

Review Essay

Korea and the Politics of Belonging

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Jaeun Kim. *Contested Embrace: Transborder Membership Politics in Twentieth-Century Korea*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016. 360 pp. \$65 (cloth).

Minjeong Kim. *Elusive Belonging: Marriage Immigrants and "Multiculturalism" in Rural South Korea*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2018. 216 pp. \$68 (cloth).

When I chose to review these two books, I knew they were very different works: *Contested Embrace* is largely historical, focuses on the nation-state as much as everyday people, and is centered in political sociology. *Elusive Belonging* is about the present, at the level of couples and families, and is centered in gender, race, and immigration. Given the blossoming of scholarship on the South Korean state's concerted effort to shore up its diaspora and its image as a multicultural nation akin to the United States (see Lie 2015)—it seems only fitting to put two different books on the same topic—the Korean state—in conversation with one another.

Jaeun Kim's *Contested Embrace: Transborder Membership Politics in Twentieth-Century Korea* is a signal contribution because it moves us beyond the standard emphasis on migrant minority groups within nation-states. This book is part of a growing body of scholarship on international migration, nationalism, and citizenship that has shifted its lens onto the ethnic diaspora, or what is now often called emigrant, expatriate, or transnational/transborder citizenship. *Contested Embrace* captures the diverse range of phenomena pertaining to these external types of citizenship, which the author terms "transborder membership politics." She defines transborder membership politics as "political claims, institutionalized practices, and discursive representations oriented to or generated by those who have durably resided outside the territory of the state, yet are perceived as belonging to that state or to the nation associated with that state" (8). By emphasizing the moniker "transborder" rather than "transnational," Jaeun Kim aptly addresses not just the movement of people over borders but the movement of borders over people. As colonial, Cold War, and post-Cold War contexts have largely spawned these movements of borders over people, the author makes much

of her case by examining colonial-era Koreans in Japan and northeast China, and their convergences and divergences in terms of group and individual identities at both macro and micro levels. In this way, she departs from the standard focus on “who gets what” to the more dialectical question of “who is what.” Her historical and more dialectical and cultural analysis corrects for the presentist and economic bias in the current scholarship.

Jaeun Kim’s study finds that colonial and postcolonial states often struggled to produce the conformity and loyalty of their transborder populations who had mixed thoughts about the outreach efforts of their states of origin. In turn, these transborder populations struggled to be acknowledged and accepted by their states of origin, which discriminated against and excluded them in various ways. Kim shows how these questions—who belongs, who does not, and on what terms—have depended on codifying the national community by way of identification documents, a key locus of the symbolic power of the state. By way of these findings, the book skillfully conjoins the institutional and the cultural-cognitive understanding of the nation-state.

As readers can easily discern, the contributions of *Contested Embrace* to the literature on nationalism, transnationality, citizenship, and migration are manifold and impressive. In terms of research ambition, scope, and quality of research, this book is a tour de force. The author uses three types of methodology—comparative, historical, and ethnographic—whereas most historical books rely primarily on archives. One limitation of the book lies in its lack of discussion of the racial biologization—what I have called in my own work the “racialization” (N. Kim 2008)—of national identity by Japan, China, and both Koreas, including the current era. Despite the author’s central engagement with the nationalism and ethnicity literature, she underappreciates the way race and global racism—namely, in the form of bloodline-based nationalism, past and present, as well as global racial orders—centrally influence how the state and its people define who is Korean and who belongs, nor does she question how culture affirms or contests that bloodline membership. This is a glaring omission, given Japan’s own dependence on “pure Japanese blood” for its state and imperial projects, Koreans’ own parallel anticolonial response of pure Korean bloodlines, China’s reliance on such biologized blood tropes, and North Koreans’ reliance on racialized discourse, including biologized nationalism.

Additionally, as much as I appreciated the depth and breadth of *Contested Embrace*, I often found myself wishing that the content were livelier and the writing more dynamic and effervescent. Delving a little more deeply into the ethnographic data and making more connections between the archived past and the ethnographic present might have allowed the author’s passion to emanate from the page.

This is where Minjeong Kim’s *Elusive Belonging: Marriage Immigrants and “Multiculturalism” in Rural South Korea* stands out. To be sure, the comparison may not be entirely fair, as engaging the reader about current events is arguably easier than walking the reader through history. In addition to being solely about the present, *Elusive Belonging* concerns a topic that frequents the Asian news outlets: the Filipina immigrant

wives of low-income farmers in rural South Korea. This book provocatively focuses on the emotive politics of “international marriages” in the contexts of race/ethnicity/nation and gender, class, and citizenship. The author’s main method of ethnographic participant observation readily brings us into the fray; the author is self-reflexive about her own positionality as not quite Korean and not quite (Korean) American, taking great pains to weave social positioning into the fieldwork and her analysis. For instance, M. Kim addresses her privileges as an urban, highly educated South Korean who has spent much of her middle-class life in the United States and her related insecurities about how the Filipina migrants and Korean nationals were receiving her. Owing to her full commitment to self-reflexive ethnography, I was engaged throughout the entire work.

Elusive Belonging is an enriching contribution to the dynamic scholarship on multiculturalism in Korea, immigration, citizenship/belonging, gender, and race/ethnicity/nation. Broadly, the author pursues how marriage immigrants in rural South Korea forge a sense of belonging in the context of a South Korean state that lauds itself as multicultural. More specifically, the author’s analysis of emotions and emotional life as a cornerstone of political belonging is riveting. She asks: How do rural marriage immigrants’ daily interactions with Korean family and community members and their emotional experiences shape the politics of belonging—an affective aspect of citizenship—for marriage immigrants? The other noted strength of the book is the author’s acknowledgment and analysis of South Korea’s highly biologized/racialized nationalism (“blood line”) (Kim 2008) as shaping the emotive politics of belonging for non-Korean immigrants and, by extension, Koreans.

By including rich ethnographic detail and coalescing multiple literatures—Asian studies, Asian American studies, sociology of gender and immigration, and citizenship—with aplomb, Minjeong Kim offers nuanced and complex portraits beyond the hapless Filipina immigrant victim and the lower-class abusive Korean husband. Addressing the emotive politics of belonging in South Korea, the author shows the various forms of agency in which the Filipina immigrants engaged, whether resisting Korean families and husbands who were abusive psychologically or physically (or both), chatting with men online when they became dissatisfied with their marriages, or forming their own community with one another and proudly performing Filipinx culture to a prejudiced Korean audience. This is not to say that the Filipina immigrants were unconstrained by state, gender, racial, and cultural inequalities and injustices; they endured those on a daily basis. Yet, the book demonstrates that, despite or even because of these straitjackets, the Filipina wives resisted in bigger and smaller ways and took pains to honor their humanity and dignity in a nation-state that discriminated against, tokenized, and exploited them for its own projects.

Minjeong Kim also shows that the Korean husbands (and their families) were more complex than the caricature of the abusive drunk. This more realistic portrait neither denies nor diminishes the patterns of patriarchy, domestic abuse, and manipulation by way of money, legal or immigration status, and alienation from loved ones in the Philippines. Yet, the book shows us that these men also suffered at the hands of their

prejudicial families and were constrained by rules of patrilineage, including their mothers' tyranny as mothers-in-law. Although the author could have said much more about how these farmers were the victims of South Korea's neoliberal economic and city-centered policies, she makes it clear that the husbands could not and did not wield singular power; most had to be in constant negotiation with their Filipina wives and with their own family members about day-to-day life decisions and had to deal with hierarchies of class, geography, and race (as it pertained to their wives and children) in the broader society.

The strengths of *Elusive Belonging* notwithstanding, the connection between the burgeoning scholarship on emotions and the Filipina experience is inconsistent and sometimes unclear. The analysis of emotions starts out strong but wanes later in the book, limiting the contribution it makes to the exciting and flourishing literature on the sociology of emotions. Consistency of the types and quality of data and of the author's analytic contributions are more the hallmark of *Contested Embrace*.

A second limitation of *Elusive Belonging* lies in the author's analysis of the racialization of Filipina immigrants, although well-intended and important. Had this study engaged with existing scholarship on race more at the macro level—such as an examination of the racialized global economic hierarchy, global racism, and the related “blackening” of Southeast Asia and the Philippines by more powerful Asian countries like South Korea (Kim 2008; Lie 2015)—the analysis of racialization would have been richer and more layered. A layered approach would have also made the story of Rosario, the Filipina migrant with whom the author spent significant time, more lucid and informative. Rosario was a very popular, financially successful, well-assimilated immigrant; in presenting her thus, the author seems to (inadvertently) support a clear, linear assimilation narrative. However, the book does not make clear how the negative racialization of Filipina migrants affected success stories like Rosario's, how Rosario navigated the dualist and conflicting social realities that the author lays out, and how the broader Korean population negotiated those realities.

As noted, both of these books deal with how states and how everyday actors negotiate with one another to determine political belonging and citizenship. Whereas *Contested Embrace* largely concerns historical eras, devotes more attention to analyzing the state level, and focuses on Koreans who left the motherland, *Elusive Belonging* does a deep dive into the current era, spotlights the family and community, and focuses on non-Koreans. Their strengths and weaknesses notwithstanding, both works do an excellent job demonstrating that issues of emotive identity and belonging are never extricated from the state, that even the most excluded have agency and therefore transform the countries in which they live, and that cultural and cognitive (and emotional) processes are just as important as those of policy and capital.

References

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About the Reviewer

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