The Politics of Conditional Citizenship in South Korea: An Analysis of the Print Media

David Hundt, Jessica Walton and Soo Jung Elisha Lee

School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Deakin University, Australia; Alfred Deakin Institute, Deakin University, Australia

ABSTRACT
This article shows how the meaning of citizenship has changed in South Korea since the partial emergence of a multicultural society in the past two decades. It does so by analysing how newspaper editorials have discussed multiculturalism, which is a multifaceted concept but one which weighs heavily on notions of citizenship. There is often a consensus about citizenship in mono-ethnic and homogeneous societies, even if it is not always clearly articulated or expressed. Societal and demographic change, however, require such societies to change or at least revisit notions of citizenship. The article shows that the print media places the onus on migrants to adapt to society, but also on Koreans to accept the “inevitable reality” of multiculturalism. Editorials advocate a form of conditional citizenship, whereby migrants are incorporated into society without disrupting current notions of what it means to be a South Korean.

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The Republic of Korea (South Korea) has long described itself as a “homogenous and united country” or “unitary race” (danil minjok gukka), so citizenship has been defined in terms of bloodlines rather than birthplace (Choi 2014, 97; Shin 2006, 18). This mindset persists in some quarters, but South Korean attitudes towards citizenship have changed in recent decades. Most respondents in a 2010 survey agreed that “South Korea must become a multicultural and multiethnic society instead of a united and homogenous state” (Joongang Sunday, March 23, 2014). In 2013, meanwhile, the Asan Institute detected a shift from a “blood-based” definition of citizenship, towards one based on “cultural competencies” such as knowledge of the Korean language and history (J Kim 2014, 99). This attitudinal shift is also evident in the constitution of South Korean society. The number of foreign residents was 2.18 million in 2017. The foreign population equated to 4.2% of South Korea’s total, as opposed to just 3.1% in 2013 (KIS Statistics 2018, 38).

Residency, however, does not lead automatically to citizenship. Of the 227,000 people who have attained South Korean citizenship since 1948, about three-quarters have done so through marriage. In 2017, two-thirds of these “marriage migrants” were from China and Vietnam, with China being the single-biggest source (37.1%). A significant portion of
Chinese migrants were ethnic Korean (Chosunjeok). The rate of increase in marriage migrants has slowed since 2014, after the introduction of compulsory information programmes for international marriages (KIS Statistics 2018, 51, 58–59). A second path to citizenship is for overseas Koreans to “recover” their citizenship. Most of these “new” citizens are in their 60s and 70s and have lived most of their lives in developed societies such as the USA (KIS Statistics 2018, 58). North Korean refugees, meanwhile, are recognised under the constitution as citizens. In June 2018 about 31,800 refugees had resettled in South Korea and qualified for citizenship (Ministry of Unification 2018).

An increasing level of ethnic diversity is thus evident in South Korea as a society, but not necessarily as a political community. That is, South Korea’s willingness to host people of different ethnicities has been stronger than its willingness to accept non-Koreans as citizens. Public opinion polls reveal that most South Koreans – predominantly the young and those with higher levels of education – favour easing restrictions on foreign workers. They are comfortable with living around foreigners and accept that non-ethnic Koreans can qualify for citizenship (Hundt 2016, 487). A consistent counter-trend, however, has been that older people and those with lower levels of education are opposed to or uncomfortable with, the changes that immigration necessitates (see Hundt 2016, 500).

To detect shifts in societal attitudes towards citizenship in South Korea, this article focuses on media reports, and specifically on editorials in the print media. It is argued that media analysis enables a better understanding of society-wide attitudes on issues such as immigration and citizenship. Media reports, taken collectively, can reveal a “real-time” reaction to events in a way that academic articles and even statements by governments and officials cannot. Media reports are “artifacts of social discourses....[as they] can provide important clues to the trends and the contexts of collective perspectives” on social issues (Park 2014, 1567–1568). The media can reflect public opinion, and also shape it. The media has the ability to “frame” certain issues through “its interpretation of events [which] can influence the way an issue is discussed and evaluated” (Dalton and Rama 2016, 475).

The South Korean print media, as will be illustrated below, has debated how the country should manage a more ethnically and culturally diverse society. Between 1998 and 2016, almost 59,000 articles made some reference to “multiculturalism” (damunhwa). More than 90% of these articles were published between 2009 and 2016. The main argument made is that the print media advocated a change in public attitudes towards multiculturalism and citizenship. Newspapers did so by normalising the notion of a “multicultural society” in South Korea and by claiming that increasing diversity was “inevitable.” It will be argued that the print media advocated conditional acceptance of multiculturalism, and thus the promise of conditional citizenship for non-ethnic Koreans. According to the print media, the costs of adjusting to multiculturalism were low, because it was presumed that the new citizens would assimilate and thus, would be consistent with South Korea’s national interests. The media thus expected multiculturalism to enhance South Korea’s national standing without fundamentally challenging its notion of citizenship.

**Multiculturalism, Citizenship and the Media**

The concept of citizenship forms part of broader debates about multiculturalism. Itself a multifaceted concept, multiculturalism can refer to, *inter alia*: how governments use
policy measures to cater to the needs of new citizens; how societies think of themselves; the degree to which ethnic diversity can be reconciled with national identity; and the actual constitution of a given society, including its degree of ethnic and racial diversity (Mansouri 2010). In this article, we are mainly interested in multiculturalism as an idea about nation building and how it affects notions of national identity and citizenship.

Citizenship is often defined in terms of either political and civic values, or ethnicity and bloodlines. It results from negotiation between citizens and would-be citizens about what it means to be a member of the body politic (Choo 2016, 5). Values-based criteria are often associated with the liberal tradition, and criteria based on genealogy are common in non-liberal or communitarian societies. Each society, however, arrives at an understanding of what it means to be a citizen in its own way. The negotiations between citizens do not necessarily take place on an equitable basis, and much depends on the reception offered by the host society to new and would-be citizens (Bloemraad 2006, 19; Bloemraad, Korteweg, and Yurdakul 2008, 156; Choo 2016, 5).

A liberal conception of citizenship is horizontal, in that all members of the political community are equal, regardless of gender, race, class or creed. There is thus sufficient space for new citizens to preserve their cultural practices within the host society. This is what Turner (2001, 71) describes as a “thin” or universalist notion of citizenship and a prominent example of a society that practices it is France (see Brubaker 1998, 1–2). The communitarian notion of citizenship, meanwhile, is “thick.” It emphasises cultural similarity and collective sentiments, and prioritises ethnicity, language and race. This conception of citizenship is vertical or hierarchical, in that new citizens have to “earn” the rights that other citizens enjoy by dint of birth right (Seol and Skrentny 2009, 149–151). It has been the basis of citizenship in societies such as Germany (Brubaker 1998, 1–3).

South Korean citizenship, similarly, is defined in terms of bloodlines rather than birthplace (Chung 2010, 651; Im and Kim 2014, 14; Lee 2012, 87–88). It has been difficult for non-ethnic Koreans to attain citizenship (N. Kim 2012, 112–114; N.-K. Kim 2014, 102–103; Shim 2013, 7–12), or to enjoy all the rights normally associated with citizenship, should it be granted (Watson 2010, 342). Some segments of society oppose the notion of citizenship being extended to non-ethnic Koreans under any circumstances (Yi and Jung 2015, 987). Immigration policy has prioritised “diaspora management” (Lee 2010, 234–240), and the inflow of foreign workers to fill short-term vacancies in the labour force (Kong, Yoon, and Yu 2010, 264–267), rather than the incorporation of non-ethnic Koreans as citizens. South Korea’s “state-led” multiculturalism has thus focused on addressing economic imperatives and has put the onus on newcomers to assimilate smoothly and quickly if the possibility of citizenship presents itself (Chung 2010, 651).

Previous studies of multiculturalism in South Korea indicate that the media is sympathetic to the plight of migrants. In online discussions about ethnic affairs, the attitudes towards migrants differ quite markedly between “media professionals” and “non-elite” netizens (Yi and Jung 2015, 987). The media has tended to depict immigrants as “victims” who are vulnerable to abuse and discrimination (Park 2014, 1573–1574). It has not, however, attempted to advocate for policy change (S. Kim 2012, 663–668). Instead, civil society organisations such as some trade unions and churches, as well as migrants themselves, have addressed issues such as the difficulty
non-Korean migrants face in seeking to attain citizenship (N. Kim 2012, 112–114). A prominent example was the launch of Migrant Workers’ Television in 2006, which seeks to cater to the needs and interests of migrants and new citizens in South Korea and also seeks to create links between migrants and South Koreans (Lee 2013, 2613–2615; Prey 2011, 114–117).

Another group of studies argues that the coverage devoted to migrants in the media is quite conformist. Television news reports, for instance, tend to reflect the government’s position on multiculturalism (Shim 2013, 5). Representations of multiculturalism on television are intended to reduce Koreans’ anxieties about the increasing diversity of their society (Ahn 2013, especially Chapter 5). In other words, the consensus is that multiculturalism should not fundamentally change society or pose a threat to its integrity. This is not a consensus that migrants themselves see as desirable or inviting (N. Kim 2012, 108–112).

According to Ahn (2012), an important shift took place in the media’s reporting about multiculturalism in about 2006. Coverage began to shift from merely “informative to analytical and normative,” which discursively created a “construction of reality called ‘multicultural society’” (Ahn 2012, 103). In other words, the media began to move beyond simply reporting on an emerging phenomenon – the reality that South Korean society was becoming more diverse – and began to explore how these changes were affecting society and what should be done in response.

Ahn’s (2012) study is the most definitive to date on media debates about multiculturalism in South Korea. This article builds on Ahn’s work in two ways. First, we update the analysis, to account for South Korea’s experience with multiculturalism until the end of 2016. We thereby capture the most recent debates in the print media about multiculturalism, and especially how it relates to citizenship. Second, we identify diversity between and within segments of the print media. Rather than treating the media as an undifferentiated whole, we seek to identify and explore diversity between different parts of the print media.

In conducting this study, the focus is on editorials, which are the most authoritative articles that newspapers publish. More so than other types of articles, editorials deliver the considered judgement of a newspaper’s editors and/or owners. For Bonyadi (2010, 324), “editorials have an important role in shaping public opinion...[T]hey try to interpret the news articles while implicitly constructing the reality from a particular point of view for readers.” Editorials play a crucial “agenda setting” role in public life, even at a time that print circulation is seemingly in terminal decline. They engage in a “search for good policy with the ultimate goal being social cohesion” (Squires 2011, 31, emphasis added). Their function goes beyond the shaping of public opinion and extends to the realm of policymaking. Editorials address politicians, not the “common reader” and can offer prescriptions for remedying pressing social problems (van Dijk 1992, 244).

Data and Method

We used the BIG KINDS (Korea Integrated Newspaper Database System) archive, which aggregates news items from the South Korean print media, to locate news articles that mentioned “multiculturalism” (damunhwa). BIG KINDS collates articles
published in 38 newspapers, ranging from national dailies to local and regional publications. We excluded from the search two English-language newspapers, the Korea Herald and the Korea Times, and instead treated the vernacular newspapers as a self-contained corpus.

Some national newspapers, however, were not searchable through BIG KINDS. So we used the online archives of the Chosun Ilbo, Joongang Ilbo and Donga Ilbo to search for relevant articles. For the Chosun Ilbo and Joongang Ilbo, we could search only for editorials, but the Donga Ilbo did not offer this capacity. Furthermore, Donga Ilbo’s archive only dated back 12 months. To ensure comparability across time and within the coverage of editorials, we omitted Donga Ilbo from both the initial search for references to multiculturalism and for the narrower focus on editorials. For the initial search of newspaper articles that mentioned multiculturalism, we included all 38 newspapers available in BIG KINDS as well as separate searches for the Joongang Ilbo and Chosun Ilbo. For the editorial analysis, however, we focused on editorials from nine major newspapers for the period 1998–2016: the Seoul Shinmun, Segye Ilbo, Hankuk Ilbo, Hankyoreh Shinmun, Kukmin Ilbo, Munhwa Ilbo, Kyunghyang Shinmun, Joongang Ilbo and Chosun Ilbo. This is because the regional newspapers’ databases did not allow us to restrict our search to editorials.

The initial upsurge in references to multiculturalism coincided with the visit to South Korea in 2006 by American athlete Hines Ward, a bi-racial African and Korean. Ward’s celebrity status – he won the “most-valuable player” award in the Pittsburgh Steelers’ Super Bowl victory of 2006 – ensured that his visit attracted substantial media attention (see, for example, Hankuk Ilbo 2006, Kyunghyang Shinmun 2006b, Segye Ilbo 2010c). Another important event in 2006 was the launch of the first “pseudo-official policy” related to multiculturalism (Lie 2014, 19). From fewer than 400 articles in 2006, the annual total increased sharply to more than 2,500 in 2008 and peaked at 8,450 in 2013. Among these articles, we found a total of 354 editorials that referred to multiculturalism. If measured by aggregate references in editorials, interest in multiculturalism peaked at 59 in 2010 (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Editorials referring to “multiculturalism” (2005–2016)
References to multiculturalism increased rapidly from 2009 to 2010, which coincided with debates in South Korea about the National Citizenship Law and the possible introduction of dual citizenship. The law raised the possibility of overseas Koreans regaining citizenship and of new arrivals attaining it (see Segye Ilbo 2009, Seoul Shinmun 2009). Thereafter, references declined steadily, to the extent that there were only 15 editorials that referred to multiculturalism in 2013. References to multiculturalism revived in 2015 and 2016 but did not return to the levels of earlier in the decade. The peak around 2015 in Figure 1 is mainly attributable to a spate of media reports about the tenth anniversary of the official launch of multiculturalism policy (Kukmin Ilbo 2016).

We screened the 354 editorials for relevance. First, editorials needed to primarily focus on multiculturalism, rather than simply mention it incidentally. In particular, articles needed to include sufficient coverage of how multiculturalism affected notions of citizenship. For instance, we omitted editorials that mentioned multiculturalism in the context of whether or not the children of international marriages should be one of the demographic groups that qualify for preferential access to university admission (for example, Hankuk Ilbo 2007a). Second, the editorials needed to discuss multiculturalism and citizenship in a South Korean context. Therefore, we omitted editorials that discussed the success and/or failure of multiculturalism in societies such as France and Australia such as in Kukmin Ilbo (2005). This screening process reduced the corpus to 154 editorials.

Korean media organisations can be categorised on a left–right spectrum (Choi 2010; Jo and Kim 2004; Kim 2001). Each newspaper appeals to different groups of readers, and adopts different positions on public policy issues, including immigration and multiculturalism. Of the 154 editorials in our corpus, 27 (or 17%) appeared in left-leaning newspapers (18 in the Kyunghyang Shinmun and nine in the Hankyoreh Shinmun). By contrast, 70 editorials (45%) were drawn from conservative or right-leaning newspapers (Chosun Ilbo, Munhwa Ilbo, Joongang Ilbo, and Segye Ilbo). Chosun Ilbo (14) and Joongang Ilbo (29) accounted for more than half of this group of editorials. The remaining 57 editorials (37%) appeared in centrist/moderate newspapers (Kukmin Ilbo, Seoul Shinmun and Hankuk Ilbo). Seoul Shinmun (21) accounted for the largest share of this group of editorials.

Attitudes towards issues such as citizenship and multiculturalism do not always map neatly on to political leanings (Davidson 1997, 5). Analysing newspapers along ideological lines, however, has the advantage of shedding light on a full spectrum of views in the media. It allows us to identify the contributions to the debate made by left-leaning and centrist newspapers, as well as the dominant conservative ones. Dividing newspapers into coherent groups also allows us to detect variation within and between groups.

To analyse the language used in editorials, we entered full-text transcripts into the software programme NVivo. The full-text articles were thematically coded line-by-line to identify how the articles discussed citizenship. The advantage of using this constructivist grounded approach is that rather than imposing a priori themes to analyse the data, we used inductive coding to capture key themes that emerged from the data (see Charmaz 2014, 51).
The main debates that emerged from the data were: (i) whether the editorials identified multiculturalism and citizenship with marriage migrants, the children of marriage migrants, migrant labourers, or migrants accused of committing crimes; (ii) the attitudes of editorials towards whether or not multiculturalism and citizenship should be treated as human rights issues; and (iii) whether the onus of social harmony was on migrants themselves, circumscribed to the government, or extended to the non-migrant Korean public. These debates, in turn, turned on issues such as: the perceived inevitability of increasing cultural diversity in South Korea, criticism of the government’s approach towards immigration policy, social problems related to marriage migration, advocacy for multicultural family-support services, and criticism of negative public attitudes towards multiculturalism and citizenship. We analysed the tone of editorials, and phrases and words that indicated particular emotions, to determine the perceived desirability of multiculturalism and the level of (dis)satisfaction with immigration policy. To comparatively analyse themes across the editorials, we drew on Ahn’s (2012) tripartite “informative/analytical/normative” schema to identify the intention and nuances of editorials. By categorising articles by outlets and years, the authors were able to, at the completion of the coding process, identify patterns and trends in narratives about citizenship, and how newspapers advocated for change on the part of South Korean society in respect to citizenship.

Across the conservative, centrist and left-leaning newspapers, there was consensus about the inadequacy of the government’s approach towards immigration policy and the need to support marriage migrants and children of international marriages through language and cultural education. Only ten editorials took a social justice approach to issues facing migrants in terms of addressing systemic discrimination or structural barriers to inclusion. These editorials (seven in left-leaning outlets) focused on migrant workers in relation to discrimination and human rights (see Hankyoreh Shinmun 2008, 2011a). This confirms the tendency for multiculturalism to be interpreted as a state-led drive to increase economic competitiveness (N.-K. Kim 2014, 104; Watson 2010, 338). Most editorials that discussed issues of discrimination or barriers to social inclusion centred on individual and interpersonal levels such as the need for attitudinal change, positive interactions between non-migrant Koreans and migrants, and educational support for migrants and their children (see Kukmin Ilbo 2013, Kyunghyang Shinmun 2006a, Segye Ilbo 2010c).

To varying degrees, therefore, we detected a strong interest in how societal and demographic change was affecting notions of citizenship in South Korea. The next three sections review how each set of editorials discussed citizenship, and the terms in which they discussed it.

**Leftist Editorials: A Broad Understanding of Citizenship**

The 17% of editorials that appeared in left-leaning newspapers generally discussed citizenship according to two main approaches: a human-rights approach to migrant issues; and a whole-of-society approach towards adapting to multiculturalism. Left-leaning editorials made specific recommendations for how South Korea should change to accommodate new citizens. As such, the coverage of these editorials went beyond being merely informative and was strongly analytical and normative.
Some of these editorials drew on human rights discourse (such as strengthening the rights of migrant workers and marriage migrants) to criticise existing policy efforts to help new citizens and migrants adjust to life in South Korea. Hankyoreh Shinmun (2011b), for instance, argued in July 2011 that “[The government] need not only focus on hosting foreigners for economic benefits but must prioritise policies for social and cultural cohesion.” In doing so they made the case that citizenship extends beyond merely the citizens of a given society: it encompasses anyone who is a resident of that society. So these editorials criticised policymakers for not enacting sufficient regulations to protect both migrant workers (who were not citizens) and marriage migrants (who did hold South Korean citizenship). They argued that immigration policy was not well-suited to the needs of migrant workers because, for example, it was not able to prevent the abuse of foreign workers, or their unequal treatment in the workplace (Hankyoreh Shinmun 2008, 2011a). Left-leaning editorials therefore argued that the problems that specifically affected migrant workers needed to be understood in a broader human-rights framework. These problems were thus relevant to everyone who lived in South Korea, regardless of citizenship status. Strengthening migrants’ rights would create a more mature multicultural society, which would accommodate a more diverse citizenry (Hankyoreh Shinmun 2011a).

Another group of editorials in left-leaning newspapers argued that South Korea needed to take a “whole-of-society” approach to the changes that accompanied immigration. In this view, it was not simply a matter of addressing the problems faced by migrants, including new citizens. South Koreans would also need to change. When immigration policy was first being developed, these newspapers stressed the “need for multicultural education policy for children of international marriages” (see Kyunghyang Shinmun 2006a). From around 2010, the twofold rise of reported cases of discrimination to the South Korean National Human Rights Commission (Hankyoreh Shinmun 2011b) and media coverage of the homicide of a Vietnamese marriage migrant by her South Korean husband (Kyunghyang Shinmun 2010), marked a shift among left-leaning editorials. They began to focus on the need to educate South Koreans about how to adapt to a more racially, ethnically and culturally diverse society. The onus, these editorials argued, was not solely on migrants to adapt. For example, Hankyoreh Shinmun (2011b) argued that “South Korea’s education system needs to be expanded to include how to co-exist in a multicultural society.” This was a departure from an earlier focus on language and cultural education to assist marriage migrants and their children as a “solution” to the difficulties migrants faced in everyday life.3

Another feature of left-leaning editorials was that from around 2012 and particularly around 2014, they began to openly critique the stigma associated with the term multiculturalism. In doing so, they offered a trenchant critique of South Korea’s notion of citizenship too. According to the Kyunghyang Shinmun (2014a, 2014b), the stigma attached to multiculturalism stemmed from institutionalised racism and culturally embedded discrimination. Editorials criticised South Koreans for seeing migrants in an “us-and-them” dichotomy and for overlooking the possibility for non-ethnic Koreans to become citizens. This type of critique represented a departure from most editorials published between 2005 and 2011, which had simply noted that the public’s attitudes towards migrants needed to change. Left-leaning newspapers began to draw attention to the underlying structural hierarchies that shaped public attitudes (Lee
2017). Previously, critiques of the racist attitudes towards migrants had focused mainly on South Korea’s mono-ethnic notion of citizenship, based on “pure blood” (sunhyeol minjok). Left-leaning newspapers criticised the structural hierarchies that such a mindset reinforces. This shift in 2014 coincided with a United Nations (UN) report on discrimination and xenophobia in South Korea and a subsequent recommendation by a UN representative that South Korea enact a comprehensive anti-discrimination law (OHCHR 2014).

As noted above, the left-leaning editorials interpreted the relationship between multiculturalism and citizenship in broad terms. These editorials were more than simply informative and analytical. They reported instances of hardship and abuse among migrants, and also made normative judgements about how South Korean society was responding to multiculturalism, and how its approach to citizenship needed to change. As we argue below, this distinguished the left-leaning editorials from their rightist and centrist counterparts.

**Centrist Newspapers: Fostering Productive Citizens**

In centrist editorials, the range of themes was relatively more diverse than in the left-leaning newspapers. These editorials contained more conservative views on how citizenship could contribute to nation-building and more left-leaning views on measures to support migrants. Like left-leaning editorials, centrist ones advocated for change in stance on citizenship, but they did so with the goal of furthering national interests.

In a general sense, centrist editorials supported changes in immigration policy that would accommodate the needs of migrants. Between 2005 and 2010, these editorials criticised the insufficient co-ordination among and between ministries that dealt with migrants (see Seoul Shinmun 2005, 2010). They also highlighted the problems that marriage migrants and their children faced because of ineffective policy measures. In highlighting social problems, however, these editorials adopted a conservative perspective. They argued that immigration policy needed to deliver national benefits, through the production of good citizens, rather than be primarily concerned with addressing the issues that migrants faced. One of the attractions of migrants, they noted, was their potential to address South Korea’s low birth rate. The Hankuk Ilbo (2007b), for instance, advocated an assimilationist approach by lauding efforts to “Koreanise” marriage migrants and make them “South Korean daughters-in-law.” The editorial suggested that this approach could help to reduce the strains on international marriages.

Centrist newspapers agreed that there should be government support for migrants, but also argued that funds were not well spent. They argued that spending on programmes that cater to new citizens should be carefully targeted. The priority for future spending needed to be on services to “multicultural families,” especially the children of marriages between South Korean citizens and marriage migrants (Kukmin Ilbo 2013). These editorials claimed that a priority should be improving the quality of education available to the children of international marriages, given the importance of education to social mobility and success. Some, like Kukmin Ilbo (2012a) and Seoul Shinmun (2011), however, also criticised the high level of support provided to multicultural families, and claimed that it could create a form of “reverse discrimination”
(yeokchabyeol) that would disadvantage non-migrant Korean families. This could have the unintended consequence of favouring some (new) citizens over others: “The more the government distributes undistinguished privileges to the multicultural community, the more backlash it causes regarding reverse discrimination toward native people” (Seoul Shinmun 2011).

In seeking a rationale for accepting social and demographic change, and thus a rethinking of existing notions of citizenship, centrist papers emphasised the “inevitability” (bulgapiham) of multiculturalism. They cited globalisation as the main reason for change. The growing number of multicultural families, they claimed, was an “inevitable trend in a global era” (Seoul Shinmun 2008). In a similar way to those in right- and left-leaning papers, centrist editorials argued that South Koreans needed to adjust their mindset about migrants, and about what it meant to be a Korean. Given the inevitability of a more diverse society, the editorials argued that the notion of a “homogenous race” was outdated and that perceptions of self and other remained rooted in the past. As a solution, the Hankuk Ilbo (2011) suggested, immigration should be addressed through a framework of equal rights rather than as a “special interest” issue. “At the very least,” it argued, “there needs to be systemic institutional change so that migrants can enjoy the same rights and privileges as South Korean citizens to be able to live a full life.”

Centrist editorials noted that South Koreans had mixed perceptions of migrants. Some South Koreans were quite negative about immigration, and the growth of this sentiment was not conducive to creating a “good society.” Seoul Shinmun (2010) criticised textbooks which depicted migrants in negative terms. This editorial argued that developing a sense of “mono-ethnic pride” in South Korean students was counter-productive to promoting acceptance of a multicultural society. Due to the inevitability of a multicultural South Korea and the benefits that migrants provide to society, centrist editorials recommended that the government undertake public education campaigns. The goal should be to ensure that South Koreans were aware of the difficulties that migrants face in their new society and to reduce discrimination. Seoul Shinmun (2016) argued that public education would be required to teach acceptance of migrants because they were “good” for society. These editorials contended that migrants should be accepted because of the economic benefits they bring, and consequently South Koreans should make them feel included in society as productive citizens.

Some centrist editorials emphasised that migrants were beginning to exercise a degree of political power. Hankuk Ilbo (2010) argued that migrants would represent about 5% of the population by 2050 and thus be “an important component of South Korean society.” So they were crucial to South Korea’s prospects for maintaining social cohesion and enhancing national competitiveness. By stressing the inevitability of immigration, and the need to include migrants in decision-making processes, some centrist editorials highlighted examples of political activism involving new citizens. For example, Seoul Shinmun (2011) related the story of an Uzbek woman who was discriminated against after being refused entry to a bathhouse. The woman reportedly sued the business to highlight this incident of racial discrimination and to protect the interests of her child and future generations of biracial children. Other editorials referred to the historical significance of the appointment of Jasmin Lee, a Filipina who married a South Korean, as the first non-ethnic Korean member of the National
Assembly (see Kukmin Ilbo 2013). Another migrant was appointed to the board of the Seongbuk District Council, and this was also depicted as an event of historical significance (Kukmin Ilbo 2012b).

As this analysis demonstrates, the centrist editorials reflected left-leaning sentiments that the onus needed to be on changing the general public’s attitudes towards acceptance of citizenship in a multicultural society because it was inevitable. These editorials, however, also aligned with a more right-leaning justification by advocating change because it would be economically beneficial. Coverage in centrist editorials went beyond being merely informative. It was strongly analytical, and even had some normative elements, in that it advocated for a new approach to citizenship. Centrist editorials argued that multiculturalism could not be controlled and therefore had to be accepted, and treated the changing nature of citizenship as a fait accompli rather than a principled and conscious choice for South Koreans. In this sense, the centrist newspapers’ rationale for rethinking citizenship was quite distinct from that in left-leaning ones.

Rightist Editorials: New Citizens and National Competitiveness

In attitudes towards citizenship and multiculturalism, there were some parallels between right-leaning editorials and centrist and left-leaning ones. Right-leaning newspapers focused on the need to change public attitudes from a “one blood” mentality to a global outlook characterised by greater acceptance of people from different racial, ethnic and cultural backgrounds (see Segye Ilbo 2010b). Joongang Ilbo (2008, 2014, 2015), meanwhile, argued that multiculturalism should be perceived from a human rights perspective, particularly in regard to children or pregnant mothers, regardless of their citizenship status, abandoned children of international marriages, and in relation to the unlawful search and detention of illegal migrants.

In a similar way to the centrist and left-leaning newspapers, right-leaning editorials conceded that multiculturalism was good for society (see Munhwa Ilbo 2012). Conservative newspapers, however, shared the concerns expressed by centrist editorials about the costs and management of immigration policy. They claimed that the services provided to international families were straining the welfare budget, and that this was unsustainable and unaffordable. Segye Ilbo, for instance, argued in September 2010 that “National debt has increased by 40 trillion Won over the previous fiscal year. The cause of surging debt is due to not only the government’s new projects but endless spending on welfare policy development and welfare benefits” (Segye Ilbo 2010a). Compared with the left-leaning and centrist newspapers, conservative editorials also placed a stronger emphasis on the need for immigration to be tied explicitly to an increase in national competitiveness. Right-leaning editorials argued in favour of accepting a multicultural society, and the resultant changes to citizenship, primarily claiming doing so would enhance South Korea’s national competitiveness and burnish its international reputation.

For example, Munhwa Ilbo (2008) argued that immigration policy should enhance national competitiveness by providing pathways for foreigners to contribute to society (see also Chosun Ilbo 2011). In order to do so, these editorials argued, migrants would need to become South Korean citizens. In relation to the debate around the National
Citizenship Act and dual nationality, Segye Ilbo (2009) cited a report from the Ministry of Justice that the introduction of dual nationality would help to address South Korea’s declining birth rate. It argued that despite misgivings, dual nationality was critical for South Korea’s future and further delay could compromise national interests (see also Joongang Ilbo 2009). Segye Ilbo (2013) referred to a report from the IOM Migration Research and Training Centre in South Korea, which claimed that “by 2030, South Korea will need 3 million immigrants.” Consequently, the editorial argued, “stubbornly adhering to an ideology of ‘pure blood’ (sunhyeol juui) hinders the nation from growing into a ‘global South Korea’” (see also Chosun Ilbo 2013). It was thus in the national interest for South Koreans to rethink citizenship.

At the same time, there was recognition that South Korea had to improve the way it treated its newest citizens. The right-leaning papers highlighted the growth of anti-migrant sentiment, and deplored the domestic violence committed by South Korean husbands against migrant wives. Segye Ilbo (2013) cited a survey that found that more than 40% of marriage migrants or naturalised South Koreans “had suffered discrimination or been ignored because they were foreigners.” Right-leaning editorials, however, diverged from their left-leaning counterparts in their rationale for opposing discrimination and marital violence. These editorials tended to focus on how migration and public attitudes impacted on South Korea’s national interests, rather than seeing it as primarily a human rights issue. For example, Chosun Ilbo (2007) argued that domestic violence against Southeast Asian migrant wives could damage South Korea’s reputation in their home countries. Domestic violence within international marriages prompted the Cambodian government to re-enforce its 2008 ban on women marrying South Korean men. Similarly, in 2007 the government of Vietnam proposed to screen South Korean men seeking to marry Vietnamese women, and in 2005 the Filipino foreign ministry issued a warning to its women about South Korean men. Joongang Ilbo (2010) argued that marriage migrants and their children could play a diplomatic “bridging role” (gagyo yeokhal) between South Korea and the wives’ countries of origin. These new citizens could help to repair the reputational damage caused by marital violence. Accepting migrants was a form of “civil diplomacy” (minkan oegyo), which could have positive economic impacts. South Korea needed to become a society that “recognises and accepts difference,” and it should support migrants’ “Korean Dream.” This was the only way for South Korea to become a “first-class society” with “first-class citizens” (Segye Ilbo 2016).

Overall, the predominant view of conservative editorials was that rethinking the notion of citizenship was primarily a means of helping South Korea to overcome its ageing and low birth-rate problems (see Segye Ilbo 2011). South Korea could improve its “international competitiveness” through the attraction of skilled migrants on the one hand, and child-bearing women on the other. These editorials acknowledged that discrimination and violence against migrant women was widespread, but that these problems could be addressed through legal reforms and more systematic regulation of immigration. The coverage of multiculturalism, and by extension citizenship, in the conservative media was informative and analytical. It was also normative, but in a narrower sense than in the left-leaning and centrist newspapers. Conservative editorials advocated for particular policy and attitudinal changes in relation to new and would-be
citizens. They did so, however, with South Korea’s national interests in mind, rather than the plight of migrants themselves.

Conclusion: The Emergence of Conditional Citizenship

This article analysed how the South Korean print media discussed multiculturalism in the two decades up to 2016, and how this affected notions of citizenship. When seen from Ahn’s (2012) tripartite schema, the media fulfilled the informative and analytical functions well. Where they differed, we argue, was in the degree to which they advocated for change on the part of South Korean citizens and the government (the normative aspects of their coverage). The strongest normative elements were found in the left-leaning editorials. These articles made the case for change on the part of the public and the government, as well as migrants themselves. Other groups were less convinced about the need for adjustment on the part of South Korea. The centrist and right-leaning newspapers presented multiculturalism as something that would exact relatively few costs because of the economic benefits of migration for addressing social problems like the low birth-rate and ageing workforce, but only if ministries were more efficient in managing welfare budgets. These two sets of editorials, however, reached a common conclusion via quite different logics. For conservative newspapers, multiculturalism was a process that the state can and should control, and therefore can accept if it is deemed to be in the national interest. For centrist papers, the process was somewhat outside the control of the state, but its effects were not detrimental to society, so it was something that should be embraced. Across the entire suite of editorials, however, the dominant view was that the societal and demographic changes caused by multiculturalism could be dealt with by extending a form of conditional citizenship to non-ethnic Korean migrants.

This article has illustrated the diversity of opinion within the print media about how notions of citizenship have changed because of the partial emergence of multiculturalism in South Korea. We have thus offered a corrective to those studies that depicted the media as solely supporting the government’s official immigration policy or having little interest in the topic. Instead, we detected a range of views on how citizenship can and should be rethought in South Korean society.

The dominant interpretation of multiculturalism, however, was that it could be adapted to South Korean conditions without fundamentally changing notions of citizenship. In keeping with an assimilationist logic, the centrist and right-leaning editorials tended to form specific criteria for marking the success or failure of multiculturalism. The centrist editorials in particular tended to celebrate and acknowledge the individual achievements of migrants to South Korea, such as Jasmine Lee. The visible rise to the heights of political power of an immigrant was a signal to other would-be citizens that they too could “succeed” if they accepted the laws and customs of their new host society. A different marker of success was the stability of “multicultural families.” These marriages were to be celebrated, since they could demonstrate the potential for non-Koreans to become “one of us.” If successful, the foreign features of non-Korean partners to international marriages (mostly women) would be gradually erased. For brides from other Asian countries, and especially for ethnic Koreans from northern China, it might be possible for the foreignness to become
almost entirely undetectable. In this sense, South Korean-style multiculturalism was truly assimilationist. International marriages, however, also exposed the fragility of South Korea’s multicultural project. The visible failures, especially in the form of violence against migrant women, indicated that there were some serious problems with how multiculturalism was practiced in South Korea.

These benchmarks for success were consistent with the print media’s advocacy of a conditional form of citizenship in South Korea, which is no longer the mono-ethnic society that it was as recently as two decades ago. For the media, citizenship needed to change to reflect social and demographic transitions. Nonetheless, as in other largely homogeneous Asian societies such as Japan, the South Korean media advocated a form of citizenship that has a strong cultural and linguistic basis. In this view, citizenship remains a privilege that the majority grants, not one that minorities can demand.

Notes

1. “Foreign residents” are defined as people who permanently live in South Korea and who require a permit to do so or who have been exempted from a permit. About half of all foreign residents fall into the categories of overseas Koreans, non-skilled workers, guest workers, and people visiting on short-term general purpose visas. Other categories include tourists, international students, and spouses of Korean citizens (KIS Statistics 2018, 42).

2. Conservative newspapers dominate the print media market, and account for about 70% of sales. The “big three” conservative papers (Chosun Ilbo, Joongang Ilbo and Donga Ilbo) account for about 60% of the market, and thus wield substantial influence on public opinion. The circulation of left-leaning and centrist (moderate) newspapers is much smaller. Left-leaning papers such as Hankyoreh Shinmun and Kyunghyang Shinmun account for about 10% of print circulation, and centrist papers such as Seoul Shinmun and Kukmin Ilbo have a combined market share of about 20% (Kim and Kim 2010).

3. A recent study found that children of international marriages who were born and raised in South Korea challenge the idea that assimilation is the “solution” to social acceptance (Walton 2018). Despite their high levels of “assimilation,” the children were not accepted as unconditionally South Korean.

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ORCID

David Hundt http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2019-1927
Jessica Walton http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3876-2994
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