



Between Migrant and Minjung: The Changing Face of Migrant Cultural Activism in Korea

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In 1979, Kim Min Gi and other activists from South Korea's democracy and labour movements clandestinely released the collective radio play "Light of a Factory" (*Kongchang'ui Bulbit*). This work was used to mobilize factory workers into the broad-based *minjung* or people's movements that were challenging the dictatorship. The play documented the lives of Korean workers and the suppression of their desires under the authoritarian regime. The plot centered on female workers in an export factory who decide to organize a union. It was loosely based on real struggles such as the massive strike by female employees at the Y.H. Trading Company in 1978-9; a strike which spilled over into the struggles of the Korean democracy movement. The music was a cacophony of different styles and influences: from US camptown progressive rock, to Western and Korean folk music, to shaman ritual and other traditional styles. Cassettes of the play were rerecorded on home stereos and passed around from hand to hand.



"Money for our backbreaking work... Money that Never Comes."
[Still from Light of a Factory, DVD version, 2006, Hakchon Music]

Fast forward to the current period and similar protest music is being made by migrant workers in South Korea (hereafter Korea). Although these recordings are more likely to be distributed via Youtube, the lyrics deal with strikingly similar themes. The music of *Stop Crackdown*, a bad name for a very good band that was formed in December 2003 by migrant workers from Nepal, Burma, and Indonesia, is one example. The music has elements of Korean prog-rock, such as deep base lines and strong vocalist-led melodies, reminiscent of some of the camptown rock music popular in the late 1970s. In particular, their single 'Payday' highlights the plight of foreign migrant workers in Korea with lyrics that are eerily reminiscent of Kim Min Gi's 'Light of a Factory'. In that play, upon having their wages withheld, the mistreated women workers sing, "Money for our backbreaking work... Money that Never Comes." In *Stop Crackdown*'s 'Payday' video, migrants facing similar conditions belt out a chorus that concludes with the line "Oh Boss, give me my pay." Similarly the space of *Stop Crackdown*'s performances also resonates with the *Minjung* cultural movement,¹ as they are a fixture of contemporary social movement rallies (both the migrant and irregular workers movements and other social struggles), performing at movement events and at a locations (such as Marrioner Park, Myeoungdong Cathedral, etc) of historical

significance to previous democracy movements.



Still from the [Stop Crackdown Video, Payday](#).

Thus, these two musical productions exist in an interesting tension with one another, revealing some of the political transformations Korean society has witnessed over the past 3 decades. When 'Light of a Factory' was secretly being produced, Korea was an industrializing, migrant-sending country: thousands of Korean construction workers were exported to the Middle East, while nurses and miners found a temporary home in Germany. By the late 1980s, Korea had shifted towards becoming a migrant-receiving country. The migrant worker population in South Korea has since increased rapidly. As of February 2009, there were 854,000 registered foreigners in South Korea, or about 1.8% of the population; in addition, there are an estimated 200,000 undocumented workers, roughly one quarter of the total number of migrant workers in the country.² Thus migrant workers are beginning to make up a significant proportion of the working population, and the struggles they experience are not unlike the struggles of past workers' movements. As Young-Min Moon points out, "the public appearance of the foreign workers is an uncanny experience because of the profound sense of irony and complex social memories it brings... those who were fighting for justice have become the citizens and mute onlookers of the host nation, which has become an entangled object of desire and resentment for the exploited (migrant) workers."³

While there may seem to be an apparent cleavage between citizens and migrants, they are temporally, if not spatially, connected through their struggles. The democratic trade union movement of the 1970s and early 80s, which was led by women workers in the garment and textile industries,⁴ helped to gradually achieve more equitable labour rights legislation and recognition of unions. It was in part as a response to these struggles and to labour shortages that Korean employers began to import migrant labour. Migrant workers exploited by employers in turn found a home among Korean activists from the democratic labour struggles and the broader social movements and civil society groups that emerged from the democracy movement.

Migrant workers have drawn on these networks to advocate for greater rights and to contest the distinctions that separate them from ordinary citizens, asserting their equality and solidarity with workers and everyday residents of Korea through a variety of forms of activism. As Kim Dong Choon has argued, civil society (*simin sahoe*) in Korea is largely concerned with societal transformation and thus the priorities of the democracy movement still continue to inform it.⁵ It is not merely a passive sphere of interest group mediation. Thus the fact that groups led by migrant workers, and even undocumented migrant workers, are actively taking part in Korean civil society speaks of the continued vitality of social movements in South Korea, even under the current conservative regime of Lee Myung Bak which has adopted a considerably more repressive attitude toward social movements than previous liberal governments.

Thus, there is a complex historical relationship between migrants and Korean civil society that needs to be further explored. Starting with the cultural activism of one high-profile migrant worker - Minod Moktan - the lead vocalist of *Stop Crackdown* - we highlight some of the contributions made by migrant activists within Korean civil society. At the same time Moktan's arrest and deportation in October 2009 draws attention to some of the injustices that migrants face as a result of Korea's labour migration policies. Before exploring this case, however, it is important to first provide some background on migrant labour history and policy in Korea.

From Trainees to Employees

Migrant workers first started to appear in Korea after the Seoul Olympic Games in 1988. Korea's economy by this time had experienced two decades of rapid industrial growth and pronounced labor shortages were beginning to occur in some sectors, especially small businesses.⁶ As Andrew Eungi Kim points out, the percentage of employees in small firms grew from 18.3 per cent in 1980 to 27.6 per cent in 1995 as large firms subcontracted some of their labor-intensive production to smaller firms. The labor shortages in Korea were thus more serious in these small and mid-sized firms, and in 1991 unfilled manufacturing jobs totaled 222,000.⁷ Migrant workers, mainly hailing from South Asia, South East Asia and China, took over the jobs that young Koreans were shunning – the so-called 3D jobs (Dirty, Dangerous, and Difficult). At first, most worked without papers, making them easy prey for exploitation. The subsequent 'Trainee System'⁸ (ITS) that the government enacted in 1994 did little to improve conditions. Similar to Japan's Foreign Training Internship Program, migrants were paid substantially less than Koreans for the same work, and as they were considered 'trainees' not 'legitimate' workers, they were not protected by labor rights.⁹ By the late 1990s, migrant workers and NGOs had begun to protest the ITS and the government began to revise the system.¹⁰ The Employment Permit System (EPS), which was introduced in 2003, treated migrant workers as workers and granted them further protection under Korea's labour standards law.

In many ways, the EPS had the potential to set a new benchmark for temporary migration policy in Northeast Asia by codifying strong labour rights for migrant workers. However, the EPS had several flaws. Undocumented migrants who had been in Korea already for over five years were denied amnesty under the EPS. There was no path to citizenship or permanent residency for longer-term migrant residents. The three-year time limit on sojourn was also too short for migrants to earn significant money to send home (especially since many migrants have to repay brokerage costs, even though the practice is illegal) and thus likely to encourage overstaying. Migrants were not able to easily change workplaces under the EPS without the permission of their employers, upon whose discretion they were also dependent for yearly renewal of their visas. This both limited migrants' freedom of association and made them less likely to protest workplace conditions.

As Glenda Roberts remarks in the case of Japan, there is no straightforward relationship between labour shortages, on the one hand, and the welcoming of immigration in a transparent, systematic, and coordinated manner. "Even in the face of anxieties concerning labor shortages, the politics of migration in receiving countries prove to be complex indeed, as the state seeks to perfectly regulate and control immigration, and to define those worthy of some kind of regular status, versus those unworthy, illegal, and thereby, criminal."¹¹ Even after the passage of the EPS, undocumented migrants have continued to be the target of continuous immigration crackdowns. Twenty to forty thousand migrants are deported from Korea every year. These 'crackdowns' have resulted in many serious injuries to migrants and, in some cases, even death. As both Amnesty International and Korea's National Human Rights Commissions have documented, the government seems to rely on immigration raids as its primary strategy for tackling irregular migration.

The Korea Immigration Service, sometimes accompanied by the police, has conducted mass crackdowns on workplaces, on the streets, in markets, train stations, and private homes of migrant workers. Amnesty International has documented instances of arbitrary arrests, collective expulsions and violations of law enforcement procedures, including in some cases, excessive use of force, during these raids. The mass crackdowns have also put pressure on detention facilities, contributing to problems of overcrowding, poor living conditions and delayed access to medical treatment.¹²

Migrant activists were not the only ones to complain about problems with the EPS, as many Korean employers were loath to replace well-trained staff after only three years. Thus, though the EPS helped regularize labour migration, allowing for an expansion in the number of migrants working in Korea, there were still flaws in the system that excluded long-term residents and produced illegality whenever migrants changed workplaces or the term of their sojourn expired.¹³ Since the election of the conservative government of Lee Myung Bak, the EPS has been expanded to five years, which has lowered the rate of undocumented workers. However, rights violations continue during immigration control exercises, and prominent and politicized migrants such as *Stop Crackdown* band members and members of the Migrants' Trade Union have been targeted, and deported, with greater frequency than under previous regimes.¹⁴

'Multiculturalism' in Korea

While the numbers of migrant workers in Korea continued to grow through the 1990s, a new phenomenon was also taking shape. By the late 1990s, Korean bachelors, particularly those in rural areas who were finding it difficult to find Korean wives, were increasingly 'importing' brides from countries including Vietnam, China and the Philippines. The thriving international marriage industry has now expanded to include urban Korean bachelors and foreign brides from a host of other Asian countries.¹⁵ As Timothy Lim points out, the rise in both international migration and international marriage has been acknowledged from the most conservative to the most progressive news sources, editorial writers and columnists who note, and sometimes lament, the country's loss of ethnic homogeneity and its move toward a "multi-ethnic society."¹⁶

In order to maintain social cohesion in a rapidly changing society, the Korean government has instituted policies to deal with these new "multicultural families." While the government now officially refers to the children of these marriages as 'multicultural children', some education and social welfare organizations refer to them as 'KOSIANs'. KOSIAN, a compound word made from 'Korean' and 'Asian', refers to those children from foreign wives and Korean males. The word was coined as a way to avoid the term 'mixed race' which has negative connotation. However, the category of 'KOSIAN' is considered by groups such as Amnesty International and some domestic critics of Korean multiculturalism to be a discriminatory category in itself.¹⁷ On April 26, 2006, South Korean president Roh Moo-hyun passed two new acts: 'Act on the Social Integration of Mix-Race Families and Immigrants' and 'Act on Foreign Wife Integration'. President Roh declared that "the trend towards multi-race/multicultural society is irresistible" and therefore "it's high time to take measures to incorporate multicultural policies."¹⁸ The Ministry of Education and Human Development also announced a shift in civic education textbooks from an emphasis on mono-ethnicity towards multiculturalism and the values of tolerance.¹⁹ Furthermore, routes to naturalization for foreigners who marry Koreans have been opened, and steps to have been taken to eventually recognize dual citizenship.

"Multiculturalism" in Korea, nevertheless remains a very slippery concept; a term which does not actually begin to acquire meaning until the conditions of its implementation are examined. If we look more closely at the meaning of 'multiculturalism' in Korea, we see that the Korean government declared the new policy of multiculturalism by first differentiating foreign brides from migrant workers. Seonok Lee in a book chapter titled "Korean Multiculturalism and the Migrant Social Movement" (2007) describes the government's new policy as a way to maintain control over a growing population of migrants. Lee explains how foreign brides who receive permanent residence status through marriage are regarded as subjects in need of integration and government support through Korea's multicultural policy. The children of these marriages are also covered under this policy.²⁰ However, migrant workers and their children, as non-nationals, are considered temporary sojourners. They are a disposable source of cheap labor rotating in and out of the country and since they are required to return to their home countries when their period of sojourn is over, multicultural policy doesn't support their integration into Korean society. Instead, they are placed under the jurisdiction of the EPS labor policy, with its attendant minimum of human rights protection, and constant threats of deportation. This is because they are essentially regarded as 'labor', not as 'individuals' or potential citizens.²¹

The Korean government, by employing 'multiculturalism,' has managed to cleverly move the discussion away from the labor issues of migrant workers. Seonok Lee argues that it is largely because of the significant amount of government funding at stake that migrant-supporting NGOs advocate 'multiculturalism' and as a result many "have stopped paying attention to the basic labor situation of migrant workers."²² Originally, many of these organizations were focused on improving the labor conditions and rights of migrant workers, but they are now meeting the government at the conjunction of multiculturalism. As Lee writes, migrant-supporting NGOs "are the main advocates of multiculturalism. They act as the messengers of the government's multicultural policy and the beneficiaries of multicultural funding."²³ One reason is that the integration of foreign brides is regarded as a very important issue by mainstream Korean society.²⁴ Problems with the cultural adaptation of these brides and with domestic violence have emerged as serious social issues in the

public sphere.

Migrant Cultural Activism

Both migrant policy developments and the societal tensions that have characterized the relatively brief history of migrant labour in Korea are indicative of a nation undergoing rapid structural and cultural change. Migrant workers have not been passive observers of this process. In particular, migrant cultural activism has in recent years exploded in myriad forms and practices, both deepening and challenging the Korean State's definition of multiculturalism. However, if multiculturalism can be said to work as a 'carrot' in the management of diverse populations, deportation, or to be more precise, the threat of deportation, is certainly the 'stick'. It is the constant threat of deportation that makes cultural activism a difficult and precarious endeavor for migrant workers, particularly undocumented migrant workers, as migrants are often quickly deported if they become politically active. It excludes migrants from active citizenship rights, through barriers to permanent residency and naturalization and informal practices of discrimination (such as the seizure of passports, and everyday discrimination). The constant targeting of public spaces by immigration officials also denies migrants a substantive right to the city, as they are unable to reside, shop, work, travel, and carry out social life free from interception by immigration authorities. The anthropologist Nicholas P. De Genova forcefully states that, "It is deportability, and not deportation per se, that has historically rendered undocumented migrant labor a distinctly disposable commodity...Migrant "illegality" is lived through a palpable sense of deportability, which is to say, the possibility of deportation, the possibility of being removed from the space of the nation-state."²⁵ Similar to the situation of Korean workers in inter-war Japan, contingency of migrant workers existence acts as a form of discipline and exclusion from substantive rights denied to them as non-citizens.²⁶

In other words, the 'deportability' of migrants is a powerful disciplining device, and thus migrant cultural activism has been largely focused on challenging the hard-edged, juridical distinctions between 'migrant' and 'citizen' that enables it. Like the *San-Papiers* movement in France, the *Sin-Papeles* in Spain or the *Strangers into Citizens* campaign in the UK, much of the energy of Korea's Migrants' Trade Union (MTU)²⁷ is directed at achieving rights and recognition for undocumented migrants, working to bring about a "collapse of the border between migrant and Korean workers, but also the borders between the workers of different nationalities."²⁸ This is also why the cultural activism of groups like *Stop Crackdown*, which demand that migrants be treated as equal members of society, is so inspirational to its fans.

Stop Crackdown was founded by a charismatic undocumented migrant worker named Minod Moktan – better known to his friends and fans as Minu. Minu arrived in Korea from his home country of Nepal in the early 1990s. After years of working in small factories Minu emerged as a leading cultural activist in the migrant community. In the late 1990s, before forming his band, Minu won prizes at a number of singing competitions, including taking home the main prize in a *Foreigner Talent Show* held by KBS, a Korean public broadcasting station. At the time, he even received a special plaque as a token of appreciation from the Ministry of Culture and Tourism. Minu soon became a highly recognized public voice for migrants' rights and a prominent media activist. As a public speaker he was frequently invited by schools and organizations to lecture on multiculturalism. However, Minu's nearly two decades of involvement in Korea's civil society ended abruptly on the morning of October 8, 2009, when he was arrested by Korean immigration police and deported back to Nepal a week later.

It seemed for a long time that despite Minu's 'illegal' status the Korean government hesitated to deport him due to his wealth of connections and his status and influence as a cultural ambassador. Minu's role as a producer, editor, cameraman and representative for [Migrant Workers Television](#) (MWTV) may have also provided him with a limited degree of protection.²⁹ Founded in 2005 by a multi-ethnic group of migrants, Migrant Workers Television (MWTV) produces news and documentary programming, broadcasting on TV and the Internet, in multiple languages.³⁰ MWTV is grassroots community television made both for and by members of the migrant worker community in Korea. MWTV members include other undocumented migrants like Minu, who make and broadcast their programs under the constant fear of being deported by Korea's Immigration Bureau. Programs are broadcast on a public access TV channel called RTV, and on the Internet.

The immediate setting for MWTV's formation was a massive sit-in struggle at the Myeongdong Cathedral in central Seoul that began in November 2003. The Myeongdong had been a site of prior struggles from the 1980s democracy movement and many social struggles since then. The protest brought together migrant workers from dozens of Asian nationalities, as they called for an end to forced deportation and for the legalization of all unregistered migrant workers in Korea. For 400 days, in the midst of constant attacks by Korean immigration police, strong links of pan-ethnic solidarity were forged amongst the protesters. The growing migrant workers movement that exploded into the Myeongdong Cathedral sit-in struggle helped to raise the political consciousness of migrant workers. They self-identified as "labour" and were united in their opposition to the Korean government's policies. This was a critical factor that allowed migrants to overcome the ethnic and cultural divisions that may have prevented the formation of a multi-ethnic alternative media group in the first place. The protest was largely led by the Equality Trade Union – Migrant's Branch (later to become the Migrant Trade Union) in coordination with other migrants' groups including the Joint Committee for Migrants in Korea (JCMK), an ensemble of church-based groups, charities, and small NGOs. Most of these groups had been active in the earlier migrant movements of the 1990s, but during the sit-in migrant activists themselves took greater initiative. Perhaps the reason for this is that many of the groups that had earlier participated in the migrants' rights movement were receiving funding to administer the governments multicultural policies and risked losing their funding if they took the lead in contesting the EPS. Migrants also wanted a greater voice in the movement and there were some tensions between the migrant trade union movement and the church-based charity groups within the JCMK. However, in general, both groups shared a similar critique of the ITS and EPS and jointly staged rallies through the year of the sit-in. The JCMK also help the emergent migrant trade union movement with logistics in particular incidents, such as in the case of deaths of migrants fleeing immigration crackdowns.³¹

In April 2004, a few months after the start of the protest, a public media center called MediAct set up a tent at the sit-in site. About 40 migrant workers began to regularly attend a 'Media Education for Migrant Workers' program in this tent and at MediAct's nearby headquarters. Almost all the participants in this first migrant media education program had lived in Korea for a considerable period already, most for about 7-10 years. In the first month of the program, the participants made a video that documented their labor situation and their struggle. A screening was held and some of the migrant participants expressed a desire to continue producing activist media with ideas such as starting a migrant workers radio station or making a documentary film. As Mustaque Ahmed Mahbub, a migrant worker from Bangladesh and one of the key founders of MWTV relates, "At first it was just a dream for us to make our own TV programs. During the (sit-in struggle), we did a number of interviews, and we organized conferences and seminars. We criticized the way Korean media were reporting migrant worker issues."³² Then in April 2005, with the involvement of MediAct and RTV, a group of migrant workers came together to make a one-off program that they called "The World of Migrant Workers". The show was broadcast on RTV and received such a great response that in August, 2005 "Multi-Lingual Migrant Worker News" began regular production - and MWTV was born.

"The World of Migrant Workers" turned into a monthly 60-minute discussion and current affairs program in which migrant workers discussed issues affecting their daily lives in an honest and direct manner. The initial target audience was migrant workers in Korea who spoke Korean. However, the program underwent numerous changes since its inception. In order to attract a wider audience, and to provide some relief from serious issues such as the crackdown on undocumented labor (which continued to make up the core of the program), "The World of Migrant Workers" began including a 20-minute talk show segment called "All right, All right!" This production was an attempt to shift the imagined place migrants occupied within Korean society - from the manufacturing zones to the cultural heart of Korean society. Minu was the producer of the show and he described the program as a way to reach out to Korean viewers to demonstrate that migrant workers were not just laborers but human beings with many different talents who were contributing to the building of a new multicultural Korea.

If we always talk about sad stories, Koreans consider us servants. It gives us a bad image. That's why we need to talk more about our cultures and other issues. Migrant workers must work together with Korean people to change society. We can only change society with Koreans.³³

Since its inception, MWTV has also produced a regular multi-lingual news program focusing on issues of importance to migrant workers, news from their

home countries and explanations of Korean news for foreign residents. The emphasis is on covering issues that are both "politically and socially necessary for migrant workers living in Korea"³⁴ and information about events and news of interest to migrant communities. Contacts from various migrant communities, Korean volunteers and the news anchors themselves also participate in determining the contents of each broadcast by submitting articles or passing along news about their particular ethnic community in Korea.

One of MWTV's highest profile productions is the annual Migrant Worker Film Festival (MWFF). The MWFF is a traveling festival that showcases independent and mainstream films that deal with all aspects of migration. The annual summer festival, which was launched in 2006, begins in Seoul over one weekend and then, over the following two months, moves to smaller regional cities throughout the country which have high concentrations of migrant workers. During the festival's first couple of years some of the regional screenings took place in outdoor parks or stadiums. However, beginning in 2008, with the heightening of the immigration crackdowns, screenings were held inside migrant community centers or regional media centers so that undocumented migrants could watch the films safely without fear of being targeted by immigration police. The organizers of the MWFF hope that the films will resonate with both Koreans and migrants residing in regional cities so that new communities bridging ethnic divisions can be built in these locations.



Promotional poster for the 2nd MWFF

Although other festivals in Korea and elsewhere occasionally cover migrant workers' issues, the MWFF is unique in that it focuses exclusively on a broad range of topics specifically related to migration. Through documentaries, comedies, dramas and other genres, audiences are introduced to films that show how migration intersects with issues of labour, human rights, race, education, culture, and gender. Numerous amateur productions by first-time Korean or migrant directors are screened alongside international or domestic feature length films. Through the screening of films, and the cultural performances and parties that are also part of the MWFF, this traveling festival expands the discussion about migration beyond what is possible with MWTV's regular programs.

The creation of an 'Asian Media Activist Network' has also been one of the MWFF's initiatives. In 2006, in the festival's first year of existence, a film by the independent Bangladeshi film group "Breakthrough" was screened and the director, a former migrant worker in Korea, was invited to the festival to give a talk. In 2007, a Filipino multimedia activist was invited to screen her documentary and participate in a festival seminar. Festival director Mustaque Ahmed Mahub has even talked about taking the MWFF to migrant-sending countries in Asia because in his words, "until now it is always the countries receiving the migrants that hold these events and show these films. People living in migrant-sending countries should also be able to learn about the situation of migrants around the world."³⁵

Some of the films screened at the film festival are shorts produced by migrant workers who have graduated from MWTV's 'Media Academy'. The Media Academy is an initiative run by MWTV and supporting Korean media activists to teach migrant workers and international brides how to make their own media. Participants, who are all migrant workers or international brides, typically register for a three month-long seminar where they learn how to make short videos and films. MWTV has also held media production and media literacy programs in numerous factory towns on the outskirts of Seoul which are home to large numbers of migrant workers. Special photography workshops and media education programs for women migrants

and international brides have also been organized.

The central goal of these media education programs is to teach minorities in Korea media skills that will allow them to amplify their collective voice in Korean society. By spreading media production skills throughout the migrant worker community, MWTV is creating a network of 'non-citizen' reporters who are able to upload news stories and commentary from anywhere in Korea onto MWTV's website, or any other sites.

Crisis or Challenge?

For the first couple of years of MWTV's existence, funding for its main programs; 'Multi-lingual News' and 'The World of Migrant Workers' were supported by MWTV's parent broadcaster RTV as part of the public access channel's production costs. MWTV was paid 4,000,000 won (about \$4,000 USD) by RTV every month to produce these two programs. MWTV's media education programs and the film festival are examples of project-based funding. Funding for the first two film festivals came from the Ministry of Public Administration and Security and to a smaller extent from the Korean Film Council.

However, this all changed in early 2008 with the election of the conservative government of Lee Myung Bak. This new regime has attempted to dismantle some of the institutional legacies from the previous decade of liberal-left rule by rapidly realigning the nexus between state and civil society in contemporary Korea; especially the nexus to NGOs created by activists from the democracy movement -- the very NGOs that had supported the migrant movement and led to progress in changes to labour migration policy that seem unique to Korea in terms of how social movements were able to catalyze the creation of an alternative to the Industrial Trainee System. Part of this realignment can be readily observed within the media and cultural sector.³⁶ Public access television certainly did not fit the priorities of the "CEO President" and his appointees at the newly formed Korea Communications Commission (KCC). Immediately after being established, the KCC cut off annual funding of RTV of more than one million dollars.

As a result, funding to MWTV was immediately frozen and MWTV's pioneering production "The World of Migrant Workers" was canceled. MWTV responded by launching a membership drive, building up a core network of around 200 paying members who provide a flexible monthly 'membership fee' and in turn are given the opportunity to participate in MWTV's general meetings. Currently, RTV is providing MWTV with very limited funding to cover production costs for the Multi-Lingual News program.³⁷ With no government support, MWTV's 2009 Migrant Workers Film Festival was a bare-bones operation largely supported through a fundraising drive on Korea's Agora website. This funding crisis has left MWTV with skeleton staff of full-time workers, and a heavy reliance on both Korean and non-Korean volunteers.

This funding crisis is not unique to MWTV as NGOs and social welfare ministries across the board have had their funding slashed. This is especially the case in ministries and NGOs that have strong connections to the democracy movement. For example, the Ministry of Gender Equality has lost most of its budget, the National Human Rights Commission has been restructured, and parachute appointments and political dismissals have taken place across arts and cultural institutions (from the Korean National University for the Arts, to independent media organizations, including ones that have been key supporters of migrant activism such as MediAct and IndieSpace).³⁸

Even in light of these recent challenges, migrant cultural activism continues, indicative of the vibrancy of Korean civil society and the space of migrants within it. Unfortunately, however, the deportation of skilled and well-connected long-term migrants like Minu makes it more difficult to forge these connections. Nonetheless, new migrant leaders continually seem to emerge to replace those that have been deported, even in severely targeted groups like the Migrants' Trade Union, which is a sign both of the importance of migrant struggles and commitment of migrant activists. Even in the case of deported activists, many seem to continue to use their connections to Korea and the cultural and political skills they learned there to continue to support migrant rights movements and



Scene from Mustaque Ahmed Mahbub's 'The Deported', Available online [here](#).

other social struggles. This has been documented by migrant activists themselves. For example, MWTV founder Mustaque Ahmed Mahbub's 2007 short film, 'The Deported,' traces the lives of deported migrant workers and activists back to their home countries of Nepal and Bangladesh, focusing on former activists of the migrant trade union movement in Korea. In all the cases he documents, the deported migrants have continued to be active, forming NGOs of their own or working with existing organizations. Many of them continue to work on migrant issues, showing would-be-migrants how to avoid illegal brokers and educating them on Korean labour laws, language and culture. They also run programs to re-integrate deported workers back into their home societies, as many of the long-term migrant residents essentially came of age in Korea and thus the return home after many years can be very alienating.



Promotional Still from the 2009 movie *Bandhobi*, subtitled trailer available [here](#).

In a curious way, the deportation of undocumented and politically active migrant workers has actually helped to spatially expand the scale of the migrant struggles, creating a transnational dimension to Korean migrant activism that was non-existent before.³⁹ That a film like 'The Deported' has been made at all speaks to the growing connections between Korean civil society, migrant workers, and foreign-born residents. The film and the

movement also touch upon the growing phenomenon of transnational marriages between migrants and Koreans, which is set to further reconfigure the politics of citizenship in Korean society. The filmmaker, Mustaque Ahmed Mahbub, is married to a Korean national and thus, unlike most migrants, he was able to travel outside of the country to film 'The Deported' since he has permanent residency status.⁴⁰ Since the release of this film, he has been building his own acting career in Korea, including the lead role in a feature-length romantic comedy called 'Bandhobi' (Girlfriend) about an unlikely relationship between a high-school dropout and an undocumented migrant worker. This film was widely-screened and well-received, signaling broader social acceptance of migrant workers in Korea. Mainstream Korean productions involving migrants, such as the popular KBS television show "Talking to Foreign Beauties", tend to keep their discussions of migrant issues at a very superficial level and are reticent to engage in a deeper social critique -- this show itself has been the object of criticism by foreign residents in Korea. In contrast, the film 'Bandhobi' connects migrant issues to domestic issues such as social polarization, racism, labour exploitation and a dysfunctional educational system. When he loses his wallet on a bus, Karim, a migrant worker who is nearing the end of his work permit and has not been paid by his boss, meets Minseo, a high school dropout without the resources to pay for extra schooling. Rather than depicting its characters as passive in their social positions, the film depicts both characters as having the agency to contest unequal social relations, as both Karim and Minseo challenge their employers, teachers, and immigration officials. That the film was able to break into the mainstream, gaining wide distribution in Korean theatres and in DVD, is thus a significant sign that attitudes towards migrants are changing as a result of cultural activism, and that the issues facing migrant workers need to continue to be articulated in relation to problems within the Korean society in general.

Conclusion

In much the same way that Kim Min Gi's radio play "Light of a Factory" galvanized women factory workers three decades ago, migrant cultural activism works to build communities of affinity and networks of support between Koreans and non-Koreans. This can be seen in the many forms of migrant cultural activism occurring in Korea, in particular through the work of Stop Crackdown and MWTV which we've highlighted in this brief essay. However, as Minu's deportation demonstrates, these projects take place in a very precarious political space. While cultural activism of this type breaks through some symbolic barriers between migrants and citizens, as well as between migrants of various nationalities, it also exposes migrants to targeted action by the immigration authorities. The migrant activists who create and produce these new forms of cultural activism are subject to the constant threat of deportation. This threat renders most migrants largely invisible in the public sphere, and cheapens their labour, by excluding their daily struggles from wider recognition. Cultural activism attempts to challenge this exclusion, and like the cultural repertoire of previous Korean social movements, it connects migrant issues to larger democratic demands for a more inclusive society, as well as for greater social solidarity and equality. With the help of Korean civil society, this activism has helped encourage reforms to Korea's labour migration system that point towards a greater institutional space for migrant workers and for multicultural policy than has been the case in East Asian countries. However, these reforms are insufficient, and even though the nexus created between migrant workers and Korean civil society has been an important resource for addressing concerns of migrants workers, without greater institutional transformation and the expansion of migrants' rights, migrant activism, in all forms, will remain precarious. This raises the question of how many more exceptional migrant activists like Minu will put themselves at risk to advocate migrant rights. The emotional and political costs to the migrant social movement whenever a long-term resident like Minu is deported are immense as connections are uprooted and scattered. Certainly wider social transformation is necessary in order to create greater space for migrant activists like Minu. However this can only occur once the current system of migrant deportability and institutional discrimination against migrant workers is transformed.

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See the following articles on related themes.

Jamie Doucette and Owen Miller, [From APEC to WTO: Trajectories of Protest in Korea and East Asia](#)

Timothy Lim, [Who is Korean? Migration, Immigration, and the Challenge of Multiculturalism in Homogeneous Societies](#)

David McNeill, Matsutani Minoru, Alex Martin, Kamiya Setsuko, and Hongo Jun, [Lowering the Drawbridge of Fortress Japan: Citizenship, Nationality and the Rights of Children](#)

Andrew Eungi Kim, [Demography, Migration and Multiculturalism in South Korea](#)

Kamata Satoshi, [Japan's Internship Training Program for Foreign Workers: Education or Exploitation?](#)

Arudou Debito & Higuchi Akira, [Handbook for Newcomers, Migrants, and Immigrants to Japan](#)

Takeyuki TSUDA, [Local Citizenship and Foreign Workers in Japan](#)

Notes

¹ For more on the Minjung movement see Namhee Lee's (2007) *The Making of the Minjung: Democracy and the Politics of Representation in South Korea*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, as well Hagen Koo (2001) *Korean Workers: the Culture and Politics of Class Formation*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. For more on migrant protest practices and their connection to Korean social movements see Jamie Doucette (2005) "The New Minjung? Migrant Workers in South Korea." *Korean Quarterly*, 8 (4), and *The Postdevelopmental State: The Reconfiguration of Political Space and the Politics of Economic Reform in South Korea* (2009) [unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of British Columbia], pp 190-238,

² Hankyoreh, 21 February 2009. "Foreign population grows four times in eight years." [Link](#) [Accessed July 2009].

³ Young-Min Moon, The Composition of Social Memories in Vicente et al (eds) *Activating Korea: Tides of Collective Action*, Seoul: Insa Art Space, 2008, pg 34. Moon's essay was prepared for a Korea/New Zealand exhibition of work by Korean art collectives which included a 'music café' performance art exhibit involving Minu and Soe Moe Thu from Stop Crackdown and the Korea-based Mixrice art collective.

⁴ See Sunok Chun. (2003) *They Are Not Machines: Korean Women Workers and Their Fight for Democratic Trade Unions in the Seventies*. Aldershot: Ashgate.

⁵ Kim, Dong-Choon. (2006) "Growth and Crisis of the Korean Citizen's Movement." *Korea Journal*. Summer 2006, pp. 99-128.

⁶ More recently, fears of population decline and further labour shortages due to Korea's low fertility rate have influenced the public debates on labour migration.

⁷ [Andrew Eungi Kim](#), (2009) "Demography, Migration and Multiculturalism in South Korea" *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, Vol. 6-2-09, February 1, 2009.

⁸ The Trainee System was eventually phased out in 2007, and replaced entirely by the Employment Permit System (EPS), which first came into effect in 2004.

⁹ Another form of migration into Korea, also similar to Japan, involves the ethnic-Korean diaspora, primarily from China. Many of these workers also lacked proper documentation, although technically they had access to special visas for overseas Koreans. As Katharine Moon reports, throughout the nineties migrant workers were represented in the press as unwelcome strangers, even the ethnic Korean Chinese – who were initially welcomed by the Seoul Shinmun newspaper with the "call of *hyoruk*" (literally, blood shared family). See Katharine H.S. Moon (2000) 'Strangers in the Midst of Globalization: Migrant Workers and Korean Nationalism' in Samuel Kim ed. *Korea's Globalization*. London: Cambridge University Press.

¹⁰ See Timothy Lim (2003) 'Racing from the Bottom in South Korea? The Nexus between Civil Society and Transnational Migrants,' *Asian Survey*, 43:3, pp. 423-442, for more on the history of migrant-NGO interactions leading up to the reform of the ITS.

¹¹ [Glenda S. Roberts](#), (2007) "Labor Migration to Japan: Comparative Perspectives on Demography and the Sense of Crisis." *The Asia-Pacific Journal*.

¹² Amnesty International. (2009). *Disposable Labour: Rights of Migrant Workers in South Korea*. London, UK: Amnesty International Publications, p. 35 (also available online). See also, [Korean National Human Rights Commission publications on migrants in Korea](#), and [Prey, Robert, and Seon Ok Lee](#). (2007) "Tragic Fire Illuminates South Korea's Treatment of Migrant Workers." *The Asia-Pacific Journal*.

¹³ The EPS also enabled the government to take over much of the job of recruiting migrants away from quasi public-private recruitment and training agencies managed by the Korean Federation of Small and Mid-Sized Businesses. This has given the government the greater ability to monitor migration and also use it in foreign policy. For example, during the Roh Moo Hyun administration, the Korean government began to invest more in Mongolia and procuring spaces for Mongolian migrant workers was a coordinated part of this process. This joint negotiation of investment and migration is similar to the Japan-Philippines Economic Partnership Agreement; see [Gabriele Vogt](#) (2007) "Guest Workers" for Japan? *The Asia Pacific Journal*. It worth noting that Korea has also tried to secure visas for Korean skilled workers in its free trade negotiations with the United States.

¹⁴ It is important to be clear that deportations under the current government of Lee Myung Bak are overall, a continuation of the policy carried out by the liberal, reform-oriented governments of Kim Dae Jung and Roh Moo Hyun. In particular, virtually every elected president and executive member of the Migrants' Trade Union (MTU) has been deported over the past several years, though the MTU continues to survive as an organization. During the most recent Lunar New Year, police raided a Nepali restaurant under suspicion of 'illegal gambling.' Although no such activity was found to be taking place, immigration control officials accompanied the police and detained 10 MTU members. Thus it seems that targeted crackdowns are still common, even if the procedural basis of these has recently been transformed, or, rather, become more ad hoc in the case of politicized migrants. See the MTU report on the

Lunar New Year arrests on their [website](#) [Accessed March 2010]

¹⁵ In 2005, 36% of marriages in rural areas were between Korean men and 'foreign wives', while about 13.6% of marriages overall in Korea were international marriages. In terms of nationality, Vietnamese made up 53.2% of total foreign wives, followed by Chinese (34.1%) and Filipinos (6.9%). See the [yearly reports of the Korean Immigration Service](#), accessed 17 March 2010. The latest trend is that more women are coming from Uzbekistan, Mongolia, and the Philippines. The rate of international marriages doubled between 2003 and 2008. In 2008 alone, there were 38,431 international marriages (see Hankyoreh, "Foreign population..." cited above).

¹⁶ [Timothy Lim](#), "Who is Korean? Migration, Immigration, and the Challenge of Multiculturalism in Homogeneous Societies" *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, Vol. 30-1-09, July 27, 2009.

¹⁷ See Heejung, Kim (2007), 'Official Multiculturalism Revisited: Multicultural Transition in South Korea', Oh KyungSuk (ed.), *Multiculturalism in South Korea: A Critical Review*. Hanul books

¹⁸ Heejung Kim (2007), 'Official Multiculturalism Revisited: Multicultural Transition in South Korea', Oh KyungSuk (ed.), *Multiculturalism in South Korea: A Critical Review*. Hanul books

¹⁹ This is a rather drastic departure from previous civic education where the most important topic in the civic textbook is how distinctive and unique Koreans are from all the other ethnic groups in the world and how lucky Korea is to be ethnically homogeneous. (from Heejung, Kim (2007), *Multiculturalism in South Korea: A Critical Review*.)

²⁰ Interestingly, Lee writes that "the government doesn't recognize a foreign man who marries a Korean woman as an object of multicultural policy even though he also has a semi-national status. Foreign brides are considered to be under their husband's control since patriarchy is so deeply entrenched in Korean society. Thus Korean society accepts foreign brides as members of society. However Korean society refuses to acknowledge that foreign husbands are members of Korean society because it cannot accept foreign husbands as substitute patriarchs." (from Seonok Lee (2007), 'Korean Multiculturalism and the Migrant Social Movement', Oh KyungSuk (ed.), *Multiculturalism in South Korea: A Critical Review*. Hanul books)

²¹ Seonok Lee (2007), 'Korean Multiculturalism and the Migrant Social Movement', Oh KyungSuk (ed.), *Multiculturalism in South Korea: A Critical Review*. Hanul books)

²² Lee, 2007

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Lee writes, "There is an interesting international component to this concern as Korean society started worrying about social stability and the second generation of children from intermarriage couples after seeing images of the French riots in 2005." (from Seonok Lee (2007), 'Korean Multiculturalism and the Migrant Social Movement', Oh KyungSuk (ed.), *Multiculturalism in South Korea: A Critical Review*. Hanul books)

²⁵ Nicholas P, De Genova. (2002) 'Migrant "Illegality" and Deportability in Everyday Life', *Annual Review of Anthropology* 31: 438-439

²⁶ See, for example, Ken Kawashima's excellent (2009) study *The Proletarian Gamble: Korean Workers in Interwar Japan*. Durham: Duke University Press. See also [Tessa Morris-Suzuki](#) (2008) "Migrants, Subjects, Citizens: Comparative Perspectives on Nationality in the Prewar Japanese Empire." *The Asia-Pacific Journal*.

²⁷ A further group to add here might be the Migrant Worker Network in Japan, which seems more similar to the Joint Committee for Migrants in Korea, which is largely led by Korean civil society activists, than the migrant-led unions. See also, [Ryoko Yamamoto](#), Migrant-support NGOs and the Challenge to the Discourse on Foreign Criminality in Japan. *The Asia-Pacific Journal*.

²⁸ This was a slogan commonly used by the Equality Trade Union – Migrants' Branch, the precursor of the Migrants' Trade Union. The Migrants' Trade Union (MTU) was formed in April 2005 as a union by and for migrant workers, regardless of status. Its membership is made up of both documented and undocumented migrant workers from Nepal, Bangladesh, the Philippines, Sri Lanka and Indonesia who work primarily in the manufacturing sector. The MTU provides many services for migrant workers such as counseling, advocacy, Korean language training and specific support groups for women migrant workers. However it is not able to enter into collective bargaining with employers because the Korean government refuses to recognize MTU as a legal union, despite a Seoul High Court ruling that it should do so. The government claims that MTU includes undocumented migrant workers whose right to freedom of association is not protected under South Korean law; however, the labour movement and human rights scholars argue that the Korean constitution guarantees all workers basic labour rights and does not differentiate on the basis of workers' nationality.

²⁹ As one of the founders of MWTV, Mustaque Ahmed Mahbub put it in an interview with the Asia Rights Journal; "Sometimes the Immigration Bureau contacts us, wanting to know if any of our presenters are illegal migrants and the like. They try to pressure us. But all the same, I think they know they can't go too far. They're a bit afraid of us too, because we are the media." *AsiaRights Journal*, "Korea's Migrant Workers Find a Voice on Air" Issue 6, 2006. Accessed [here](#) on March 6, 2010.

³⁰ The languages MWTV broadcasts in change occasionally depending on the availability of anchors and translators. Languages most often represented are Korean, English, Chinese, Mongolian, Indonesian, Nepali, Burmese, Bengali, Vietnamese, Thai and Filipino. Programs have also been produced in Russian and Sinhala in the past. MWTV's website can be found [here](#).

³¹ For more on tensions between the migrant trade movement and the JCMK see (2004). "An interview with Kabir Uddin of the Equality Trade Union. "ZNET, January 5th. [Link](#) [Accessed January March 15, 2010].

³² AsiaRights Journal, Issue 6, 2006. accessed [here](#) on Oct. 27, 2009

³³ Interview with Minod Moktan, June 4, 2008.

³⁴ Interview with Park Su Hyun, MWTV staff member, May 25, 2008.

³⁵ Interview with Mustaque Ahmed Mahbub, June 9, 2008.

³⁶ Examples include the unilateral passage of new media and news laws, the replacement of major broadcasting networks' executives with pro-government figures, the use of the Public Prosecutor's Office to detain and question journalists critical of the government, the Grand National Party's (GNP) and conservative newspapers' attempt to take-over of public broadcasting and the evening news in particular. Most recently, the dismantling of the public media center MediAct, and the independent film theater Indie-Space, are further disturbing examples of this trend.

³⁷ A Korean foundation called the 'Beautiful Foundation' has stepped in to provide some additional financial support

³⁸ State funding has been denied to a total of 1,842 social and civic organizations, from women's help lines and charitable foundations to economic policy NGOs, most of whom participated in the candlelight demonstrations against Lee Myung Bak's policies during the summer of 2008.

³⁹ As further evidence of this phenomenon, current members of the Migrants' Trade Union (MTU) met deported former leaders in Kathmandu, Nepal from June 12-14, 2008 to hold an "International Conference on Networking between Countries of Origin and Migrant Workers in South Korea." According to the press statement, the conference recommendations included: establishing an International Migrant Workers Solidarity Network (IMWSN) for the purpose of regular systematic communication and joint action between Nepal, Bangladesh and South Korea with the prospect of expanding to include other countries in the future, planning pre-departure education and training for workers before migration to South Korea, forming organizations for returned migrants in their home countries, and protesting in front of the South Korean embassy in different countries to make known demands directly to the South Korean government. (MTU, June 6, 2008. *International Conference on Networking between Countries of Origin and Migrant Workers in South Korea*, accessed [here](#) on December 20, 2009.)

⁴⁰ It is possible for foreign spouses to become naturalized but they must give up their other nationality.