

The Story of Minh: The Lifeworld of a Marriage-Labor Immigrant Mother

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Abstract

In this paper, I investigate how Minh, as an immigrant mother, accepts, resists, and transforms available Korean cultural discourses about mothering. With the goal of exploring and understanding the discourses about mothering that pertain to immigrant families in Korea, I examine how local, national, and international histories of race, gender, class, citizenship, nationality, and culture shape the discourses of mothering in Korea. Through this process, the paper addresses the intersection between the discourses about mothering and marriage-labor immigrant families in the Korean context. To examine disparities and contradictions that emerged from my multiple ethnographic interviews with Minh between 2013 and 2015, I use Bakhtin's idea of heteroglossia as an analytic tool. The paper concludes by discussing the need for establishing renewed perspectives on the role of "Koreanness," the complexities of marriage-labor immigrants' lifeworlds, and mothering as cultural, emotional, and affective labor.

Keywords: immigration, mothering, Korea, heteroglossia

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Minh¹, a mother in her twenties with two young children, has never learned to be “Korean.” Now a naturalized Korean citizen, she was aware that being Korean is much more than speaking fluent Korean. With bright eyes and a gentle smile, Minh sought out opportunities that would connect her to Korean culture and to local communities as a hard-working employee, devoted volunteer and caring mother. She wanted her children to see her as capable and wise, so she kept herself busy with family, work, and study. Despite her efforts to be received as a part of the local community, Minh experienced how the social label of “foreigner” is inescapable in Korean society. During the interview carried out in 2013, Minh expressed her frustration about how she was perceived: “Even though I have lived in Korea for a long time, I am always seen as a newly wedded foreign wife.” Minh was also well aware that being socially positioned was not a matter of obtaining a legal citizenship in Korea: “Even after marriage immigrants, foreigners, or [immigrant] workers obtain Korean citizenship, [people] still call them foreign residents.” This image of “a newly wedded wife” entangled with the perception of “foreigners,” influenced Minh as an individual, an immigrant, and a mother. While her journey from Vietnam to Korea was filled with her bright “Korean Dreams,” she had not anticipated the challenges that came with her decision.

Born in Vietnam, Minh married a Korean man whom she met through a matchmaking company about nine years ago. Then she moved to Korea and had two children in a cultural community far from where she grew up. I met Minh in Korea in 2013, when I was conducting a research about children from marriage-labor immigrant families. The Multicultural Family Support Center where Minh worked—the Chungsun Multicultural Family Support Center in Hamshin, South Korea—was the first place that agreed to let me interview some of their social workers who were immigrants themselves. Approximately one-third of the social workers at the center are themselves members of marriage-labor immigrant families.

In this paper, I investigate how Minh, as an immigrant mother, accepts, resists, and transforms available cultural discourses. Minh was one of the key informants who participated in my ethnographic interview study carried out in Korea between 2013 and 2015. Though I interacted with 12 informants during the study, this paper focuses on

analyzing my interviews with Minh as an ethnographic case study (Dyson & Genishi, 2005). Even though Minh's personal experiences cannot be generalized to every immigrant mother from Vietnam, or immigrants from any other countries, the complexities of her lifeworld, as demonstrated in the discourses that emerged during the interviews, highlight important aspects of the transforming demographics in Korea. With the rapidly increasing number of immigrant parents and their children in Korean public schools, (N.-K. Kim et al., 2012), it is crucial to consider the ways in which cultural discourses about mothering manifest themselves on an individual level. Personal stories of marriage-labor immigrants, intertwined with the stories of other immigrants and Korean people, provide a gateway for understanding not only the intricacies of daily challenges the immigrants face around discourses of mothering, but also the complexities of the tension about marriage-labor immigrant parents in Korean society.

With the goal of exploring and understanding the discourses about mothering that pertain to immigrant families in Korea, I examine how local, national, and international histories of race, gender, class, citizenship, nationality, and culture shape the discourses of mothering in Korea for immigrant parents. Through this process, this paper addresses the intersection between the discourses pertaining to mothering and marriage-labor immigrant families in the Korean context.

Immigration to Korea in the last two decades has fulfilled several specific personal and cultural needs in society. The Korean economy has prospered and birth rate has fallen, leading to a shortage of labor for low-end jobs and increasing the need for cheap laborers, mothers, and caretakers. This has created a large influx of immigrants to the country (Kong, Yoon, & Yu, 2010). It is important to note that the majority of the immigrants are women, who through birthing and raising "Korean" babies play a significant role in resolving social issues that accompany the dwindling, increasingly elderly population (A. E. Kim, 2009). Many younger Korean women refuse to partake in the cultural discourse of a traditional wife, so immigrant women have been serving as a solution to maintain hierarchal and patriarchal Korean family values (Constable, 2003; Triece, 1999; Yoo, 2006).

These immigrants, including Minh, navigate a number of cultural discourses that coalesce and contradict with one another. Ranging from assimilationist approaches to cultural pluralist approaches (J. Kim, Yang, & Torneo, 2012), the responses of cultural

institutions, such as the schools, media, and government, also reflect the complexities of circulating discourses. Nevertheless, little attention has been paid to the tension between these contradictory reactions, and consequently, there exists the need to acknowledge the complexities and significance of circulating discourses in relation to mothering (Yuk, 2011). In this sense, there is much to be done to challenge a privileged and static perspective on available discourses about immigrants and their mothering in Korea.

In the upcoming theoretical framework section, I discuss mothering as a cultural construction grounded in specific temporal and spatial contexts. I also elaborate on how this paper is situated within the reconceptualist scholarship in the field of early childhood education. This allows it to challenge the norms and the status quo about mothering in the midst of the rapidly transforming demographic landscape in Korea brought about through immigration.

Theoretical Framework

Underlying assumptions about mothering, including how instinctive and gender specific it is, have proliferated for many years, influencing the ways in which mothers relate to children, other individuals, and society (Walks & McPherson, 2011). Compared to the static, institutionalized, and idealized notions of motherhood, mainly rooted in patriarchal perspectives, mothering is an open-ended, dynamic, practical, and relational process involving both nature and nurture, the biological and the social (Porter, 2010; Walks & McPherson, 2011). In other words, even though the women's body and gender plays a significant role in some cultural contexts, including Korea, daily acts of caring for children are not exclusive to people who are recognized as mothers (Ruddick, 1995).

Different cultural perceptions of mothering have co-existed and transformed over the years. Porter (2010) illustrates diachronic changes in the image of an "ideal mother" by examining historical shifts and movements around major events, such as World War II, the use of birth control methods, and the ideas popularized by John Bowlby's (1953) attachment theory. Moreover, with rampant globalization, mothers and children from immigrant families do not necessarily share the same culture. If the difference between

parents' and children's culture was not as notable previously, the difference is becoming increasingly prevalent due to the increasing immigrant population (Walks & McPherson, 2011). Considering how mothering is culturally defined, dynamic, and specific to temporal and spatial contexts, marriage-labor immigrant mothers in Korea have faced challenges navigating the discourses of mothering they are unfamiliar with, what is expected of them, and what they would like to do as mothers (Yang et al., 2012).

In this paper, I borrow from and expand on the ways in which reconceptualist scholars in the field of early childhood education have deconstructed various boundaries that reify the dynamics and relationships within cultural norms about mothering. Questioning the dominant preconceptions about mothers in various cultural communities, these scholars have investigated the ways in which cultural discourses influence mothers and their children. In particular, the works of Bloch (1998), Swadner and Jagielo (1998), O'Brien and Swadener (2006), Polakow (1994, 2007), Bailey (2003) have played a pivotal role in examining power and privilege embedded in beliefs, practices, and policies about mothering.

The critical perspective on the role gender plays in discourses of mothering is one of the key ideas I borrow from the reconceptualists. Bloch (1998) shares her own personal struggles in the space between the public and the private parts of her lives. Through personal accounts and stories from the cultural contexts of different societies, as well as in light of her role as a mother, caregiver and academic, Bloch questions what counts as "legitimate" work by disrupting familiar cultural patterns around gender, work, and childcare. Problematizing the gender division of labor as the universal norm, she interrogates representations of mothers by examining the role cultural contexts play in giving meaning to how beliefs and practices materialize in mothers' everyday lives.

In addition, the works of Swadener and Jagielo (1998), Polakow (1994), and O'Brien and Swadener (2006) provide a critical viewpoint from which to examine the Korean cultural discourses that position marriage-labor immigrant parents and their children through a static cultural construction of who they are and even as "at risk." Making visible the dominant cultural discourse in Korean society about mothering, I not only challenge the "labels" imposed on the immigrant parents but also the assumptions that contribute to the cultural construction of such discourses. By situating dominant discourses about marriage-labor immigrants in particular contexts of contemporary Korea, this paper disrupts the "natural"

connection between the stigma-filled labels and marriage-labor immigrant parents.

In the next section, I introduce the term “marriage-labor immigration,” which functions as a tool making visible the cultural assumptions about immigrant families in Korean society. By addressing the contexts and the shifting understandings of immigrant families in Korea, I delineate the complexities of the transforming demographic landscape while foregrounding my encounters with Minh.

Marriage-Labor Immigrant Families

The term “marriage-labor immigrant families” focuses on the significance of the labor that immigrants (and their children) perform to meet various needs in Korean society. Borrowing from David Eng’s work, *Transnational Adoption and Queer Diaspora* (2003), the term contextualizes the ways in which marriage-labor immigrants manage, facilitate, and fulfill Korean discourses about mother, wife, and family by engaging in cultural activities including producing and mothering young children and by establishing and maintaining relationships with their Korean in-laws. This reproductive and affective labor of marriage-labor immigrants fulfills a range of emergent needs that pertain to cultural expectations on gender roles, cultural homogeneity, and national heritage (Kim, 2007). In this regard, marriage-labor immigration as a concept focuses on changes, muddled boundaries, and the heightened sense of tension brought to Korean society by marriage-labor immigration.

In addition, my choice of the term “marriage-labor immigration” is grounded in the decision to acknowledge and separate myself from the preconceptions associated with pre-existing terms that refer to marriage-labor immigrant families. “Multicultural families” is the archetypical term colloquially used by Korean policy documents and the scholarly literature pertaining to the contemporary demographic shift in Korea (N.-K. Kim et al., 2012; also see Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development, 2006). The term “multicultural” derives from a translation of the Korean term *damunhwa*, which can literally be translated to “multiculture” (Lee, 2013). The notion of “multiculture” and the phrase “multicultural family” were first introduced in the early 2000s as a substitute for derogatory terms such as “mixed blood” and “mixed race,” then used to describe children

from marriage-labor immigrant families (N.-K. Kim et al., 2012). Emphasizing the multiplicity of cultures rather than the imagery of adulterating Korean purity through immigration, the term “multicultural families” was rapidly popularized.

Regardless of its initial intention to be non-discriminatory, however, the use of “multicultural families” in Korea has been criticized for being static and secluding the very people the term intended to include (Olneck, 2011). In other words, even though the discourses of multiculturalism and cultural pluralism have become more prevalent (Lim, 2010), the importance of assimilating marriage-labor immigrants into Korean culture has not necessarily diminished. Its use has contributed to categorizing and marginalizing the ethnic and national diversity of minority groups in Korea, rather than emphasizing different aspects of diversity in Korean society, including but not limited to race, ethnicity, culture, gender, religion, and socioeconomics (Lee, 2013).

For these reasons, I use the term “marriage-labor immigrants” in this paper hereafter when I refer to Minh and other immigrants who have moved to Korea through international marriages. By articulating the Korean cultural needs the immigrants fulfill through their labor, as well as the cultural overtone about “others” in Korea, I highlight the complexities of navigating discourses of mothering as marriage-labor immigrant parents in both local and national communities.

Methodology and Analytical Framework

Between 2013 and 2015, I visited and revisited Minh three times, in her neighborhood and at her workplaces. The initial interview was conducted with another informant, who was Minh’s co-worker at that time, and lasted about 40 minutes. Then, two follow-up interviews were carried out individually, and the length of the interviews increased to 75 minutes and 90 minutes for the second and the third interview, respectively. The interviews were audio and video recorded for analysis. While our meetings began as traditional sit-down interviews, borrowing from the concept of semi-structured ethnographic interviews (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Spradley, 1979), the structure of the interviews gradually evolved to include eating, drinking, and walking together (Kusenbach, 2003). This provided multiple opportunities to elicit from Minh different descriptions and interpretations of her

own experiences, her understandings of past interview sessions, and her perceptions of my reading of the previous encounters.

This process of revisiting Minh added to my initial presupposition that words produced during interviews are heterogeneous, complex, and even contradictory. As a part of my effort to understand the circulating discourses about mothering in which Minh partook, I particularly attend to how varying discourses are recycled, reconstructed, and reappropriated within particular contexts. This perspective contributes to how I position and interpret texts produced during ethnographic interviews and fieldwork—not as an original statement that reflects the psychological consciousness of my informants, but rather as a collection of available discourses the informants utilized (Tobin, 2000). In this sense, I consider Minh's words as evidence of the process of negotiating the individual and the social in relationships, knowledge, and beliefs (Fairclough, 1992).

To investigate disparities and contradictions that emerged from my multiple encounters with Minh, I use Bakhtin's idea of heteroglossia as an analytic tool. Heteroglossia represents "ideologies inherent in the various languages" (Park-Fuller, 1986, p. 2), referring to "the conflict between 'centripetal' and 'centrifugal', 'official' and 'unofficial' discourses within the same language" (Morris, 1995, p. 248). Even though centripetal force attempts to unify the ways in which discourses are used and understood, the meaning of discourses continuously shifts due to centrifugal forces (Morris, 1995). Heteroglossia is also "perceived as the constituting condition for the possibility of independent consciousness" because the unchallenged authority of a truth is relativized through coming in context with other discourses (Morris, 1995, p. 73).

These specific features of heteroglossia are useful in my Bakhtinian textual analysis because they illustrate dynamics within and across circulating discourses, rather than portraying them as static and self-contained. The Bakhtinian ideas also became valuable in the process of interpreting the uncertainty and tension that emerged from my interviews with Minh and the ways in which discourses interact with one another. This adds to my intention of offering multiple possible interpretations of informants' insider voices, rather than finalized explanations.

In the section below, I examine major cultural discourses of mothering that emerged in the process of engaging Minh through ethnographic interviews and fieldwork. By doing so

through the lens of heteroglossia, I provide an examination of the multiplicities and dynamics of available discourses about marriage-labor immigration, the immigrants themselves, and their mothering in Korean society.

Findings

From the Korean Dream to a Personal Dream: Becoming a Mother

Initially employed at the Chungsun provincial government building, Minh started working at the Chungsun Multicultural Family Support Center in 2013, assisting with translation from Vietnamese to Korean, legal counseling, and mentoring other immigrants in the local community. Minh is one of the many immigrants who entered the country in the early 2000s. Since the late 1990s, marriage-labor immigration to Korea has paralleled Korea's booming economy. This resulted in an unprecedented 2,000 percent increase in foreign residents since the 1990s, as immigrants sought out opportunities in achieving their "Korean dream" through employment and international marriages (Kang, 2010; Kong et al., 2010; Lim, 2010).

I wanted to understand what brought Minh to Korea, so I asked her how she and her husband met. During the interview carried out in 2014, she explained straightforwardly with many details:

Well, I met my husband and my mother-in-law in Vietnam for the first time through a matchmaking company in Hanoi. We got married in a week, went on a honeymoon, and my husband and my mother-in-law went back to Korea. Then I stayed at the matchmaking company for about three months. You need about three months or so to do all the necessary paperwork. You know, the husband needs to submit the paperwork for you to get the visa and come to Korea.

Minh's story provides a typical example of how marriage-labor immigrants start their journey to Korea. Even though marriage-labor immigrants play a crucial role in local and national communities, fulfilling cultural, emotional, and physical needs for having a spouse, children, and a family, marriage-labor immigration is entangled in many social stigmas. During the 2013 interview, for example, Minh shared how many Korean people had

questioned her and other marriage-labor immigrants as to why they had moved to Korea, implying that the marriage-labor immigrants were being opportunistic:

I don't know about Chinese people. But Vietnamese people frequently told me that they were asked by Korean people, "Why did you come to a foreign country?" "Did you come because of money?" "Why did you come even though your [Korean] husband is a lot older than you?" Honestly, we all have different reasons that lead us here. Yes, there is the money aspect, but some come to pursue their dreams. Others come for their children, to raise them in a good country. For me, honestly, Korea has a better climate and better economy ... I can raise my children in a better environment [in Korea] because the [Korean and Vietnamese] cultures are similar; I can adapt more easily to the culture here ... So, you get married, children are growing up, two years, three years, then all of sudden a random person comes and asks me things like "did you come here for money?" "Are you going to send your children to Vietnam when they grow up?"

In a tone of discomfort and irritation, Minh noted how the line between Korean people and marriage-labor immigrants was easily drawn, even in casual conversations. One of the things that dazed me from what Minh shared was the emphasis she put on the phrase "because of money." There are different types of financial benefits that could potentially result from marriage-labor immigration. For example, by marrying a Korean, an immigrant spouse can gain access to various employment opportunities to make money in Korea (Jones & Miller-Chair, 2012). Some immigrants also contribute financially to their parents' living conditions by sending allowances back to their parents' home (Bélanger, Linh, & Duong, 2011).

At the same time, about 50 percent of marriage-labor immigrant families with immigrant wives are struggling financially and living below the poverty line (Cho, 2006; Choi et al., 2011; N.-K. Kim, 2009; S.-Y. S.-Y., Kim, Chang, & K. Kim, 2008). The types of jobs the immigrants can find are also limited due to their language skills (Jones & Miller-Chair, 2012). For these reasons, many marriage-labor immigrant families are beneficiaries of welfare programs in Korea (Choi et al., 2011).

The complexities of conflicting perceptions about marriage-labor immigration in Korean society are demonstrated through the dissonance between the circulating discourses about immigrants as opportunists who pursue financial gain through marriage and the everyday experiences of marriage-labor immigrants as cultural and socioeconomic minorities.

Whether or not marriage-labor immigrants play a role in local and national communities as parents, employees and caretakers, and regardless of their financial situation, the prevalent discourse about the immigrants confine their lifeworlds to a static image of immigrants as cultural trespassers who pollute not only the racial and ethnic homogeneity, but also the financial well-being of the country. In other words, many Koreans have a set of assumptions that lead them to doubt the reason why the marriage-labor immigrants came to Korea and started a family.

When Minh began a family, she encountered some of these assumptions and faced new challenges. After becoming a mother, Minh sensed that people perceived her and her baby differently than how they might have perceived a Korean mother and her baby:

After the baby was born, as I raise the baby, I felt people's eyes ... At first, I was scared and lonely, and I didn't want to talk with others. But after five to six years, I thought, "I can't continue on like this."

After contending for several years with the sense of being scared and lonely, Minh came to a realization that her way of coping with "people's eyes" would not benefit her children. Initially, after she became a mother, Minh did not want to face and acknowledge the cultural stigma against her child and herself. However, she came to the conclusion that she needed to put her daughter's need first as she positioned herself in society. Essentially, she realized that her children needed to be a part of the local community, and in order to facilitate this, she herself needed to change.

Through the lens of heteroglossia, I see Minh continuously navigating the tension between and across different discourses concerning marriage-labor immigrant mothers. The social, emotional, temporal, and spatial conditions through which Minh perceived herself are also continuously changing. While she felt overwhelmed, intimidated, and even distressed about the biased glare against "an immigrant mother" in Korean society, she simultaneously wrestled with the responsibility of meeting her children's social and emotional needs, her hopes of providing a better environment for her children, and her own needs to be acknowledged as a mother who is now established in the local community. In this sense, Minh actively navigated the disparate space between the cultural discourses and her internal desires, making visible the ambiguity and conflict amid available discourses.

“Multicultural” Children and “Failing” Mothers

The cultural stigma against marriage-labor immigrants was also directly related to Minh’s perception of herself as a mother, and her perception of her own children. As a marriage-labor immigrant parent, Minh grappled with the ways in which she and her children were perceived as “different” than their Korean counterparts. In particular, as she navigated various discourses of mothering circulating in Korean society, she contended with whether her children were Korean and/or “multicultural.”

For example, when I asked Minh about her children in 2014—a 7-year-old girl and a 4-year-old boy—she expressed some of her fears and concerns about her children’s experiences at school. She was especially worried about what her children might have to face beyond the safe boundaries of her home. The experience of motherhood in Korea was more complicated for Minh than other Korean moms, because she needed to navigate an educational system she had never experienced. This in-between space, filled with uncertainties and anxieties, made Minh nervous. Particularly, as she tried to leverage her children’s relationship with their teachers and improve their experiences in school, she didn’t know whether the initiatives she made were beneficial or harmful to her children.

There are maybe five kids [from marriage-labor immigrant families]. Less than 10 kids per school ... I told my child’s teacher things like, “Please let me know if there is any problem communicating with my child, or if there is any good information because my child is ‘multicultural.’” ... When you say “multicultural” children compared with Korean children, you say “multicultural” children but actually they are Korean children. So, what I thought was, I made a mistake. When I said that [my children are from marriage-labor immigrant families], I felt like I was drawing a line between my children and other children, rather than making the situation better. Maybe it’s better if I don’t say anything—I thought about that, too.

Even though the number of children from marriage-labor immigrants was slowly growing, Minh was in fear of what was going to happen to her children at school because they were still a minority. Her effort to be the “bridge” between the child and the teacher left Minh with many regrets, for she realized that what she did might have labeled her children. While her children were born and raised in Korea, and their father was native Korean, Minh worried about her children having possible communication problems with

their teachers and needing special attention. Even though she affirmed that the children actually were Korean, she was still concerned that they would be marginalized and fall behind at school. As much as she was attentive to how the children might be treated as outcasts, she partook in the cultural discourses that positioned children from marriage-labor immigrant families as lacking.

The conflicting perspectives displayed in Minh's words about her children took the conversation in a different direction, shifting the focus to Minh as an immigrant mother. As if she was confessing something or sharing thoughts from deep in her heart, Minh added:

Honestly, when it comes to "multicultural" children, the moms are rather lacking, in terms of the language and the social relationships. I wish that people shared information so that the other side [marriage-labor immigrants] can do things [by themselves], instead of just helping out [to the extent that marriage-labor immigrants are dependent on the help]. Unfortunately, teachers don't think that way. This is because for "multicultural" children, there are support centers for "multicultural" families, there is the Ministry of Family and Gender Equality. The teachers assume that there is a lot of help, so they ignore you.

Minh's comment that marriage-labor immigrants fall short compared to Korean mothers surprised me. She explained that Korean society saw her as someone in need, for they assumed she was lacking in the areas of "language and social relationship." This particular perspective on marriage-labor immigrant mothering, positioning marriage-labor immigrants as not "Korean" enough, therefore not competent enough, is one of the most pervasive discourses on local and national levels (N. H.-J. Kim, 2009). Due to this preconception, marriage-labor immigrants are frequently blamed as the reason why their children were "deficient" in terms of academic achievement, language skills, and emotional stability (e.g. see Cho, 2011; Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development, 2006).

Simultaneously, Minh articulated her frustration at being treated as helpless and not being offered adequate assistance, wrestling with the tension between too much help and too little help. Minh desired to be more autonomous, doing things by herself with acquired information, but she sensed that the kinds of help offered to marriage-labor immigrants made them rely on such assistance. Caught between the risk of labeling her own children and the desire to be competent, Minh as a marriage-labor immigrant mother could not win either way.

The discourses of “multicultural” children and “failing” mothers from marriage-labor immigrant families manifested themselves in pervasive ways in my conversations with Minh. It not only influenced how Minh and her children were perceived by the local and national communities, but also how Minh identified herself and her own children. She tried to take ownership of her lifeworld and provide her children with opportunities to be successful in their academics and social relationships. In this process filled with intricate complexities and contradictions, she experienced much anxiety and frustration making sense of disparities between circulating discourses about who she was and her own understanding of herself.

Learning to Mother and Mothering as Labor

As an intermediary space of negotiation, learning has become a substantial part of Minh’s life. She has been studying the Korean language and culture ever since arriving in Korea. Many marriage-labor immigrants who come to Korea through similar circumstances as Minh participate in cooking classes and language programs, in order to better fulfill the roles for which they came. Though sometimes criticized for their underlying assimilationist purpose (Kang, 2010), these programs do help immigrants survive, and in Minh’s case, helped her realize that she had “an aptitude for studying.”

Minh went beyond the level of learning practical skills to live in Korean society, and enrolled in an online university program as an undergraduate student studying business. Learning served as a platform whereby Minh positioned herself as a competent mother able to instruct her own children, while at the same time making her children a higher priority than earning an income. Not every marriage-labor immigrant, however, shares her values. During the interview conducted in 2014, she contrasted her desire for learning with the quite different attitude of Vietnamese women immigrating to Korea nowadays:

Friends that recently came from Vietnam told me, “Why do you study so hard? If you can communicate enough in Korean, you can just go to work [and make money]. Why do you insist on studying so hard?” I don’t think it would be a good idea to set money as the main objective when I just started my life here. If I don’t learn now and work to make money, I can’t teach my babies when I have babies. ... If my kids ask me, “other moms know how to do these things, but why don’t you?”, words like that would break my heart.

The disparities between Minh and her friends' points of views demonstrate one of the significant ways in which marriage-labor immigrants negotiate the available cultural discourses about mothering. In Korean communities, there are a number of expectations and demands towards marriage-labor immigrant mothers, and many of them are rooted in patriarchal and hierarchal values of Confucianism. Such values require the mothers to fulfill the traditional discourses of mother and wife. Because of this, marriage-labor immigrants prioritizing work over other duties at home has caused much tension in their families.

During the interview, Minh strongly voiced her thoughts about the necessity for marriage-labor immigrant mothers to study the Korean language and culture, even though she was fully aware that not every marriage immigrant would agree with her. Associating "learning" with "feeling competent as a marriage-labor immigrant mother living in Korea," she advocated for learning over working and contributing to the household economy. For Minh, learning functioned as a place for negotiation that helped her cope with inner anxiety about being an incompetent mother in Korean society. She was willing to do whatever necessary for her children, a part of her Korean dream, and learning contributed to her sense of competence, her knowledge of the Korean language and culture, and her position in the local community.

One of the things that struck me when Minh told of her conversation with her marriage-labor immigrant friends was the surprising similarities between Korean women, who are refusing to play a role in promoting the values of a hierarchal and patriarchal family structure, and marriage-labor immigrant women, who use the emerging demand for fulfilling cultural needs as an opportunity to pursue their own financial, social, and personal dreams. Even though marriage-labor immigrant women are expected to fill the gap created by the changing values and decisions of Korean women (S. Kim, 2009), marriage-labor immigrant women pursue ways to meet a separate set of needs. The dissonance between what Korean husbands and their families are looking for (a "traditional" wife who will uphold the values of a hierarchal and patriarchal family structure) and what marriage-labor immigrant wives might have in mind (taking advantage of employment opportunities and making money, sending remittance to "the family back home"), which Minh spoke of, might explain the high divorce rate, domestic violence, and other social issues that have surfaced along with the increasing number of marriage-labor immigrant families in Korea.

In addition, Korean cultural discourses about mothering, as they relate to marriage-labor immigration, are typically child centered, positioning the child's interest as competing with or independent from the mothers', rather than being interdependent (Greaves et al., 2004). While mothers are implicitly pressured to be competent and autonomous for the sake of the child (Greaves et al., 2004), they are also subtly asked to channel and demonstrate their competency as a mother through their children, because in Korean culture the idea of "good mothering" is associated with the performance of the child (You & McGraw, 2011).

Discussion: Navigating Different Voices as an Immigrant Mother

In the journey to become a "good mother" as a marriage-labor immigrant in Korea, Minh heard a number of different "voices" that positioned her in multiple ways. The conflicting discourses complicated Minh's lifeworld, directing her attention to differing cultural expectations, norms, and practices. When examined through the notion of heteroglossia, these voices and the discrepancies between them make visible the tension she navigated on a daily basis. For example, she often heard questions like the following:

- "Did you come because of money?"
- "Why did you come even though your [Korean] husband is a lot older than you?"
- "Are you going to send your children to Vietnam when they grow up?"
- "Why do you study so hard? If you can communicate enough in Korean, you can just go to work."
- "Other moms know how to do these things, but why don't you?"

These questions, which came from Korean people, other marriage-labor immigrants, and her imagination (of what her children might say in the future), directed Minh's attention to one "official" image of marriage-labor immigrants in Korea, accusing her of being an incapable mother who moved to Korea through an opportunistic marriage. The questions arose from the various kinds of relationships in her life, complicating the ways in which Minh needed to respond to those questions. A simple denial or rejection of the questions did not necessarily help Minh address them. In fact, Minh herself struggled with this deficit

view of marriage-labor immigrants, and took the position of many Koreans: “Honestly, when it comes to “multicultural” children, the moms are rather lacking, in terms of the language and the social relationships.”

During our interviews, Minh contended with this centripetal force that positioned her as a “not good enough” mother who got married only for a financial gain in multiple ways. For example, at times she addressed the official discourse directly by telling others about her own views. To newer marriage-labor immigrants from Vietnam, for example, she would say, “You need to invest some time in yourself. Learn as much as you can, and study as much as you need. Then think about money.” Even though the fellow immigrants did not necessarily agree with her, causing some tension, Minh dedicated much time to learning about the Korean culture and language, as well as taking college courses.

She also took a proactive stance in talking to her children’s teacher and asking for help: “Please let me know if there is any problem communicating with my child, or if there is any good information because my child is ‘multicultural.’” While she later regretted this and wondered whether or not she had made the right decision for her child, I understood her words as saying she was doing her best to make sure her children did well in school and had access to any helpful information.

Moreover, Minh asserted her legal right as a naturalized citizen and insisted that her children be seen as Korean: “If marriage immigrants came here, we will live here and we will obtain it [a Korean citizenship], and when I obtain the citizenship, my children are Korean.” She was clear in articulating the intention and purposefulness in her decision to immigrate and live in Korea, making it clear that her children are Korean, not “multicultural.” Minh also shared that there were times she experienced herself as Korean. After living in Korea for many years, she felt more Korean than Vietnamese at times, especially when she realized that she spent and managed money in certain ways:

“Usually Korean women ... buy things like new pots and pans, or electronics. When I do that I feel, when I write in the household ledger, I feel like I may have become Korean.”

In this sense, Minh challenged not only the stereotypes that denied other ways of understanding marriage-labor immigrants, but also the emphasis on marriage-labor immigrants as solely spouses and parents. In other words, the ways in which she, as a marriage-labor immigrant mother, created meaning out of multifarious and conflicting

discourses were informed by the roles she played outside the boundaries of her home. Through a heteroglossic lens, what I am suggesting here is that Minh was in a continuous process of contending with the cultural pressure that positioned her in the midst of preconceptions about immigrants and the efforts that fragmented the biased single story.

As demonstrated above, much tension and uncertainty arises when I juxtapose these conflicting discourses from the interviews using the idea of heteroglossia. Minh, as a marriage-labor mother who was “lacking,” wished to be knowledgeable and independent. The way she envisioned herself shifted the common cultural understanding of who marriage-labor immigrants are and provided other possibilities. In this sense, the discourses Minh used to explain herself as a marriage-labor mother made her unpredictable and uncontainable. They deconstructed the “official” discourse about marriage-labor immigrants, by illustrating different underlying beliefs upon which various discourses are established. Examining the contradicting discourses in a contiguous relationship through the Bakhtinian idea of heretoglossia demonstrated the dissonant co-existence of familiar values and beliefs that constructed Minh as a marriage-labor immigrant mother.

Conclusion: Going beyond Minh’s Story

As a marriage-labor immigrant mother, Minh enjoyed learning the Korean language and culture, transforming herself as a wife, mother, worker, and student, and establishing relationships and building a community with those around her. It is important to note that nine years after immigrating to Korea and six years after becoming a naturalized Korean citizen, Minh’s presence, as well as her children’s, in the local and national community continued to question and challenge the virtue of the nation’s homogeneous cultural identity. Despite living in a society entrenched in discourses that often perceive differences as deficiencies, she struggled to make her own voice heard. Negotiating many discourses and intentions that contradict and coalesce, Minh navigated her lifeworld with courage, anxiety, and hope.

As I reflect on my encounters with Minh, I see three different ways in which her story can help us understand the relationship between mothering and the lifeworld of marriage-

labor immigrants in Korea. First, Minh's story conveys the significance of a national cultural identity that functions as a cultural discourse marginalizing immigrant parents and their children. This also means that "Koreanness" could be used as an unattainable ideal that positions immigrants as an inferior group of people who fail to embody the proper national cultural identity (Freeman, 2005).

As a marriage-labor immigrant parent and a naturalized Korean citizen, Minh grappled with discourses that continuously positioned her and her children as outsiders to Korean society. Even though Minh was fulfilling traditional Korean cultural discourses by taking on the roles that some Korean women were refusing to assume (Hwang, 2009; S. Kim, 2009; Lee, 2012), she was confronted with hostile voices that doubted her motivation, qualifications, and judgment as a mother. The notion of "Koreanness" as a national cultural identity functions as a double-edged sword in the sense that on one hand it provided Minh with a set of expectations she needed to fulfill in order to be accepted in the community, yet on the other hand it ostracized her and hindered her from achieving that very goal. While it is debatable whether a national cultural identity is a notion that has a static meaning, it positions immigrant women, including Minh, as always already failing immigrant mothers (Bailey, 2003). The cultural norms, and perspectives on what counts as legitimate and valuable work, combined with the division of labor based on gender (Bloch, 1998), contributed to how Minh was perceived as "lacking" and "at risk" (O'Brien & Swadener, 2006, Polakow, 1994; Swadener & Jagielo, 1998).

Minh's story exemplifies how an idealized notion of "mothers" in a culture influences the everyday lives of immigrant mothers and their mothering practices. In this paper, I conceptualize mothering as a dynamic and fluid notion that reflects culture, history, and place. This notion helps one understand that the ways in which Minh is positioned in Korean society as an immigrant mother is uniquely entangled with beliefs, practices, and power dynamics within the local and national communities (Porter, 2010; Walks & McPherson, 2011). Subsequently, this also calls for the need to examine the equivalent of "Koreanness" in countries with a similar history of immigration; countries in which a national cultural identity serves as a foundation for establishing a value-laden perspective towards marriage-labor immigrant parents and their children. In other words, the discourses that emerged from my interactions with Minh function as an impetus for investigating both

idealized cultural discourses and the manifestations of such discourses about mothering in relation to national cultural identities.

Second, Minh's story articulates the complexity of navigating conflicting discourses of immigrant parents. Negotiating a number of discourses that position them differently, marriage-labor immigrant parents, including Minh, face not only the external pressure to conform to the patterns of local and national communities, but also the internal conflict of juggling contradictory discourses. As I demonstrated through the notion of heteroglossia in the previous section, Minh simultaneously contends with multiple discourses that stem from various viewpoints. This means that making sense of the lifeworlds of marriage-labor immigrants need not be done through a binary or a causal perspective that focuses on a linear logic. As my multiple visits with Minh demonstrate, she subscribed herself to various discourses that are even inconsistent at times. As Tobin (2000) articulates, what emerges during an interview is not necessarily a direct reflection of an informant's psychological perception. Rather, the emergent discourses are based on circulating cultural discourses in the specific context in which Minh was situated. Minh's story challenges the assumption that the immigrant informants are fully aware of their own positions and that they are fully "legible" by others, and it helps acknowledge how immigrant parents navigate multiple discourses in more complex, dynamic, and open-ended ways (Tobin, 2000).

This is also a step forward in acknowledging that navigating the lifeworld as a marriage-labor immigrant is much more than assimilating and adapting to the new ways of life. Minh's story demonstrates that the process of configuring a life in a new cultural context is far from being static and consistent. Marriage-labor immigrants grapple with a number of discourses based on local, national, and international histories of race, gender, class, citizenship, nationality, and culture, which are tightly and intricately entangled with the contemporary demographic changes in Korea. The lifeworlds of immigrant women, and their roles as wives, mothers, and daughter-in-laws, lie at the center of the unfolding and entangling complexities. The discourses of mothering that Minh navigates on a daily basis reflect cultural values, beliefs, and customs, and this demonstrates how the notion of mothering is culturally constructed and situated in a particular temporal and spatial context (Porter, 2010; Walks & McPherson, 2011). In this sense, Minh's story provides alternate perspectives to examine and understand marriage-labor immigrant mothers in Korea by

going beyond the dominant cultural narrative about the increasing number of immigrants moving to the country.

Lastly, Minh's story serves as an example of how mothering is a form of intense labor. Mothering as labor is more than the physical labor of serving as a caretaker. The cultural, emotional, and affective forms of labor that marriage-labor immigrants offer—birthing a child, learning to mother, relating to the in-laws, and navigating the educational system—are indispensable in Korean society (A. E. Kim, 2009; Yang et al., 2012). Fulfilling cultural needs and navigating implicit expectations, the significance of the roles immigrants (and arguably their children) play is not trivial, whether at the local or the national level. For example, marriage-labor immigrants have significantly contributed to increasing the population in rural regions of Korea during an era of a low birth rate (Fackler, 2009; A. E. Kim, 2009; Y. Kim, 2012; Korean National Statistics Office, 2011; S. Park, 2011; Suzuki, 2003). They also play the roles of wives, mothers, and daughters-in-law in place of their Korean counterparts who are becoming ever more career oriented (Hwang, 2009; N. Y. Kim, 2006; S. Kim, 2009; Lee, 2012).

Expanding our understanding of the types of labor performed by marriage-labor immigrant parents can potentially inform and transform the relationship between marriage-labor immigrant families and their Korean counterparts. As important members of Korean society, rather than intruders who are inferior or lacking, marriage-labor immigrants contribute to the facilitation of cultural beliefs and practices. In this sense, it could be argued that the immigrant mothers are actually promoting traditional familial values, rather than hindering such values from manifesting. Minh's accounts force us to reexamine our perspective and look beyond unchallenged cultural preconceptions about "others." They make visible the complexities of the labor in which marriage-labor immigrants engage themselves. They also demonstrate how the lives of immigrant parents are situated in the larger cultural context that necessitates their labor.

Moreover, the notion of mothering as a form of labor resonates with how mothering is deeply rooted in cultural contexts, in which there exist assumptions and stereotypes about what counts as legitimate work (Bloch, 1998; Walks & McPherson, 2011). Recognizing the significance of the labor performed by marriage-labor immigrants in Korean society helps examine the taken-for-granted assumptions about the immigrants as cultural "others" and

inferior members of the local and national communities (Freeman, 2005; Said, 1979).

Visiting and revisiting Minh's story serves as an impetus for establishing renewed perspectives on the role of "Koreanness," the complexities of marriage-labor immigrants' lifeworlds, and mothering as cultural, emotional, and affective labor. Minh's story demonstrates contradicting and coalescing discourses that immigrant mothers negotiate on a daily basis. As immigrant mothers, including Minh, continue to navigate cultural discourses about immigrants and their mothering in Korea, the need for understanding their lifeworlds continues to grow. Examining the intersections between discourses on mothering and immigrant families in Korea, as they manifest themselves through the story of Minh, offers a renewed understanding of how marriage-labor immigrant mothers fulfill, contest, and negotiate cultural discourses.

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