary subimperial context that calls for an international, interracial solidarity with migrant workers. In its unreserved critique of the appalling labor exploitation, racist policies, and practices of South Korean authorities and employers, and the xenophobic discrimination by the mainstream population, the novel as a whole is a major intervention that attempts to educate the South Korean public.

While acknowledging the progressive contributions of the novel, my reading critically explores the more unconscious and unintended dimensions of the emergent South Korean leftist multiculturalism. In the novel's narrativization of an interracial romance and its suborientalism, I argue, it foregrounds the gendered sexualities of the main characters in relation to ethnicity, class, nation, and subempire as constituent dimensions in realigning and reconstructing their subjectification in the subimperial context. In *Namaste*, Korean feminine sexuality is now redeployed and resubordinated in the transnational space of the Korean subempire, while the Korean masculine sexuality of elite leftist labor activism, now detached from its exclusive association with the ethnonation and its male-centered working class, forges linkages with a pan-Asian masculine proletarian or revolutionary subjectivity.

Suborientalist Subimperial Romance:  
Korea as a Mother(land), Wife, and Pupil

Sin-u, a thirty-year-old divorcee and a returnee from the United States, discovers Kamil, a Nepali worker, unconscious in her yard. His “copper” skin and his supine posture remind her of a dead animal, but what returns him to humanity is the first Korean sentence that he speaks to her when he comes to: “The world is getting brighter.”<sup>81</sup> His smile and his words become the center from which light, further enhanced by the brilliance of mountain cherry blossoms, radiates for Sin-u. Kamil has run away from a blue jeans factory, where he was being abused by his Korean coworkers. He and his girlfriend, Sabina, a fellow Nepali, move into one of the spare rooms in Sin-u’s house. While Kamil is devoted to Sabina, because of her instability and possible infidelity he eventually comes to lean on Sin-u, and they gradually fall in love. The novel represents Sin-u’s changing roles vis-à-vis Kamil: first, as a nurturing mother, next, as a supportive wife, and then, as an inspired pupil.

Sin-u’s attraction to Kamil, five years younger than herself, is consistently described as maternal. The night before she meets him in her yard, she has a “birth dream,” foretelling the birth of a sacred mountain man (*sanin*). Her love for Kamil, she acknowledges, is not quite what one feels for the “opposite sex,” but rather “a tearful blood relation nursed in my own bosom.”<sup>82</sup> In *Namaste’s* representation of the current labor politics involving migrant workers, it might seem at first curious that the “progressive” dimensions of South Korea as an immigrant nation and subempire that oppose and criticize the racist and discriminatory practices of the mainstream is imagined as the feminine and feminized authority of a mother, given the fact that the South Korean dissident labor politics of earlier decades had always been intensely androcentric and patriarchalist. However, allegorization of an immigrant nation as a mother has been common enough in the U.S. context. Just to name a couple of texts, both a Filipino American novel, *America Is in the Heart* by Carlos Bulosan, and a Korean American novel, *Native Speaker* by Chang-Rae Lee, employ the figure of a white woman to symbolize the United States as a welcoming, embracing mother of immigrants of diverse races and ethnicities.<sup>83</sup> If the South Korean left’s understanding of itself as a remasculinizing entity was premised on South Korea’s besieged and emasculated position as a U.S. neo-colony, its transition to an emergent subempire that necessitates inclusion

and assimilation of a multiethnic population regenders and resexualizes South Korea as a maternal polity.

The metaphor of immigrant subempire or nation as a mother lies in a continuum with the equally familiar metaphor of the colonizer as a parental figure, paternal or maternal. The figuring of an immigrant nation as an adoptive mother or as a (re)birth mother operates as an effective sign that performs the more complex task of assimilatory and integrative domination, that is, an “interiorized” colonization of immigrants and migrants.<sup>84</sup> It naturalizes the territorialization of the dominated immigrant and migrant subjects, through imagining filial, bodily ties, while obscuring the more violent strategies of hierarchized, racialized assimilation and exclusion. The immigrant (sub)empire, figured as a familial, generational hierarchy, infantilizes the immigrant or migrant. Along with its portrayal of Kamil as a godly man with a halo-like brilliance around him, and as a suffering man, “blood-stained,” the novel also continually depicts him as a child in the beginning of their relationship. Sin-u is struck by her impulse to breastfeed him: “I wanted to be an old cow.”<sup>85</sup> Behind the deployment of such a maternalism, I would argue, we actually find the South Korean left in the forms of a patriarchal and paternalist author. In installing maternalism as a surrogate, proxy subimperialist agent of multiculturalism, the leftist South Korean labor politics, as exemplified in *Namaste*, colludes with other subimperial interests by facilitating domination and assimilation, while at the same time establishing itself as the vanguard in charge of fostering the Asian masses’ resistance and opposition vis-à-vis the state and multinational capital.

In *Namaste* the interracial romance narrative, then, grows into Kamil’s proletarian bildungsroman. Kamil has been slated to become an ethnic proletarian martyr for transnational labor activism under the invisible authority and authorship of the South Korean left. Kamil says, “Korea’s gift to me is that I became an adult here.” Toward the end of the novel, when Kamil is about to martyr himself for the cause, he further elaborates: “the power to think, before I came to Korea, I did not have it. Either I put up meaningless resistance or I simply submitted. Korea taught me that.”<sup>86</sup> The maternalism in the early part of the novel prepares Kamil for his transformation from an infant into a revolutionary in the latter half. Sin-u’s character undergoes a conversion from a type of subimperialist memsahib to the domesticated, supportive wife of a transnational, pan-Asian male revolutionary subject.<sup>87</sup> The transnational alliance of Asian male workers

returns the figure of a South Korean woman as a proxy subimperialist to her supporting role on the margin, similar to the one played by the older generation of South Korean women from the 1970s and '80s. With the suicide of a migrant worker, who throws himself under an oncoming subway train, Kamil undergoes "conscientization" (*üisikhwa*). He becomes a man for the first time, awakened to the significance of a "collective," while Sin-u critically reflects upon her womanly desire to hold Kamil to his familial obligations as a father and a husband. Admiring Kamil's leadership role in the protest, Sin-u says, "Unlike before, now I was in the bosom of a warrior."<sup>88</sup> The novel applies the epithet *chönsa* ("warrior"), along with another term, *yölsa* ("martyr"), to Kamil and his migrant worker-activist colleagues. If these terms, used to describe South Korean workers and their student activist allies of the 1970s and '80s, create solidarity across time and across racial and cultural differences, Kamil's very emergence as a transnational Asian revolutionary subject premises itself on the exclusion of Asian female workers' solidarity among themselves, as well as the possibility of their solidarity with Asian men as equal partners.

If Sin-u plays the roles of mother and wife in the novel's treatment of the issues of immigration and migrant labor, she plays Kamil's pupil in the novel's suborientalist engagement with Nepali thought, culture, and religion, a central aspect of the text. Although Sin-u also teaches Kamil Korean language, culture, and history, her lessons on Korea are meant to offer him more of a practical and material value. On the other hand, Sin-u's learning of Nepali and South Asian thought operates as a broader intellectual framework for the novel. The relationship between Korea and Nepal in *Namaste* parallels those between the West and its Orient and, later, between Japan and its Orient.<sup>89</sup> The degree of a nation-state's capitalist development and industrialization is inversely proportional to its access to the profundities and truths of the uncorrupt, sacred, and spiritual Orient. Sin-u's immersion into the mysteries of the Himalayas signifies South Korea's economic dominance over Nepal and other Asian nations precisely by conferring on them cultural and spiritual superiority. Kamil is Sin-u's "teacher" (*süsüng*) in the highest sense of the word.<sup>90</sup>

Miscegenation and Dual Allegorizations of Asian Women:

Expansion of a Subempire or Creation of a Multiethnic Utopia?

Through Sin-u and Kamil's international and interracial relationship, which produces a biracial family, *Namaste* reconfigures feminine sexuality, now

decoupled from its exclusive subordination to ethnonation, in relation to the changed status of South Korea as a subempire. The significance of the bi- or multiracial family in the novel as a performative history, I would argue, remains ambiguous. On the one hand, Korean feminine sexuality is surreptitiously (re)assigned the allegorical role of reproductive surrogacy for expanding the subempire, imagined as a racially mixed collective. Sin-u's suborientalist agency subordinates her reproductive sexuality to affirming South Korea's dominant status over Nepal, and further fortifying it through the reproduction of biracial subimperial subjects. On the other hand, we may also posit, given the novel's progressive stance in transnational labor politics, its creation of bi- and multiracial families gestures toward radically different conceptions of Korea and Asia as a multiethnic and multiracial utopian space, constituted not only through the labor movement but also connected through blood and kinship ties. From very early on in their relationship, Sin-u's description of her feelings toward Kamil is that of "blood relation."<sup>91</sup>

The novel's overall representation of Sin-u's pregnancy with Kamil's child is also intensely familistic. Shortly after her mother, who returned from the United States, passes away, Sin-u discovers that she is pregnant. The fetus is acknowledged as a reincarnation of her dying mother's approval of Kamil and of Sin-u's relationship with him. Sin-u's maternal affect toward the fetus is carried over to her protectiveness towards her biracial family as a whole. This is noted as a natural sentiment that rises from the deepest part of her soul: "The sense of obligation to protect my family was budding from the interior of myself." Her pregnancy with a biracial child, placed beyond national boundaries, becomes a process in which cosmic energy is shared and brought together.<sup>92</sup> The birth of the biracial child accomplishes this goal of unification of a (transnational and universal) Asian proletariat in a physical and material way. During her pregnancy, it is the fetus that connects Sin-u to Kamil, and ultimately to Nepal, which represents, for her, a path to enlightenment and universal truth.

Sin-u's own nationality and ethnicity as Korean is also transformed as a result of her relation with Kamil and their procreation: "I was born in *this land [i ttang]* through the mysterious opening of life creation. . . . [T]hrough the long and rough detour of America and following the path of fateful karma, I met Kamil, who came across the ocean, and that path was now open to the Himalayas and I believe that he came to show me the

path.”<sup>93</sup> Since the Park Chung Hee era and until recently, this particular phrase she uses, “to be born in this land” (*i ttange t’aeõna*), has always suggested the autochthony of ethnonational subjects, an inalienable linkage between the body and the territory. Sin-u’s musings about their karmic meeting, “namaste,”<sup>94</sup> deliberately and carefully detach her from this previous notion of “this land”; *ttang* could mean soil, land, nation, or earth. In the context of the novel, Sin-u’s reference to *ttang* takes on a different import, and its translation could be revised as “I was born on this earth.” *I ttang*, reinterpreted in this way, marks the transition of the South Korean proletariat from ethnonationalist autochthony to pan-Asian universal identity.

Then, the novel extends the familism that had been exclusively wedded to the ethnonation in order to imagine a multiethnic (Asian) collective, a transnational society that is similarly based upon blood and kinship. We also want to note here that this interracial, transnational family-community is limited to mixing within the Asian race. Given the extremely problematic portrayal of African Americans in the portion of the novel that describes Sin-u’s immigrant experience in the United States, it is difficult to say this racially hybrid, blood-related polity would include mixing with other races, such as whites, blacks, or Latinos.<sup>95</sup> She gives birth to a daughter, and they name her Maya in Nepali, which means love, and Aerin in Korean, which means love of neighbor. We learn at the end of the novel that Kamil also had a child with Sabina, his Nepali girlfriend whose presence Sin-u had always felt as a threat to her relationship with Kamil. Ultimately, the two women in Kamil’s life, Sin-u and Sabina, play a similarly allegorical role. Kamil, who represents the transnational Asian masculine revolutionary subject, must love both Sin-u and Sabina, who symbolize his split and yet compatible loyalties for both his native country and his adoptive country. Transnational Asian proletarian masculine subjectivity is, thus, produced through an appropriation and allegorization of double (or potentially multiple) Asian female sexualities, which are at once eroticized and maternalized.

The eighty-five-day-long protest ends with Kamil’s self-immolation: he throws himself out of a high window in sacrifice. The epilogue of the novel brings the reader to the year 2021, roughly twenty years after Kamil’s death. The novel has the two children of Kamil meet each other for the first time, Maya/Aerin, and a young Kamil. Two young people, a brother and a sister who share the same father, are on their way to visit his grave in

Nepal. This biracial family is rooted in two cultures, and yet at the same time inherently uprooted, diasporic, and transnational. While they are said to be *mujökja*, one who does not have a proper place to belong, both Maya/Aerin and young Kamil, who are cosmopolitan and elite, educated respectively in the United States and Britain, are comfortable in multiple locations.

Their futural deterritorialized citizenship in the cosmopolitan elite culture contrasts sharply with the very territorialized nature of the lives of contemporary migrant laborers in South Korea. As I have argued above, there is a way in which Sin-u and Kamil's biracial and multicultural family articulates a subimperialist desire, in which a woman's reproductive sexuality, now released from its total subsumption to ethnonationality, is reappropriated as a symbolic strategy of proxy conquest. A subempire, by definition, must be inclusive, not only of other ethnicities, but also of racially hybrid subjects. On the other hand, the novel also posits this multiethnic/racial/cultural family as a transnational utopian site of future solidarity for the pan-Asian masses. This duality in the novel, in my reading, is ultimately irresolvable, reflecting the contradictory desires of the South Korean left, where memories of intense domestic struggle, triumphalism of the new subempire, and lingering ambitions for international solidarity coexist. Such contradictions inhere in this particular historical juncture in South Korea, which registers the indeterminacy of a subempire that expands through incorporation, assimilation of "others," and diversification and heterogenization of "itself."

#### SOUTH KOREA AS A TRANSNATION AND MIGRANTS AS TRANSLOCAL SUBJECTS

Contemporary globalization, resulting in a significantly intensified rate and scale of mobility, has changed the very nature of the movement of people from more stable and simple kinds—immigration and temporary labor migration—to less stable and more complex kinds—what some have called "transmigration."<sup>96</sup> In this context, we may conceptualize South Korea not only as a stable immigrant nation-state-to-be, but also as what Arjun Appadurai calls a "diasporic switching point,"<sup>97</sup> stretching out and connected to the larger transnational network. Thus, for some migrant workers, South Korea may only be a temporary stop on their way to another country, as economic migration is propelled by their motivation to find better jobs, better pay, and better living conditions. Some sail to

Japan via secret channels, while others aspire to travel as far the United States. Yi Ran-ju, a South Korean activist who works with migrant workers, calls it a “migration chain” (*iju sasul*), in which the hierarchy of national economies causes them to move up and down and around. This very movement, often carried out “illegally” or “secretly” (*milhang*), and globally oriented, is itself a strategy of survival and resistance that challenges the conditions of living and laboring in particular national locations. As migrants move from one country to another, their cultural assimilation and adjustment becomes a double, triple, and multiple process. When she was visiting Korean migrant workers in Japan, Yi Ran-ju ran into a Southeast Asian man who used to work in Korea but had found a job working for a Korean business that deals with Korean tourists in Japan. His Korean language ability and cultural knowledge from his past gave him this unique niche that aided him in Japan, a higher place in the “migration chain.”

While successful migrants are able to capitalize on their diverse cultural knowledge in their journey through various locations, we can be sure that others find such ceaseless movements exhausting and debilitating. The difficulty of such multiple migrations approximates a kind of transnational vagrancy, where migrant labor means the barest kind of survival—one that often risks nonsurvival. Nonetheless, we do want to acknowledge certain empowering dimensions of the transnational mobility of migrant workers, and this further helps us to revise our view of South Korea as not simply an immigrant nation-state, but rather as a “transnation.”<sup>98</sup> Migrant workers’ presence in South Korea is part of their multilocal and multi-directional mobility; the complex routes and trajectories of their diaspora, to some extent, relativize their attachment, hardship, and struggle in South Korea, as the potential and actual transnational mobility of migrant workers empowers them and helps destabilize the South Korean nation-state’s immobilizing powers over migrant workers.

For Appadurai, translocality refers to the production of subjectivities that are deterritorialized from single national, social, or cultural contexts, through movements, and the use of, and exposure to, “technological interactivities.”<sup>99</sup> Migrant workers’ acquisition and maintenance of social ties, cultural knowledge, political memberships, and economic participation in more than one national location generate a peculiar type of locality that is deterritorialized in the transnationalizing and globalizing cultures and contexts, and yet thoroughly embedded in the local cultures and contexts. The newly formed ethnic enclaves of migrant workers in South Korea,

which can be viewed as interiorized neocolonial spaces of a subimperial immigrant nation-state, can also be simultaneously reconceptualized as a site of translocal migrant worker activism, whose resistive agency emerges out of their personal and collective interstitial, transnational contexts. Another example of the production of such translocal subjectivity is the founding of various “migrant workers’ broadcasting stations” (*iju nodongja pangsongguk*) since 2005, which include multilingual Internet sites, radio broadcasts, and paper newspapers. Migrant workers interact with one another, with their families and compatriots in their native countries and other locations, and with mainstream South Korean society, as activists, reporters, and community members, to voice and exchange information, concerns, and opinions.

Other kinds of cultural and artistic activities, such as organizing rock bands, writing songs and lyrics, mounting art exhibits, and writing essays and poetry, are also part of the process of production of migrant worker communities’ translocal identities. A rock band consisting of seven migrant workers from Myanmar, in collaboration with workers from other countries such as Nigeria, Thailand, Nepal, and China, has put out an album titled in English *What Is Life?* with lyrics in Korean written by migrant workers. They speak of how exhausted they are, their having to fight with the machines, and their longing for their families and homelands, and they sadly acknowledge their illegal status in South Korea. Their songs are simultaneously a complaint, lament, protest, and appeal for solidarity among migrants from various parts of the world, as well as South Koreans. They articulate a migrant’s sense of transnational and translocal identity, hybridizing their respective cultures, their knowledge of Korean culture, and their experience in Korea, with global popular culture. Another band formed by migrant workers is called Stop Crackdown. They sing, “Did you think that foreign migrant workers were just machines who only work? We, too, are human beings who like to sing.” Their lyrics echo the dying cry of the most celebrated martyr of the South Korean labor movement, Chŏn T’ae-il: “We are not machines!” The name Stop Crackdown points to the ways in which their political and economic struggle to work and survive, and the artistic expression of such struggles, form an integral whole. They sing, “though trampled upon again and again, we get up again and we move on proudly. . . . We love Korea, we love Korea.”<sup>100</sup>

Another song by Stop Crackdown, titled “Mix Language,” collects some of the most frequently exchanged phrases and sentences among Koreans

and migrant workers: How are you? / Company president, team leader, factory manager / Do this one and that / After these two, work on those / Do a good job / No defective goods please! / Are you done yet? / Finished your work? / Oh, dear! / Get the hell over here, you son of a bitch! / This is wrong / How many defective ones? / This one's expensive, buy that one / Are you really a foreigner? / Your eyes are pretty / You're good-looking / Mixing blood / Are you Nepalese? / Hey, it's too noisy / Do you have this in your country? / Is there a moon in Indonesia? [Yeah, there is a moon] / Does the sun rise in Nepal? [Sure, it does] / Don't you have spoons in your country? [That's why we eat with our hands] / How long have you been in Korea? [Twelve years!] / No more to say? / Take a break / Hurry, hurry / Mixing blood / No more to say? / Take a break / Hurry, Hurry / You're good-looking / Hurry, hurry / Hurry, hurry / Hurry, hurry / Take a break.<sup>101</sup>

As "transnationalism" itself is embedded in the global hierarchy, or rather, it is indeed an articulation of the global economic, racial, and cultural order, the concept and practice of translocality also partakes in this hierarchy. Migrant workers' particular investment in Korea, articulated in their expression of love for Korea, must be interpreted as resistive and subversive vis-à-vis their historically specific transnational and translocal identity situated in this global order. Transnational mobility and translocal identities, while liberatory with respect to one nation, culture, or location, are bound by another set of specific constraints and determinations.<sup>102</sup> The translocality of their cultural productions is anti-subimperial cultural nationalist, pan-Asian, pan-Third World, subversively Korean, and oppositionally global. As we have seen, migrants' subjectivity in South Korea is necessarily multiple, positional, and nonessentializable: as emigrants, they are their native nation-state's deterritorialized citizens; as immigrants, they are reterritorialized, assimilated Koreans; as transmigrants, they are translocal subjects situated beyond and between nations.

## CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have explored three dimensions of contemporary South Korea—the state, South Korean labor activism, and migrant worker-activists—in the overlapping and yet divergent contexts of South Korea both as an immigrant nation-state in the making, and as a globalized transnation. First, I have argued that the South Korean state performs the dual, complementary roles of legislating a racially segmented labor force

and managing the same through its multicultural policies. I have raised the question of semiperipheral discipline in the sphere of labor organizing, that is, whether South Korean labor activists reproduce, unwittingly, a racial, national, and cultural hierarchy by establishing the history of the South Korean labor and democratization movement as a model to be followed by migrant worker-activists. Lastly, I have discussed the dual constructions of migrant workers, as both reterritorialized subjects of South Korea and translocal subjects in the globalized networks of culture, economy, and politics. I would like to conclude the chapter by touching on some of the related topics below that I do not explore fully above.

### *Female Migrant Workers and “Marriage Migrants”*

An important category of female migrants that has become very visible in the mainstream media in recent years is “foreign brides” or “marriage migrants” from various Asian countries, those who marry Korean farmers and settle in the countryside. These brides began arriving about a decade ago; currently, there are roughly ten thousand of these women in South Korea. Many of them are Korean Chinese, while others are from Asian nations such as the Philippines, China, Thailand, Vietnam, and Mongolia. Most arrive in Korea through the arrangement of matchmaking services. Acknowledging their role as workers and immigrants, in addition to their role as a spouse, the South Korean media began to refer to them using the term *kyölhon ijuja*, or “marriage migrants.” Both groups of women—female migrant workers and marriage migrants—often experience similar kinds of discrimination and violence from their South Korean male coworkers or spouses, who exercise their gendered, racial, class power over these women. For example, one Vietnamese female factory worker was beaten to death by her South Korean coworker and boyfriend. Perhaps not surprisingly, many marriages between South Korean farmers and Asian women do not work out, due to a variety of factors, including Korean husbands’ abusive treatment of their wives. Although progressive NGOs, as well as even the mainstream media, make efforts to intervene on behalf of immigrant brides, and to educate the South Korean public, the racial and gender discrimination against these women and their biracial children is a growing social problem that South Korea, as a nation, must deal with now and in the future.

Female migrants constitute about one third of the entire migrant worker population residing and working in South Korea.<sup>103</sup> Apart from Russian

and Filipina women who enter South Korea on “entertainment visas,” recruited for sex and sexualized service industry jobs, female migrant workers also enter South Korea in search of factory or other service jobs in restaurants or sales. The fact that they often suffer varying degrees and kinds of sexual harassment on the job connects these different categories of female labor migration to one another; the fact of race, nationality, and class exploitation is always already compounded and complicated by simultaneous gendered and sexual proletarianization.<sup>104</sup>

*Contemporary South Korean Diaspora: Cosmopolitanism, Education-Immigration, and Labor Migration*

One of the peculiarities of a subempire consists of the multidirectional flows of migration. In conjunction with the recent influx of migrant workers into South Korea, there is also a continuing outflow of South Koreans to various locations around the globe, to the core countries as well as to the peripheral regions. The diversity of the contemporary South Korean diaspora is a stratified phenomenon. While the elite and upper class of South Korea continue to gravitate toward the metropolitan centers of Europe and North America with increased ease, frequency, and affluence, the South Korean middle class also continue to aspire to catch up with its elite counterpart in its desire for *t'al-han'guk* (“escaping Korea”); they may accomplish their ambition by travel and tourism, or by so-called “education-immigration,” or by different kinds of study, training, and work overseas. Middle-class businessmen have also made advances into various Southeast Asian locations, such as Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar, Indonesia, and the Pacific Islands, finding lucrative the economic opportunities and ventures that developing countries offer.<sup>105</sup> The South Korean publishing industry provides guidebooks and manuals for the would-be adventurers, and the mainstream media regularly reports on the successful entrepreneurs in various locations. In something of a contradistinction to the triumphalism accorded the multinational corporations and their mythic success, the media often portray these overseas small- to medium-sized businesses in the tradition of pied-noir colonial settlers, all-sacrificing pioneers in the hinterland, educating the natives and selectively assimilating into local cultures, and ultimately patriotic expatriates. South Korean entrepreneurial migrants overseas function as deterritorialized and yet isomorphic sub-imperializing agents who expand the invisible yet tangible boundaries of South Korea as an economic nation-state. Their relative affluence and

technological networks of culture and communication make it easier for these South Korean businessmen and their families, in contrast to migrant workers in South Korea, to maintain their national and cultural identity and to incorporate themselves into more metropolitan cultures (for example, by sending their children to private international schools), rather than being assimilated into the cultures of the dominated. On the other hand, the very bottom sector of the South Korean working class, including day laborers, construction workers, and sex workers, find themselves migrating to the neighboring wealthy nation, Japan, making up one fifth of its migrant labor force.<sup>106</sup> The deepening polarization of South Korea as a postindustrial semiperiphery has articulated itself in these radically contrasting out-migrations of its people.

*Pan-Koreanism, Deterritorialized Subempire, and Renationalization*

The recent emergence of South Korea as an economic power has also caused a reverse flow of diasporic Koreans from different locations back to South Korea. Chinese Koreans have entered South Korea, mostly as unskilled labor, while ethnic Koreans from North America have been attracted to the opportunities offered by big businesses in South Korea. The South Korean state has also made concerted efforts to organize and utilize various groups of ethnic Koreans from all parts of the world—Asia, North America, South America, and Central Asian states of the former Soviet Union—as potential sources of labor in the globalized economy. The incorporation of overseas ethnic Koreans into South Korean transnational capitalism is a stratified process that takes into account the economic and cultural standing of their respective nation-states. Whether racialized (as in the case of Korean Chinese) or Westernized or Americanized (as in the case of Koreans from North America), overseas ethnic Koreans are recruited to function as a transnational surrogate labor force in the interest of the expanding subempire. The idea of pan-Koreanism conceptualizes the overseas Korean population as part of the larger homogeneous ethnic body, despite, or rather because of, their cultural and linguistic heterogeneity, spanning the globe. The heterogeneity of homogeneous diasporic Koreans serves the new subimperial Korea. In the era of South and North Korea's "economic cooperation"—including, among other ventures, the opening of the Kaesŏng Industrial Complex—in which we are facing the strange but real possibility of North Korean workers becoming "overseas" Koreans or "offshore" workers for South Korean capital, North Korea has

now been reduced to one of South Korea's diasporic locations.<sup>107</sup> The global Korean diaspora that has resulted from the peninsula's domination by a series of foreign powers from the late nineteenth century through the early 1980s have now taken on the new role of contributing to the formation of Korea as a transterritorial or deterritorialized subempire.<sup>108</sup>

While this chapter has emphasized the incipient erosion of South Korea's mono-ethnicity and its national boundary, I also want to point to the simultaneous hardening of the ethnonational boundary. This re-nationalization, associated with the prevailing mood of triumphalism in South Korea, can also be concretely tied to the concerted efforts, on the part of the South Korean state and capital, to create a pan-Korean network abroad of diasporic Koreans in various locations on the globe whose Koreanness is similarly heterogenized and yet re-essentialized, as in the domestic context. As the South Korean state's management of migrants and diasporics inside and outside of South Korea, both exclusionary and inclusionary strategies, consists of models borrowed from imperial and postwar Japan and from the post-civil rights era United States, the South Korean governmentality over migrants and diasporics is culturally and temporally multilayered. In thinking about these two broad groups together, the migrant and immigrant population in South Korea on the one hand, and the ethnic Korean diasporic population overseas on the other, we see that Koreanness has become multiracial, multicultural, and multilocal. In both cases, Koreanness is multiply hyphenated for multiracial parentage, for multiple migrations and for multiple cultural identifications. Within South Korea we have, for example, immigrant Koreans, second-generation Koreans, Filipino Koreans, or Korean Chinese Koreans. And in North America we have Korean residents of Japan, Chinese Koreans, and Korean Chinese, who are now fast becoming part of Asian America. In the context of their overlapping similarities and the singular differences among these groups of various Koreans, some are already imagining and creating connections, interactions, and alliances that would be effective in carving out spaces of resistance to redefine and redeploy progressive, open-ended, and heterogeneous Koreanness vis-à-vis the hegemonic forces organized by the South Korean state, capital, and the mainstream media, despite the profound economic, cultural, and historical divides.

Through the process of rehierarchization and restratification of the global capitalist order in the post-1945 era, the South Korea that was a postcolonial and neocolonized space only twenty years ago has now been

transformed into a subimperial space, to which postcolonial subjects from other parts of Asia are congregating, falling short of reaching other metropolises.<sup>109</sup> In the complex and contradictory terrain of South Korea, where multiple historicities and heterogenous spaces coexist, it has become increasingly difficult to separate the forces of oppression and resistance, as they have become entwined with each other; the legacies of coloniality and neocoloniality have become indeterminate in that they have rearticulated themselves in both directions, replicating colonial power as well as anticolonial resistance. If thirty-six years of colonialism brought about unprecedented changes to what was then known as Chosŏn, the history of labor migration over twenty years in South Korea, one which will continue into the foreseeable future, has already laid the foundations for profound changes to come for what is still known as the Republic of Korea.