
DECENTERING CITIZENSHIP: GENDER, LABOR, AND MIGRANT RIGHTS IN SOUTH KOREA

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Decentering Citizenship: Gender, Labor, and Migrant Rights in South Korea

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Decentering Citizenship: Gender, Labor, and Migrant Rights in South Korea by Hae Yeon Choo examines how Filipina migrant women challenge the limits of the South Korean citizenship in their interactions with other migrants, South Korean employers, immigration officers and civil society groups. The book skillfully compares diverse paths for claiming rights by bringing to the forefront three migrant categories, namely female factory workers, marriage migrants, and hostesses. This book differentiates itself from other similar studies not only through the spaces and groups of people it focuses on, but also through its methodology. The ethnographic approach combined with several series of interviews conducted between 2008 and 2014 offers a comprehensive account of how the basis of citizenship and rights is negotiated by Filipino migrants, South Korean advocates, and authorities. Therefore, the seven chapters of the book and its concluding section highlight the sometimes divergent opinions and goals of the aforementioned actors, arguing that the issue of migrant rights and justice cannot be separated from a shift in citizenship boundaries.

Given the ethnic, gender, class and international¹ hierarchies at work, labor immigration policies in many Asian countries, including South Korea, have been highly exclusionary² when it comes to workers from developing nations. Indeed, Choo declares that these migration regimes are defined by a stark incongruence between the existence of formal rights and the immigrants' ability to exercise said rights. The author situates migrant groups at the "margins of citizenship," where the inequalities embedded in law and policy are revealed and reproduced horizontally among polity members. Therefore, *Decentering Citizenship* delves into the formulation process of state membership which, although premised on equality and inclusiveness, excludes low-skilled and non-ethnic migrants to different extents.

Choo's view on transnational flows of people is congruent with the dual labor market theory, which assumes that demand for labor in developed countries engenders international migration.³ Similarly, she argues that the movement of Filipino workers abroad is motivated by domestic and global forces, namely the home government's labor export policy and the international need for cheap and short-term migrant labor. In addition, *Decentering Citizenship* unveils a new side of transnational migrants: despite their limited opportunities for full integration into the South Korean state, the Filipina migrant women do not consider the Philippines as the home they have to return to either. Therefore, while some of them choose to build a life in South Korea, for many more it is a temporary destination in their continuous pursuit of mobility and security, ideals which are widely associated with Western welfare states.

The importance of recognition and respect when deciding to take part in the cycle of migration is further highlighted by Choo, who points out that legal status does not deter discrimination and disrespect. Moreover, the discourse of human dignity was also widely adopted by South Korean people in their claim-making, although the way in which diverse groups integrate this ideal into migrant activism is influenced by gender and generation. Men who took part in the labor movements between 1960s and 1980s see migrant laborers as the new working class who should be protected against abuses at the workplace. The women who came of age during the same period perceive migrant women as the mothers of the future

1 Choo argues that Filipina migrant women's decision to move to South Korea is based not only on individual circumstances, but also on their understanding of South Korea as superior to the Philippines within the global hierarchy of nations. Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore are perceived as having a similar standing to South Korea, which transformed the four states into countries of destination for many Filipino migrants (22-23).

2 The author observes how the immigration policies of South Korea and other Eastern and South Asian countries have largely discouraged the permanent settlement of migrant workers by enforcing short-term employment systems and denying family reunification requests. At the same time, the South Korean government heavily funds assimilation programs catered to marriage migrants, who are eligible to naturalization.

3 Douglas S. Massey, Joaquin Arango, Graeme Hugo, Ali Kouaouci, Adela Pellegrino, and J. Edward Taylor, "Theories of international migration: A review and appraisal," *Population and development review* 19, no. 3 (1993): 440, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2938462>.

generation of South Koreans and consequently fight against their subordination within the family. Finally, younger activists are seemingly guided by the pursuit of their personal freedom and claim that immigrants should have the right to do the same.

The author also refutes the idea that legal status minimizes the threat of immigration enforcement. In South Korea, racial profiling is a widespread practice which places phenotypically different Filipinos at a higher risk of being detained, regardless of documentation status. In certain instances, the political activism of immigrants, although a statutory right, transforms them into a target of immigration raids and deportation. Choo attributes this paradoxical nature of citizenship to the need to contain the alien population within well-established boundaries by using fear as a method of discipline. Choo's approach seems to build upon two of Calavita's main statements: it is difficult to differentiate between legal and illegal migrants, due to the blurred line that separates the two. Also, inequality is embedded in the national law in order to perpetuate the vulnerability of the migrant community.⁴

The inferiority of the Filipino migrant community, which is predominantly church-based, is not only imposed by state authorities, but is also reinforced by South Korean advocates, who often adopt a paternalistic or maternal attitude towards the migrants. Choo clearly describes the drawbacks and limitations of such approaches, at the same time suggesting a personal bias towards the maternal educators active in both faith-based migrant advocacy organizations and social welfare centers. The author argues that the female educators encourage marriage migrants to capitalize on their entitlements and become involved in migrant advocacy not only at the local level but also at the national one. This in turn begs the question whether formal politics will become available to other categories of migrants, or whether state repression against MTU and illegal workers will continue.

Choo predicates the expansion of labor rights for migrant workers on the long-established relationship between dignified work and citizenship, and the legacy of labor movements in South Korea. While Filipina factory workers benefited from the mobilization of civil society actors in the name of a gender and an ethnically mixed workforce, Filipina camp town hostesses have been excluded from right-claiming based on the disreputable nature of their work. The interplay between morality and state membership, as well as the stigmatization of particular sectors of work, discouraged most migrant advocates from including hostesses within the category of dignified migrant workers. This in turn forced migrant hostesses to choose between maintaining a sense of self-respect and adopting the narrowly-framed victim-of-human-trafficking status proposed by feminist NGOs.

Decentering Citizenship argues that not only hostesses, but also marriage-migrants are constructed as victims of human rights violations as a basis for political claims. For both groups of women, accepting the rhetoric of victimhood implies giving

4 Kitty Calavita, "Immigration, law, and marginalization in a global economy: Notes from Spain," *Law & Society Review* 32 (1998): 529- 566, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/827756>.

up on moral respectability as a member of the community. Consequently, migrant wives adopted the morally elevated status of mother-citizens as an alternative path towards the expansion of rights. Motherhood is glorified by both church and the state, a reason as to why cross-border marriages probably represent the safest option to full and equal South Korean membership citizenship. Meanwhile, hostesses that reject the downgrading status imposed on prostitutes or victims are left on the margins of citizenship.

One aspect notably absent in Choo's study is the religious discourse of faith-based migrant advocacy work. Indeed, the author mentions in a note that she has developed the topic in a previous study, hence its omission in the book. However, a reiteration of her results would have benefited the analysis by offering a complete image of the narrative employed by pastors and staff members. Given that Protestants and Catholics are the two denominations most involved in migrant advocacy, migration scholars such as Joon K. Kim and Denis Kim emphasize the universalistic character of Christianity as one of the main drivers behind migrant support and activism. The migrant workers' issues have been therefore situated within the biblical message of equal treatment, humanitarian assistance and selflessness.⁵ Moreover, Joon K. Kim observes⁶ that the purpose behind the programs launched by the conservative churches was to transform migrant workers into missionaries that would spread the word of God back in their home countries. This would explain why churches are eager to offer language courses, services of worship, and other specialization classes even to non-religious foreigners.⁷ Subsequently, just by focusing on secular factors, namely the legacy of church participation in the domestic labor movements, an important dimension of faith-based migrant advocacy is overlooked.

The book could have also offered a more balanced view on advocates' motivation for participating in migrant advocacy by providing other examples besides an altruistic desire to help. Choo primarily argues that the rationale behind migrant activism is the advocates' sense of duty to protect South Korea by helping immigrants integrate into the host society and to fight for the respect of human dignity.⁸ In turn, this would suggest that pro-immigrant organizations have been created in order to influence state policy. However, there are scholars that suggest the contrary is also possible. Denis Kim presents the criticism of two NGO representatives against faith-based organizations that took part in the labor movement in the 1970s and 1980s. They assert that their commitment to immigrant rights is motivated by the need

5 Denis Kim, "Catalysers in the promotion of migrants' rights: Church-based NGOs in South Korea," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 37, no. 10 (2011): 1649-1667. DOI: 10.1080/1369183X.2011.613336.

6 Joon K. Kim, "The politics of culture in multicultural Korea," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 37, no. 10 (2011): 1583-1604., DOI: 10.1080/1369183X.2011.613333.

7 Ibid, 1589.

8 While this statement might seem to contradict my previous point, in my understanding the concepts of "duty" and "human dignity" Choo uses are not based in religion, but rather in the global human rights discourse.

to find new targets for advocacy, after the democratization movement weakened the position of *minjung* churches.⁹ Nora Hui-Jung Kim adopts a similar stance by claiming that the multicultural boom might have been engendered by the migrant incorporation programs launched by the Korean government. She recounts how the prospect of government funding led to the creation of several migrant advocacy organizations, while already existing NGOs changed their name and even structure in order to accommodate the needs of their new multicultural targets.¹⁰

Such an addition would not have undermined the contributions made by the activists in expanding the social and civil rights of immigrants. On the contrary, it might have strengthened the sense of responsibility Choo's subjects have expressed by contrasting it with the selfish pursuit of individual financial gain. Moreover, linking self-serving migrant advocacy with the drawbacks of NGO professionalization, another undeveloped discussion point, would have facilitated further inquiries into several issues: why certain migrants groups are preferred as subjects over others and what could be the logic behind creating hierarchies within the migrant population? Given that state sponsorship represents not only a means of survival, but also proof of official recognition for NGOs, financial aid might heavily influence the choice of its advocacy targets. Therefore, the tendency to focus on targets that attract the most grants and whose needs are easier to satisfy often leads to the concentration of programs within one segment of the population. At the same time, the groups excluded by the state are also ignored by civil society organizations.

Despite a few shortcomings, *Decentering Citizenship* is still an exemplary account of the dynamics of citizenship in South Korea, proposing a model in which rights are not only formulated within a top-down relation between the state and the citizen, subject, but they are also created within day-to-day interactions between the members of a moral community. To reiterate, one of the merits of Choo's study is its ethnographic approach, which provides valuable insight into a community and their advocates that had been previously limited in the literature. Indeed, taking into consideration the premise of this book, the immersion of the researcher into the migrant community seems vital for the authenticity of the results. By looking at three overlapping groups of Filipina migrant workers, the author has shown that from a moral and right-entitlement point of view, they are notably different. Therefore, *Decentering Citizenship* is a representative work of the feminization of migration which, although not as significant in South Korea,¹¹ is relevant to the global circuit of migration. As it stands, Choo's research could help illuminate what type of social remittances Filipina migrants bring or send back to their home country and their

9 Denis Kim, "Catalysers in the promotion of migrants' rights: Church-based NGOs in South Korea," 1657-1658.

10 Nora Hui-Jung Kim, "Multiculturalism and the politics of belonging: the puzzle of multiculturalism in South Korea," *Citizenship studies* 16, no. 1 (2012): 105,108. DOI: 10.1080/13621025.2012.651406.

11 Hye-Kyung Lee, "Gender, migration and civil activism in South Korea," *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal* 12, no. 1-2 (2003): 127-153, DOI: 10.1177/011719680301200106.

effects on the local communities. Moreover, this exploratory data could represent the starting point for future studies focusing on the identity and integration of second-generation Filipino migrants residing abroad. Should more background information be given on the issues mentioned above, the present work could also serve as a fundamental academic resource for both undergraduate and graduate students interested in migration studies.