Abstract:
This short essay was inspired by my participation as the discussant on a panel at a symposium entitled “Negotiating Identities: Mixed-Race Individuals in China, Japan and Korea” held at the University of San Francisco in April 2016. As I reviewed the papers presented in the panel, I was struck by the similarity of South Korea’s experiences with interracial/ethnic relations and resultant multiracial/ethnic children to those of Japan, my native country. In an effort to seek common grounds for the experiences of the two countries, I will discuss the historical and structural contexts of post-WWII East Asia within which interracial and interethnic encounters across national boundaries occurred. My goal is to sort out the large historical, political and societal contexts that have given rise to the similar experiences of interracial/ethnic relations in Japan and Korea. For this purpose, this essay is intended to be food for thought and encourage future comparative research with concrete data from each country.

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THINK PIECE: Political and Social Contexts of Multiracial and Multiethnic Relations and Individuals in Japan and South Korea

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Introduction

I teach a course titled “Gender and Generation in Asian American Families,” in the Asian American and Asian Diaspora Studies within the Department of Ethnic Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. I also teach a course titled, “Immigration and Multiculturalism in Asia,” for Berkeley’s International and Area Studies Department. The issue of “intermarriage and mixed race children” is a theme that attracts much attention from students in these courses. It has also produced a massive volume of literature since the 1980s. The subjects are popular simply because they challenge the existing racial, ethnic and national boundaries and redefine individual and collective identities. They also re-evaluate the social distance between a minority group and majority group that usually stay far apart from each other.

For example, in my Asian American Studies course, following Milton Gordon’s concept of marital assimilation, I discuss an increase in intermarriage between an immigrant group – such as Japanese Americans – and the white majority group, as a measure of cultural assimilation into mainstream society. In my Asian Studies course, I examine the topic in the context of emerging multiculturalism in East Asia as a result of an increasing number of international marriages between East Asian men and Southeast Asian women. In both cases, intermarriage across race, ethnicity and nationality brings together the people and communities otherwise separated, challenging the established racial and ethnic boundaries. It also forces people to adjust, and adapt to, cultural differences of the communities commonly seen as alien to them. In these new emerging relations and processes, individual and group identities are constantly shaped and reshaped at the intersections of race, class and gender. By definition, children of intermarriage are the major actors thrown into such new discourses, carrying a heavy burden of proving who they are, where they belong, and how far the two heritages come close in society.

This short essay has been inspired by my participation as the discussant on a panel at a symposium entitled “Negotiating Identities: Mixed-Race Individuals in China, Japan and Korea” held at the University of San Francisco in April 2016. As I reviewed the papers presented in the panel, I was struck by the similarity of South Korea’s experiences with interracial/ethnic relations and resultant multiracial/ethnic children to those of Japan, my native country. The topics and themes that the three papers discussed revolved around the intense stigma attached to the Korean women who had sex with American soldiers, all-around exclusion of Amerasian children (called honhyeolin) from Korean society, and more recently the negative societal reception of multicultural families and children resulting from international marriages between Korean men and Southeast Asian women. These types of incidents and stories abound in post-WWII Japanese society.

In an effort to seek common grounds for the experiences of the two countries, below I discuss the historical and structural contexts of post-WWII East Asia within which interracial and interethnic encounters across national boundaries occurred. My goal is to sort out the large historical, political and societal contexts that have given rise to the similar experiences of interracial/ethnic relations in Japan and Korea. For this purpose, this essay is intended to be food for thought and encourage future comparative research with concrete data from each country. I focus on two historical periods:
the first begins in the late 1940s, the period during which the American military alliance with Japan and South Korea (hitherto Korea) brought large numbers of American soldiers to each country. The second is the 1970s and afterwards, the period during which the global economy and demographic changes caused a surge of intra-Asian migration from Southeast Asia to East Asia, including Japan and Korea.

I should note that here I use the terms race and ethnicity differently from each other. By the term “race” I refer to physical differences, such as those of skin color and bodily stature, while I use “ethnicity” to signify cultural differences, such as those of language and religion. In the context of this essay, what I term the interracial encounter thus refers to sexual relationships between men of white or black race and women of Asian race with broad ethnicities, including Japanese and Koreans. What I term the interethnic encounter then refers to sexual relationships between men and women of Asian ethnicities, such as those between Japanese men and Filipino women. In the latter cases, physical differences of the children resulting from these relationships are smaller relative to those in the former cases. This is an important point to make in the East Asian context. In relatively homogeneous societies, physical difference plays a crucial role in constructing the “other” based on one’s biological and cultural origins. It is this social process that attaches the negative meanings to the multiracial/ethnic children, and it is the subject I will discuss in each of the two distinct periods.

Multiracial Relations and Multiracial Children

In East Asia, soon after WWII ended in 1945, the intensifying Cold War against Communist threats triggered the large-scale migration of American soldiers to Japan and Korea. The American armed forces occupied Japan for seven years until 1952. With the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950, the American and allied military forces landed in Korea. Even after these events were over, the American military continued to maintain military bases in each country. This opened a new page of history in interracial interactions and relationships in the nations that had hitherto predominantly Asiatic populations. The presence of traveling American males of diverse races in Japan and Korea, most of whom were young and unmarried, immediately gave rise to intimate contact between these men and the local women working both on and off the military bases. Clearly these relationships, mostly informal, were built on unequal grounds. The political, economic, and therefore racial superiority of American males was overwhelming to the subordinated locals of war-struck and impoverished nations, especially young females with limited economic means. However, the stigma attached to the women in sexual relations with American men was harsh, and their biracial children – frequently deserted by their fathers – were disdained.

The exclusionary process of rendering mixed race children as social pariahs began as soon as they were born. In the early post-war period, the security alliance with the US ushered both Japan and Korea along a path towards economic reconstruction. But war-torn nations endeavoured to cultivate a spiritual unity among their members, who were hitherto divided by war memory, class, gender and many other lines. The ideology of social, and especially ethnic, homogeneity provided a sense of harmony, solidarity and equality across these lines toward the single national goal of rapid industrialization. In that consolidating process, biracial children – with their distinct bodily differences – clearly fell off the imagined territorial boundary and reminded the public of the painful and disastrous past.

In Japan, the nation defeated by the Americans, these Amerasian children symbolized a national shame and had no space to grow up in the country. At one point, there was even a program to ship the biracial children off to a farm opened in the jungle of the Amazon, Brazil. The discrimination against biracial children was even worse if their skin was darker, revealing their black heritage. In the 1959 Japanese movie Kiku and Isamu, a story of the two black Amerasian siblings in an impoverished
Okinawan village, presents the all-around exclusion such children met in a society struggling under the American military occupation.9

The ideological exclusion meant their institutional exclusion, commonly resulting in their low education, low-skilled occupations, and therefore limited social and geographical mobility. In postwar Korea many multiracial individuals remained poor, subsisting on unskilled jobs in the camptowns where American military bases existed.10 Neither law nor public policy helped to ameliorate their plight. The longstanding patriarchal Confucian legal system prevented mothers from registering children fathered by foreigners in their own household records. The institutional exclusion left the honhyeolin deprived of a supportive family life, and often left them with low self-esteem.

Multiethnic Relations and Multiethnic Children

Three decades later, Japan and Korea rose to be two of the wealthiest economies of Asia. By the 2010s, with the rapidly changing demographics and growing labor demands, each country attracted hundreds of thousands of migrants from Southeast Asia and other regions in the industries and occupations severely short of workers. Among them were tens of thousands of women who arrived each year and took jobs in the entertainment and sex industry.11 In Japan, Filipino, Thai and other Asian women were admitted as professional entertainers but typically worked in bars and clubs where labor shortages were acute.12 Some of them married their male customers and raised families.13 In Korea, a severe shortage of brides in rural areas prompted cross-border marriages brokered by international matchmakers. Immigrant wives from China, Vietnam and other Asian countries took care of their husbands’ households and raised children.14 In the East Asian nation-states characterized by patriarchal family practices, social homogeneity myths, restrictive immigration policies, and a resulting lack of social incorporation programs, these women endured multiple inequalities and oppressions due to their sex, gender, class, nationality and citizenship status. The burgeoning literature on the subject frequently points to all kinds of abuses and exploitations, including trafficking and sexual slavery, at the hands of customers, employers, and even husbands and in-laws, who took advantage of the women’s vulnerability as females, immigrants, workers, wives and mothers.15

The offspring of interethnic relationships between East Asian citizen males and Southeast Asian immigrant females also met prejudice and exclusion in their fathers’ homelands. Similarly to their mothers, these children are commonly seen as different or other, and even inferior to their peers because of their mixed heritage and other sources of differentiation. Here, a caveat is necessary: As this population of children continues to grow, academic literature in Japan and Korea has yet to catch up. Due to the lack of existing studies I must limit my discussion here to Japan and experiences of Filipino children fathered by Japanese men. I discuss two groups of Japanese-Filipino children: Those born within stable families, and those born out of wedlock. In my research in rural Japan, I observed the children of the first group were raised to be Japanese, graduated from local schools, and had found respectable jobs.16 In other words, they were equal to their Japanese peers in every respect, including their physical appearance.17 The second group, those born out of wedlock to single mothers in either Japan or the Philippines, largely grew up in impoverished, single-parent households. In stark contrast to the former, the latter group was subjected to many legal, economic and other barriers frequently encountered by immigrants and their children in Japan.18 Due to Japan’s patriarchal legal framework, until 2009 this group of Japanese Filipino children were not eligible for Japanese nationality.19 Even once they acquired it, however, cultural and institutional barriers – such as limited Japanese language, education and therefore viable skills – prevented them from enjoying their citizenship rights and a sense of belonging to the national community.20
Conclusion

From the above discussions, I draw two major conclusions. The first is that exclusion of multiracial/ethnic individuals from the nation-state is a result of historical, structural and ideological conditions under which Japan and Korea operated at different points in time. In each historical context, gender, class, race and ethnicity intersect differently with one another, generating different dynamics that oppress multiracial/multi-ethnic children in different ways. In the early post-WWII period, Amerasians or honhyeolin are a product of intense regional politics of East Asia under the Cold War that landed many itinerant American bachelors on each country’s shore. As a result, with their bodily marks of difference, illegitimate children from unequal interracial relationships are a racially distinct group that is relegated to the status of permanent outcast in societies which aspire to a harmonious and prosperous future. In contrast, children born to Southeast Asian migrant mothers and East Asian fathers since the 1990s become legitimate citizens of their fathers’ country, physically and culturally Asian, and augmenting populations otherwise suffering from extremely low fertility. Although legal and other institutional barriers still challenge these multiethnic children, their individual and collective identities are currently being negotiated under East Asia’s growing multiculturalism.

This brings me to the second conclusion. Examining the two historical contexts in which multiraciality and multiethnicity are constructed indicates a shift in the form and nature of exclusion in different historical and structural conditions of East Asia. A question is what of these large macro-changes trigger ideological and institutional transformations that result in exclusionary or inclusionary practices of multiracial and multiethnic individuals. Clearly such significant changes as the demise of communism and the rise of global economy have impacted every ideological and institutional base of society. Nonetheless, the question of how racial and ethnic boundaries move along the axis of race, ethnicity, class, gender and generation as a result of these epoch-making changes remains unanswered. One way to address it may be comparative studies of the shifting boundaries at the crucial historical moments between the two nations – Japan and Korea – that underwent similar circumstances. Precisely such studies comparing changes in policy, immigration and citizenship would elucidates the ways in which ideologies and institutions of race, class and gender intersect and transform themselves. It then also reveals differences of the two East Asian nations in these processes and discourses. For example, social incorporation of multiethnic children may take different paths between Japan and Korea, given differences in public policy and reception towards them, law and citizenship rules regarding their inclusion, and educational systems promoting their equality.21

In short, the examination of changing multiracial and multiethnic relations over the past 50 years is of critical importance to the emerging multiculturalism and tolerance of ethnic and cultural diversity in East Asia. In the context of growing economic and cultural integration of East Asia and Southeast Asia today, more open borders and fluid interactions of peoples of different backgrounds are increasingly occurring. And yet, the existing complex and unequal relations across the nations, ethnicities and genders make it difficult for the different groups to achieve an equal footing with the majority population. Research on changes in multiraciality and multiethnicity can suggest new directions towards more inclusive policies, open ideas and flexible identities in the more diverse and interactive Asia.

NOTES


5. For theoretical discussions of race and ethnicity, see: Omi, Michael and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s* (New York: Routledge, 1994).


17. I should note that many Filipino mothers in my study wish to teach their children their native language (e.g., Tagalog) and Filipino culture, but often find it hard in the mono-lingual and mono-cultural environment in which the children grow up.


