



The Evolution of Korean Foreign Labor Policies in Global Context:  
Toward the Politics of Societal (In) Security?

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*Most societies have problems in creating and sustaining peaceful multi-ethnic coexistence. Immigration tends to exaggerate racism, xenophobia, and ethnocentrism and, all too often, becomes the focus of socially divisive political agendas.<sup>1</sup>*

## **Introduction**

In an era of the heightened international connectivity enabled in the freer international flow of goods, services, capital, and information, migration has become a truly “global” phenomenon. The total number of transnational migrants, for example, will reach 250 million by the 2050.<sup>2</sup> Be it declining population growth, population aging, or shirking off 3 D jobs (dirty, dangerous, and difficult), most developed states have been increasingly pressured to open their domestic labor markets to foreign labor. The unprecedented levels of population movement through international migration, however, have triggered mixed reactions among immigrant-receiving countries. In particular, in the absence of an international polity (with a higher governing authority than states) to manage and monitor cross-border migration, one seemingly perennial challenge across these ethnically and culturally defined immigrant-receiving countries has been the question of how to capitalize on economic benefits from the inflows of immigrants from developing countries (“push-pull factors”) while minimizing societal instability that might occur by introducing large numbers of long-term residents who are ethnically and culturally diverse.<sup>3</sup> In the lexicon of international security studies, the former relates to “economic security” concerned with the production and accumulation of material wealth of a given state. The latter goes with the notion of “societal security,” whose referent object of security often correlates with societal stability and cohesion of a given state’s (imagined or constructed<sup>4</sup>) national identity and its associated socio-cultural practices.<sup>5</sup> On top of these two types of security concerns, most host states would have to engage in the issues of basic human rights, as they define themselves as liberal states and have problems with infringements of human rights leveled against foreign workers.<sup>6</sup> As such, these complex (and often competing) national goals have made the process of integrating immigrants a political matter of utmost concern with economic, societal, and foreign policy implications.<sup>7</sup> Coping with immigration in a rapidly globalizing environment has become a serious policy issue facing many governments.

In this context, this paper attempts to explore the evolution of Korean foreign labor policies in the interplay of the three national goals noted above. In doing so, a

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<sup>1</sup> Douglass and Roberts 2000, 4.

<sup>2</sup> ILO, IOM, and ORHRC 2001, 3.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Ford 2001.

<sup>4</sup> Anderson 1983; Geller 1983; Smith 1998.

<sup>5</sup> Buzan, Wæber, and Wilde 1998, 119-124. Following Buzan et al’s conceptual distinction, this paper differentiates between societal and social security. Whereas social security is largely linked to individual economic well-being in a given society, societal security refers to “the level of collective identities and action taken to defend such ‘we identities’.”

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Risse-Kappen (ed.) 1995; Messina 1996; Chekle 1997; Joppke 1998; Gurowitz 1999.

<sup>7</sup> Koslowski 2002.

particular attention is paid to analyzing Korea's evolutionary path in the context of a general insight anchored in immigration policy experiences shared among advanced states, such as the U.S., European states, and Japan. That is, the historical experience of advanced, early immigration receiving states shows a general tendency that the politics of societal (in) security looms large when the increased visibility of people of diverse ethno-cultural backgrounds represents a potentially significant threat to notions of stable national identities, culture, and ways of life, thus bringing a new dimension to (or somewhat overriding) the existing politics of economic gains versus human rights.<sup>8</sup> Although this general tendency would be more easily observable in ethnically homogenous immigration receiving states particularly with economic downturns, the politics of societal (in) security warrants an investigation in its own right. As will be discussed below, evidence shows that the issue of societal (in) security not only cuts across such liberal, assimilationist countries as the U.S., France, and Australia, but also gets prioritized even when economy is in good shape.

This paper asks two interrelated questions: 1) Did/does the politics of societal (in) security exist in Korea?; 2) If so, what have been the Korean governments' responses to this challenge? Were/are they similar to or different from those of advanced states? The first question might be self-evident, given Korea's historical self-understanding of its nationhood as ethno-cultural and differentialist. But with some qualifications to be discussed below, the political discourses of immigration policies in Korea have largely centered on the question of economic gains versus human rights. Interestingly enough, compared to, for example, Japan featuring many similarities in socio-cultural terms, the politics of societal (in) security in Korea has not been on the table until very recently. Reflective of the so-called "convergence" hypothesis observed by Cornelius and Tsuda,<sup>9</sup> the second question aims at explicating the Korean government's particular macro and/or micro immigration policies related to societal (in) security from a comparative perspective. This paper introduces a specific, testable hypothesis (regarding government's policies toward societal (in) security) and demonstrates below that although the politics of societal (in) security is relatively nascent and emerging, a significant degree of congruence is observed between the Korean government's policies and those developed in advanced states elsewhere.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Clark and Jerome 1997.

<sup>9</sup> According to Cornelius and Tsuda (2004, 16-17), macro policies refer to "general features of a country's immigration system such as the criteria for admitting legal permanent immigrants, use of temporary worker programs, and emphasis on external border control versus internal enforcement." Micro policies are about the detailed regulations, procedures, and mechanisms through which macro immigration policies are carried out. For example, micro policies include "numerical quotas of immigrants admitted, categories of admission, immigrant registration procedures, procedures for verifying employment eligibility, specific rights conferred upon immigrants and asylees, strategies for border enforcement, and procedures to apprehend and deport unauthorized immigrants." Cornelius and Tsuda confirm immigration policy convergence of major labor importing countries at the macro level while observing that cross-national similarities in micro policies have yet to emerge.

<sup>10</sup> Disclaimer: This paper does not investigate a mechanism through which this degree of convergence in policies toward societal (in) security actualizes. It can be "parallel path development," "policy emulation," "regional integration," "public opinion," or any possible combination of these variables as suggested by Cornelius and Tsuda (2004, 17-20). To do justice to this important question requires separate in-depth analysis.

That said, this paper proceeds in four sections. Section I discusses the concept of societal (in) security in more detail and sketches out the general insight of how the politics and policies of societal (in) security have played out in advanced states. The discussion develops in conjunction with “societal proximity hypothesis.” Section II briefly lays out the evolutionary trajectories of foreign labor policies in Korea. Rather than providing a complete genealogy of public policies and laws on the regulation of foreign workers,<sup>11</sup> the discussion here illuminates how economic gains versus human rights debates have centrally captured foreign labor policy discourses in Korea until very recently. The empirical part of the discussion derives from Korea’s three attempts to legislate “the Employment of Foreign Workers Act (EFWA),” which started to take into effect since August, 2004. Section III situates the recent development of the politics of societal (in) security in Korea within the comparative-based general discussion sketched out earlier in Section II. Finally, Section IV briefly sums up the previous discussions.

### **Societal (In) Security and Historical Experience**

The concept of societal (in) security is embedded in and/or relies its ontological status on the conceptual distinction between state and nation. According to Connor, the state is defined as “a legal concept describing a social group that occupies a defined territory and is organized under common political institutions and an effective government.” By contrast, a nation is defined as “a social group which shares a common ideology, common institutions and customs, and a sense of homogeneity.”<sup>12</sup> Therefore, if one applies this conceptual distinction to security affairs, two analytically separate units of analysis emerge. One is about state security while the other nation security.

Traditionally in the study of international relations, the notion of security is squarely equated with securing state’s territorial sovereignty often associated with political, organizational, and ideological stabilities that give governments and states their legitimacy. As such, the state is a central security unit to be analyzed as such an assumption as the state as unitary actor suggests.<sup>13</sup> This engenders the prioritization of external dimension of security, and geopolitically oriented military and economic affairs have become central to security studies.<sup>14</sup>

In contrast, as “the return of culture and identity in IR theory” signifies,<sup>15</sup> the study of societal (in) security explicitly takes “nation” as its unit of analysis. In other words, its analytical focus is on internal dimension of security often associated with social cohesion and stability defined in terms of “the sustainability, within acceptable conditions for evolution, of traditional patterns of language, culture, association, and religious and national identity and custom.”<sup>16</sup> By definition, thus, societal (in) security is about collective, self-sustaining identity group. Nation is often the form upon which

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<sup>11</sup> For the detailed analysis of this evolutionary trajectories, see, for example, Kim 2004; Koh 2004; Lee and Park 2005.

<sup>12</sup> Connor 1972, 333.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Baldwin (1993) for neorealist and neoliberal debates. See Katzenstein (ed., 1996) for the theoretical and empirical critique of the two neo debates.

<sup>14</sup> See the debate between Walt (1991; traditionalist) and Kolodziej (1992; expansionist) for the nature of security studies in terms of theories, paradigms, and concepts.

<sup>15</sup> Lapid and Kratochwil (eds., 1996).

<sup>16</sup> Wæber 1993, 23.

collective identity is bestowed.<sup>17</sup> As such, societal insecurity comes into existence when such a collective, self-sustaining identity group defines a certain socio-cultural development (for example, the increased foreign nationals through migration) as a (potential) threat to their survival as a community.<sup>18</sup> As Zalewski and Enloe argue, “one’s felt need to claim identity or to restore lost identity depends on whether there is or has been a threat to that identity.”<sup>19</sup> And as much as identity is socially constructed and contested, the essence of societal insecurity is psychological, a matter of attitude rather than of fact (or tangible manifestation such as economic gain or loss).<sup>20</sup>

Migration poses a particular challenge to this internal dimension of national security. It could be more apparent to ethnically homogenous countries (or the so-called ethnic nationalist countries). But, as long as mainstream socio-cultural practices exist in multicultural societies (or the so-called civic nationalist countries), it could instigate the politics of societal (in) security similarly in the process of “securitizing” a sense of “we”-ness. Although there are some degrees of difference,<sup>21</sup> historical evidence of the politics of societal (in) security spins across these categorical boundaries. In terms of the interplay of economic security, human rights consideration, and societal (in) security, a general insight gleaned from previous experiences is as follows: The (particularly large) influxes of ethnoculturally different population tend to move the triangular balance toward the politics of societal (in) security.<sup>22</sup> Economic gains and losses do not fully determine the outcome of the balance as evident in the politics of societal (in) security in France, Germany, Britain, and the U.S. during the 1960s and 1970s when all these economies were considerably sound.<sup>23</sup> This, of course, does not mean that economic conditions have no influence on the emergence of societal (in) security politics. Economic downturns could certainly exacerbate it as recently observed even in “countries of immigration.”<sup>24</sup> The level of human rights activists’ resistance toward societal insecurity issues tends to be relatively weak, given the fact that proponents of societal insecurity point to controlling illegal migration, which they believe is the source of societal unrest. Societal insecurity issues have growingly become significant part of the entire political discourse of immigration. Concomitantly, immigration receiving

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<sup>17</sup> According to Ree (1998), only 25 % of currently existing states can be defined as “nation-states” where people’s loyalty to their nation and the state is not exclusive of each other. Categorically, Korea is a very rare case where one nation exists with two states if both Koreas are taken into account.

<sup>18</sup> Buzan, Wæber, de Wilde 1998, 119.

<sup>19</sup> Zalewski and Enloe 1995, 286.

<sup>20</sup> Empirical studies of the rise of nationalism, for example, disprove a material hypothesis that correlates the rise of nationalism with material inequality and discrimination imposed on minority groups by dominant groups. Smith (1998) argues that the more salient reason is the arousal of previously dormant and submerged minority ethnies by the social penetration and cultural regimentation of the state run by elites from the dominant ethnies. Similarly, Gurr (1994) quantitatively shows in his “global analysis of the Minorities at Risk study” that nationalists from the 1980s tend to be only slightly disadvantaged, on average, in comparison with dominant groups in terms of material inequalities.

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Brubaker 1992.

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, Kashiwazaki 1998; Fetzer 2000; Papademeriou and Hamilton 2000; Gilpin 2001; Rudolph 2003.

<sup>23</sup> Herbert 1990; Hollifield 1992 and 2004; Rolph 1992; Hansen 2000.

<sup>24</sup> Gang et al. 2001; Cornelius et al. 2004.

countries' governments have growingly felt a political tension between economic and societal (in) security interests.

Although no two governments are exactly alike in their immigration policies, what has emerged from this tension can be more or less captured by the so-called "societal proximity hypothesis" at least at the level of macro policies. Rudolph formulates this hypothesis as follow: "Ethno-cultural proximity results in lower degrees of societal threat (i.e., more toleration). Ethno-cultural distance is positively correlated with societal threat and more restrictive policy."<sup>25</sup> What one expects to empirically observe from this hypothesis might be two general features in governments' foreign labor policies (excluding the increased border controls). The first one is that immigration receiving governments would design immigration policies and laws favorable to ethno-culturally similar migration groups. The second is about the reinforcement of assimilation or integration policies toward foreign workers already living in a given country.

Perhaps with Canada and Sweden as deviant cases,<sup>26</sup> empirical evidence supports "societal proximity hypothesis." Governments' favorable policies toward ethno-culturally similar immigrants (or conversely, discriminatory policies against ethno-culturally distant immigrants) date back to the 1950s and 1960s, the earlier era of the politics of societal (in) security. Republican, civic nationalist France, for example, limited migration from North Africa through the Franco-Algerian Accords of 1968, particularly targeting on Maghribi migration, who were largely Muslim, when tolerating European migration.<sup>27</sup> Germany attempted to cut back on Turkish migration. Britain was tightening migration from Indians and Pakistanis when it encouraged European migration into its society.<sup>28</sup> Toward the 1980s and 1990s, European Union as an integrated political unit projected its image as "fortress Europe" by facilitating migration internally while collectively stemming the migration of "third country nationals." Japan's preferential treatment for nikkeijin (descendants of Japanese emigrants) by giving what amounts to permanent settlement in Japan is another case in point.<sup>29</sup> As for the second feature, one notable example to promote the integration of existing foreigners is the increased language and socio-cultural proficiency requirements for residence status or citizenship applicants. For example, France, Germany, and Britain almost simultaneously legislated (or proposed) new immigration laws stressing the social integration of new immigrants by requiring citizenship or residence status applicants to take their respective national language courses and to demonstrate a thorough knowledge of their respective society's social institutions and government/legal structures.<sup>30</sup>

As illustrated above, societal (in) security issues have increasingly become an important dimension to the politics of immigration. And governments have had to balance societal (in) security demands with economic and human rights concerns. In particular, "societal proximity hypothesis" provides a useful insight for a general trend of governments' response (s) to societal (in) security issues. In the sections to follow, this paper examines how or in what ways Korean foreign labor policies reflect this dynamics.

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<sup>25</sup> Rudolph 2003, 606.

<sup>26</sup> See Reitz (2004) for Canadian case. As for Swedish case, see Kang 2004.

<sup>27</sup> Silverman 1992, 75-76 in Rudolph 2003, 610.

<sup>28</sup> Hansen 2000.

<sup>29</sup> See, for example, Padademetriou and Hamilton 2000, 32-43; Sellek 1997 and 2001.

<sup>30</sup> Rudolph 2003, 616-618.

### Evolution of Korean Immigration Policies

Korea, once a labor-exporting country, has been “reluctantly” transformed into one of the major destinations for Asian foreign workers since the late 1980s due to similar socio-economic reasons observed in advanced states. In conjunction with the increase in the number of foreign workers, infringements of human rights have become widespread: hard labor under virtual confinement, forced prostitution, work without pay, non-payment of wage arrears, reduction in wages without explanation, dismissal without proper notice, exploitation by brokers and lack of compensation for injuries due to work-related accidents have been prevalent. Reflective of this, the emerging politics of immigration policies in Korea has largely been led by the debates between proponents of economic security and of human rights concerns.<sup>31</sup>

As a result, Korea has gone through several revisions of immigration related law, and the continuing trend of the resulting revisions has been the Korean government’s attempts to balance economic interests with human rights concerns. This balancing behavior is captured as reflecting “the fragmented nature of the Korean state” as many players with different conceptions of national interests (i.e., economic security versus humanitarian concerns) have involved in the process of immigration policymaking (for example, see Table 1 below).<sup>32</sup> In fact, Korea’s road to the enactment of the EFWA (or work permit system) in September 2004 (the passage of this law was 2003) entitling foreign workers to bonus allowance, retirement pay, and the three basic rights of unionizing, collective bargaining, and collective action exemplifies this competition.<sup>33</sup> Although the EFWA is suggested by human rights groups (such as NGOs, some politicians, and the Ministry of Labor) as early as in 1996 as a solution to secure the economic benefits from the inflow of unskilled foreign workers (who reduce labor-shortage) without discriminating them economically and socially, it does not materialize until 2003. Following is a rough sketch to the EFWA in 2003.

In the midst of accusations of human rights violations particularly for more vulnerable illegal foreign workers, the first revision of Korean immigration policies came on October 29, 1991 dubbed as “the Industrial Technical Trainee Program (ITTP).” But the main purpose of this revision had more to do with providing a “side” door to bring in unskilled foreign workers than with alleviating working conditions for foreign workers who could enter Korea as trainees (but not “workers”) through this program. The ITTP ended up a total failure as the program itself became a site for generating illegal foreign workers, thus creating more workers to human rights violations. A significant number of trainees escaped from their designated companies to become undocumented migrant workers whose wages more closely resembled native labor market price.<sup>34</sup> As a remedy to the failed ITTP, the ruling New Korea Party and the opposition National Congress for New Politics submitted a bill in 1997 of the EFWA to the National Assembly with the

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<sup>31</sup> See, for example, Kang 1996; Lee 1997; Lee et al 1998.

<sup>32</sup> Seoul and Skrentny 2004, 498. See also Lim 2003.

<sup>33</sup> See Lee and Park (2005) for a full account of how the enactment of the EFWA was played out in Korea’s body politics.

<sup>34</sup> Since trainees are supposed to receive technical training, their remuneration was not considered “wages,” but “pocket money.” As a result, foreign trainees tend to receive extremely low remuneration compared even with illegal foreign workers.

intention to curtail human rights abuse and labor exploitation.<sup>35</sup> The Ministry of Labor also supported the bill on humanitarian grounds along with a joint organization of 26 civic movement groups, including the Citizen's Coalition for Economic Justice (CCEJ). In the face of the strong opposition from proponents of economic interests spearheaded by the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Energy and the Korea Federation of Small Business (KFSB) essentially arguing that the passage of the bill would place a heavier financial burden on small Korean business due to the expected rise of foreign workers' wages and welfare benefits, the EFWA turned into a diluted (or downgraded) form called "the Working After Training Program for Foreigners (WTAP)" in April 1998. Through the WTAP, foreign workers became entitled to the Labor Standard Act, the Medical Insurance Law, and the Industrial-Disaster Insurance Law, as well as receiving severance pay and various other allowances.<sup>36</sup>

As the WTAP still fell short of critically reducing human rights abuses, the second attempt was made in April 2000 under the Kim Dae Jung administration. President Kim himself justified the necessity of the EFWA as follow: "We should be ashamed about the discrimination against foreign migrant workers when we are aiming at establishing state safeguarding human rights in global era." History, however, repeated, and the EFWA card was once again dropped in favor of economic reasons on January 9, 2001. This time, the EFWA bill did not even reach the Standing Committee of National Assembly due to economic downturns.<sup>37</sup> Despite the continuation of the staunching opposition, the EFWA bill was finally approved in August 2003 under the Roh administration. President Roh pledged to the enactment of the EFWA during his presidential campaign. He stated, "As responsibility and rights are inseparable, the nation, joining the ranks of advanced countries and the UN human rights conventions, should hold up labor policies meeting the international norms and standards not only in name, but in reality."<sup>38</sup> In support of the Roh administration's initiative, the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), which was established in 2001, critically helped the government's attempt to completely abolish the ITTP and to introduce the EFWA to better protect human rights of foreign workers. The passage of the EFWA, however, does not necessarily mean that human rights concerns fully won over economic security issues. If the Korean government had been completely responsive to human rights concerns, the EFWA would not have had such a clause to prevent foreign workers from changing their workplaces. As critics point out, this clause encroaches upon "freedom of choosing a job" on the part of foreign workers, thus still maintaining spaces for Korean employers to exploit foreign labors. As such, the evidence supports economic security issues as a constraint on policy options.

As sketched out above, societal (in) security issues have not been raised during this critical period. Simply put, they have largely been overshadowed by the other two pillars of the politics of immigration policies. "Societal proximity hypothesis," for example, seems irrelevant to Korea as the country offered no preferential treatment to Korea's joseonjok and goryeoin as Japan did to its nikkeijin. And yet, at least two polar-opposite interpretations can be made with respect to the relative absence of the politics of

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<sup>35</sup> Kang 1996.

<sup>36</sup> Korea Herald, July 14, 2000. Yoo 2002.

<sup>37</sup> National Assembly of Korea (<http://www.assembly.go.kr>).

<sup>38</sup> Korea Times, February 2, 2003.

societal (in) security during this period. The first one would be that Korea has always been very sensitive to societal (in) security issues. Well-known evidence for this is Korean immigration law that not only prohibits family-based immigration, but also makes it very hard for foreigners to marry Koreans by institutionalizing “naturalization (by acquiring citizenship)” process through marriage extremely complex.<sup>39</sup> Because of the successful application of this law that controls large scale, permanent immigration, which might arouse a sense of societal (in) security, there is no serious threat to be countered in the first place. In contrast, the second one would be that societal (in) security issues have never been major concerns in Korea yet. It is mainly due to the low visibility of foreign population in Korea with virtually no permanent settlement of immigrant families. Evidence for this is the relative silence on societal (in) security issues in public discourse (s) of immigration policies in Korea as observed above. As far as this second interpretation is concerned, the first one’s Korean immigration law argument might at best present “unintended consequence” or “path-dependence,” given the fact that such Korean immigration laws model after those of Japanese (perhaps out of a matter of convenience) without particular considerations given to societal (in) security. Otherwise, societal (in) security issues would have been prioritized in Korean immigration policy debates as had happened in Japan where societal (in) security discourse (and the resultant immigration policies) arguably took precedent over, for example, economic security concerns.<sup>40</sup> Answering which of the two interpretations better explains this important issue is beyond the scope of this paper. It certainly requires another in-depth empirical analysis. But the fact remains that it is not until very recently that Korean immigration policies seriously start to take on societal (in) security issues.

[Table 1 Here]

### **The Emergence of the Politics of Societal (In) Security?**

As discussed in Section II, there are two general indicators derived from “societal proximity hypothesis” that capture immigration receiving governments’ involvement in the politics of societal (in) security. To recapitulate, the first one is that immigration receiving governments would design immigration policies and laws favorable to ethno-culturally similar migration groups. The second is about the reinforcement of assimilation or integration policies toward foreign workers already living in a given country. As evident below, the recent development of Korean immigration policies correlates somewhat positively with both indicators. The emergence of societal (in) security concerns in the early 2000s might be related to the increased visibility of foreign population (roughly 500, 000 by 2004), employment competition under the shadow of Korean economic downturns,<sup>41</sup> the increased criminal activity reports associated with foreign workers, or a defensive awakening of racial (and/or xenophobic) consciousness on the part of Koreans, or any combination of these. With respect to racial and/or xenophobic consciousness, one survey shows that the Korean public are generally most tolerant of Joseonjok migrants when they enter Korea to work compared to other

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<sup>39</sup> Seol and Skrentny 2004, 505, footnote 17.

<sup>40</sup> Douglas and Roberts (eds.) 2000; Lu 2000; Papademeriou and Hamilton 2000; Tsuda and Cornelius 2004.

<sup>41</sup> See Kim (2004, 327-329) for this point.

foreigners.<sup>42</sup> Along this line, Seol and Han traces the historical origins of Koreans' xenophobic attitudes toward foreigners to Korea's experience of the 35-year-long colonial rule by the Japanese and the subsequent 40-year Cold War under which Korea's fate was at foreign powers' disposal.<sup>43</sup> Simply put, these historical experiences embed Koreans in the general fear that "a large-scale inflow of 'outsiders' would damage the cohesion and harmony of Korean society."<sup>44</sup> Some Korean employers even justify their granting lower wages to foreign workers on the basis of a skin-color based hierarchical order of races.<sup>45</sup>

As for the first indicator, evidence shows that the Korean government (particularly the Ministry of Justice, one of the two principle authorities in charge of immigration along with the Ministry of Labor) indeed started to discreetly give a preferential treatment to Korean descendents (joseonjok and koryeoin). On its report entitled "Improvement for the Management of Foreign Workers," which was released on July 15, 2002, the Korean government made a categorical distinction between Korean descendents and foreign workers and suggested for the first time different methods of managing these two groups.<sup>46</sup> Along this line, the Ministry of Justice critically reduced visa requirements of employment for Korean descendents while not granting the same to foreign workers coming from elsewhere.<sup>47</sup> For example, as a way to facilitate the influxes of Korean descendents, the Ministry of Justice increased the number of visas that could be approved (without consultation with the Ministry) by the Korean Embassy in China. Documents to be submitted with visa applications were greatly reduced for Korean descendents. And the Ministry of Justice broadened the categories of visa permitting Korean descendents to enter Korea from two categories (i.e., those who are older than 65 for a temporary visit and those who are older than 30 for employment) to more than 10 categories. Finally, the lower limit of age for employment in Korea will be lifted from 30 to 25 from July of 2005. The Ministry of Justice made it explicit that it took all these measures to facilitate the employment opportunities of Korean descendents. Furthermore, on the basis of public sympathy toward Korean descendents and as a way to lessen labor shortage problems, some part of the Korean government gives a consideration to allowing them to stay an extended period of time in Korea (similar to what nikkeijin is entitled in Japan) through the so-called "ethnic preferences program."<sup>48</sup>

In this context, the Korean government's recent approach to illegal joseonjok workers' hunger strike in protest for the government's nationwide drive to evict illegal foreign workers is illuminating. In terms of the final outcome, this episode does not tell much. More than 5,000 Illegal joseonjok workers filed a petition with the Constitutional Court of Korea asking for reinstating Korean citizenship with their ethno-historical lineage to Korea, arguing that "any Korean-Chinese could have gained their Korean

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<sup>42</sup> Seol 1999.

<sup>43</sup> See, for example, Seol and Han 2004, 48-49.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>45</sup> Ham (1995) and Han (2003) in Seol and Han 2004, 48.

<sup>46</sup> Koh 2004.

<sup>47</sup> Ministry of Justice (<http://moj.news.go.kr>). It took into effect on November 11, 2004. But the Korean government's crackdown on and deportation of illegal foreign workers has not given any special treatment to Korean descendents.

<sup>48</sup> An interview with a Korean official, October 10, 2004.

citizenship if they had returned to the country 50 years ago.”<sup>49</sup> And the Ministry of Justice denied their request according to the rules concerning the application of the immigration law. The officials in the Ministry of Justice justified their decision that they could not give preferential treatment to joesonjok workers over other illegal alien in Korea, stressing the importance of the government’s strict application of rules in dealing with undocumented foreign workers.<sup>50</sup> But the importance of this episode is found in this process. President Roh Moo-hyun himself made a visit to a church where illegal joesonjok workers were on hunger strike, and the strike was ended shortly after President Roh’s visit. What has emerged from this process is arguably as noted earlier: the Korean’s government’s serious consideration of adopting “ethnic preferences systems.” Nothing has happened concretely yet. As such, it would be premature to forecast anything at this point. Nonetheless, this movement seems not to be tied with the procurement of stable labor supplies (economic interests), given the fact that Korean employers strongly prefer Indonesian, Filipino, and the Chinese workers to joesonjok, whom “they say change jobs frequently and are insufficiently respectful at the job site.”<sup>51</sup>

The second indicator, however, produces an ambivalent interpretation. On the one hand, the Korean government indeed reinforced the Korean language requirement by testing the language proficiency in home countries. Only those who pass this proficiency test can apply for employment visa. On the other hand, any integration policy equivalent of those found in Europe has yet to emerge as Korea still refuse to even imagine to becoming a country of multicultural. Any measure that might facilitate immigration settlement has not been on the horizon. In terms of the interpretation of the evidence, one cannot preclude Korean employers’ interests in having foreign workers with the language proficiency. As such, societal (in) security issues might not be relevant here. Conversely, non-existence of official integration policy itself might speak to the strong case for the politics of societal (in) security in Korea. Taken together, it seems that the politics of societal (in) security is emerging at least in light of “societal proximity hypothesis” and evidence presented above. And yet, the question of how or in what ways it will be unfolding remains to be seen.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has so far situated the evolution of Korean immigration policies within the context of comparative historical development. In particular, the paper has focused its attention on explicating the societal (in) security dimension of immigration policies. Through the lens of “societal proximity hypothesis,” it examined the immigration politics and policies of societal (in) security in Korea. Empirical evidence somewhat indicates the emergence of the politics of societal (in) security reflective of the recent development of Korean immigration policies. But evidence also dictates no conclusive posture. Doing so demands that one comes to closure on issues one is just beginning to grasp. In other words, “convergence” hypothesis in the realm of societal (in) security has yet to be further developed and tested.

The question of what will be Korea’s future immigration policies is difficult to predict. But what can be suggested from this analysis is that as long as states remain

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<sup>49</sup> Korea Times, October 14, 2003.

<sup>50</sup> Hankyore Shinmun, December 7, 2003.

<sup>51</sup> Seol and Skrentny 2004, 504.

anchored in particular historical, cultural, and linguistic identities, the themes of societal (in) security would be central to the politics of immigration for years to come. As has been the case before, the debate of societal (in) security issues will always take place in conjunction with economic and human rights concerns. The question of how and in what ways balancing behavior across these three pillars will play out in Korea is important in its own right. But placing it in a wider cross-historical context would provide a more holistic, analytical ground for understanding the nature of Korean immigration policies.

**Table 1: Positions of Actors on EFWA**

		Kim Young-Sam administration (New Korea Party, 1993-1997)	Kim Dae-Jung administration (New Millennium Democratic Party, 1998-2002)	Rho Moo-Hyun administration (New Millennium Democratic Party, 2003-)
Government	Ministry of Labor	for	for	for
	Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Energy	against	against	against
	Ministry of Health and Welfare	against	n.a.	n.a.
	Ministry of Justice	against	against	moderately against
Political Parties	New Korea Party	for	n.a. (disorganized in November 1997)	n.a.
	National Congress for New Politics	for	n.a. (disorganized in December 1999)	n.a.
	NMDP	n.a. (established in January 2000)	for	for
	Grand National Party	n.a. (established in November 1997)	against	medium
	United Liberal Democrats	against	Moderately against	Moderately against
Business sector	KFSB	against	against	against
	Digital Small Business Association	n.a.	n.a.	for
Non-profit organizations	Labor unions	against_for (1997)	for	for
	Civil society groups	for	for	for

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