Korea and Japan’s Multicultural Models for Immigrant Incorporation

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In Korea and Japan, immigrant settlement and the subsequent development of “multicultural” discourse have disrupted blood-based conceptions of national identity in divergent ways. Although both countries employ the same set of Chinese characters in their respective translations for the concept of “multiculturalism” (damunhwa in Korean and tabunka in Japanese), their divergent symbolic significance and applications offer an important window into the distinct approaches taken by each country in managing the permanent settlement of immigrants. Whereas “multicultural society” in Korea signifies a broadened definition of Korean national identity and Korean nationality to include specific categories of non-Korean immigrants, “multicultural coexistence” in Japan has further narrowed conceptions of Japanese national identity and Japanese nationality to exclude ethnic Japanese (Nikkei) from Brazil and Peru as foreigners. This paper analyzes the development of two distinct two frameworks for immigrant incorporation based on

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variants of multiculturalism: a type of selective multiculturalism in Korea and “multicultural coexistence” in Japan.

Key Words: Immigration, Incorporation, Japan, Korea, Multiculturalism

I. Introduction

On October 16, 2010, German Chancellor Angela Merkel declared multiculturalism in Germany a failure. Far-right parties that have recently gained power in countries such as Sweden and Austria have further raised doubts about the viability of multiculturalism in Western Europe and North America. Meanwhile, in Korea and Japan, where immigration is tightly controlled and integration programs are at their infancy, the catchword, “multiculturalism,” has gained popularity among policymakers and the public alike. Although foreign residents make up approximately 2 percent of the total population in Korea and Japan, their total numbers have grown more than four-fold since 1990 to over 1.2 million in Korea (including undocumented immigrants) and have more than doubled since 1985 to over 2.2 million in Japan. Immigrant advocacy groups, progressive local governments, and even some government officials have used the term “multiculturalism” to mark the advent of social diversity in both countries and have juxtaposed them against mainstream mono-cultural ideologies that have been used to justify past discriminatory policies and attitudes.

Does this relatively late engagement with policies and practices that many regard as unsuccessful in Western Europe and North America merely reflect Korea and Japan’s recent experience with immigration? I argue that the variants of multiculturalism developing in both countries represent each society’s attempt to improve upon what policymakers in both countries view as the failures of multiculturalism — and, more broadly, diversity — in traditional countries of