Multiculturalism is one of the most popular academic topics in the Republic of Korea (henceforth “Korea”) today, as many journal articles bear the word in their titles. However, the existence of many different definitions and interpretations of “multiculturalism” is the cause of serious confusion. In this paper, I attempt to find the characteristics of ethnic minorities in Korea, social incorporation policies of the Korean government, and the different usages of “multiculturalism” by leading scholars of migration and “multicultural” studies. I also assess the relevance of this concept to contemporary Korean society and Korea’s immigration policies.

Key Words: Multiculturalism, Developmental State, Globalization, Immigration Policies, Assimilation, Interculturalism
I. Introduction: Transformation of Korea into a Multicultural Society

Korea has long been considered an ethnically homogenous society. The World Factbook (2010), published by the United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), calls Korea “ethnically homogeneous (except for about 20,000 Chinese).” According to this publication, countries with a low ratio of ethnic minorities are North and South Korea, Portugal, Iceland, and Japan. Among these countries, North and South Korea are the most homogeneous.

Korean society, which has for a long time maintained the myth of an ethnically homogeneous nation, has recently undergone a sudden transformation into a multicultural society (Republic of Korea, 2006). The cause of this transition is the arrival of foreigners. Foreign workers started to arrive in Korea in the late 1980s, followed by immigrants through marriage, who started to arrive in the early 1990s (A. Kim, 2009). Ethnic groups other than Hwagyo (overseas ethnic Chinese), who have resided in Korea since the end of the nineteenth century, are continuing to increase.

According to data released by the Ministry of Public Administration and Security, the number of foreigners residing in Korea totaled 1,122,850 as of January 1, 2010. The number represents 2.26 percent of the Korean population. While Korea is not yet a flourishing multicultural society, it can be said that it is on the verge of becoming one. However, in terms of the share of foreign-born population or immigrants, the number is estimated to be among the lowest in the world (see Table 1). The share of permanent settlers, including permanent residents and naturalized citizens, is particularly low and the remaining majority of the foreigner population is comprised of temporary migrant workers and short-term visitors (Seol and Skrentny, 2009a). Most of these permanent settlers are immigrants by marriage to Korean citizens (H. Lee, 2008). Some of these permanent settlers are Hwagyo with Taiwanese citizenship, and are descendants of immigrants from the Shandong Province of China (Yang and Lee, 2004).