The Rainbow Chorus: Performing Multicultural Identity in South Korea

Hilary Finchum-Sung

Put multiculturalism and Korea in the same sentence and a potential paradox materializes. Korea’s ethnic nationalism, with its espousal of one people, one blood, has driven government policies and local identity for decades. In recent years, escalating numbers of foreign workers and “marriage migrants” have led local and national governments to develop social programs designed to assimilate immigrants into Korean society as well as educate native Koreans about these foreigners. Various multicultural family centers, like the Center for a Multicultural Korea (Han’guk tamunhwasa sent’ǒ/CMCK) in Seoul, have been set up around the peninsula to advance this goal. In this paper, I examine the Seoul-area Center’s spearhead program, the Rainbow Chorus, as a visible endeavor both projecting the Center’s goals as well as working within a specific Korean construal of the term “multicultural;” a construct engaging domestic socioeconomic and cultural hierarchies as well as emphasizing assimilation. The Center, choral program, and choristers represent a contemporary liminality within Korean society; one balanced between complete assimilation and the desire to nurture Korea’s burgeoning diversity through integration and education. The choristers themselves serve as symbolic icons of contemporary demographic change. Simultaneously, the Chorus embodies a potential paradigm shift, acting as a metaphor for Korea’s hoped-for trajectory: a future in which a diverse Korea maintains equal footing with global

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competitors. Through a heuristic case study examining the choristers’ training and performance processes as well as the Chorus’s rhetorical connections to Korea’s multiculturalism, this paper offers a perspective on the meaning of ‘multiculturalism’ for children in the South Korean context.

Keywords: multiculturalism/tamunhwajui, multicultural family/tamunhwa kajong, choral music, identity

You and I singing the bass line of the ‘Sanctus’ in the Mass in B Minor make our temporary impress on the movement – but we are, all the time, being secretly moulded [sic] by the hand of Bach. To what end? – (Young 1981: 10)

“Our rainbow chorus is like a bridge, and if you cross that rainbow bridge you can reach a more wonderful world, one without discrimination and prejudice.” – (Ko 2011: 119)

Rarely are musical experiences purely musical. From Plato’s ideal Republic within which the moral law of music shaped desirable subjects to Chosôn’s (1392-1910) neo-Confucian realizations of music as a tool in developing “right-mindedness,” the experience of music can take us beyond the mere physicalities of sound production and perception, accentuating the socio-cultural realities of our existence (Purshouse 2007). Music, thus, acts as a technology allowing individuals to not only change their bodies, but also to alter their souls, conduct, and ways of being (Foucault 1999). As such, musical experience exhibits transformative potential. Research on choral music attests to the transformative processes in which group singing plays a key role. With the choral director enforcing desired behavior – beyond musical, I might add, to moral and psychological states – through “surveillance mechanisms,” choral members are not only transformed into choral singers but also participate in a reconstitution of the self within society (Garnett 2005, 265). Rooted in the choregos concept of classical Greece, which implies controlled harmonic union signifying societal order and accord, choruses create opportunities for members to belong to an organized unit and for that unit as a whole to participate in a process of ethical and moral self-realization (Calame 2001, 40-44).

Choruses enlisting particular members of a society such as women, people with special needs, and ethnic minorities take performance as a means through which both performers and audiences can engage in socio-musical phenomena aimed at articulating and reconstituting the marginal within society. Studies on choruses of handicapped children, for example, indicate audiences aware of the physical limitations of the children both make concessions for imperfections in
performance and openly sympathize with the performers (see Cassidy and Sims 1991). The framing of the chorus as one for a particular subset of children creates an opportunity within which performance can be interpreted as an expression of their place within society. In the early-to-mid twentieth century African American choirs such as the Fisk Jubilee Singers and the Hampton Choir were not only renowned for competent performances but also as representatives of their race. Traveling abroad, the choristers became “saviors of an uncivilized Africa” as well as representatives of “a distinct and authentic cultural community” (Metzelaar 2006, 180) in the United States. Likewise, the African American children of Susan Paul’s 19th century abolitionist children’s chorus became, in the act of performance, both political messengers and rightful citizens of the United States (Brown 2002). Unlike national choruses, which aim to mobilize the nation, choruses of ethnic minority and diasporic communities offer an opportunity to reflect on the inclusivity and exclusivity of the nation and “remind us that choral music of peoples without nations also contributes powerfully toward the shaping of the nation” (Bohlman 2002, 95-97).

Through an individual case study, I endeavor to examine the ambivalences of Korea’s multicultural policy, rhetoric, and practice in connection with a group of children labeled “multicultural” and the ways by which these ambivalences emerge in the process of performance. The Center for a Multicultural Korea’s (Han’guk tamunhwasa sent’ō/CMCK) children’s choir, the Rainbow Chorus (Tamunhwasa ḏorin hapch’angdan reinbou hapch’angdan), began as a social program for non-Korean children and children of mixed heritage living in South Korea (hereafter, Korea). As representatives of the “foreign” existing within Korea’s borders, the children are labeled “multicultural,” a label designating their membership in an “outsider” population (Andrew Kim 2010, 124). Like the above-described minority choirs, the Chorus began not only as a social program for children in need but also as a mouthpiece for the multicultural community. In this paper, I aim to demonstrate the role of the Rainbow Chorus’s training and performance space as a transformative one within which difference is made visible and likeness is rhetorically emphasized.

The paper considers performance space as a metaphor for the complexities of Korea’s multiculturalism. Performance reinforces the specific regional and

2. Jen Ang writes, “[A]mbivalence pervades the micropolitics of everyday life in a multicultural society. While the dominant ethos of multiculturalism both reinforces and obscures this ambivalence, it is important to examine these ambivalent moments because they have significant consequences for the prospect of our capability to be ‘living with difference’” (1996: 38).
socio-political character of Korea’s multiculturalism, which delineates an underprivileged and, thus, inferior, population within the nation in need of help and acceptance from the dominant South Korean (hereafter, Korean) population. The physical, aural, and rhetorical presentation of the children accentuates this paradigm. While the children are certainly objectified against a backdrop of societal curiosity and paternalism, they are also performing identities that place them squarely within societal structures.\(^4\) The chorus’s performance space affords a means for expressing alterity, but the space, as well, creates an opportunity in which the “other” can become familiar, emotionally and aesthetically transcending difference. The latter point represents a crucial distinction from cosmetic multiculturalism in which the exotic other provides a convenient escape for the dominant population. The rhetoric of multiculturalism (examined in the pages below) frames the children’s performance as a demonstration of sameness, their likeness to their Korean peers and, as such, accentuates the standards of assimilation and conformity – ideals most acceptable in the Korean context. While their difference makes them worthy of attention and social welfare, their sameness makes them safe and their presence palatable to the majority population.

The performance space represents a time and location within which multiculturalism is taking shape, and the children are the physical embodiment of that space. Homi Bhabha considers this space one of ambivalence; a ‘third space’ in between sameness and otherness, equality and difference. According to Bhabha, such a space can serve as a beginning, a point from which identities and oppositions can lead to new hybrid cultural forms and meanings (Bhabha 1994 and 1990). While the multicultural child alone inhabits a marginal realm, one of uncertain status and limited potential as a contributing member of Korean society, the Chorus connects these children into a unit. Together, through vocal training, deportment, and costume they confirm their alterity as a starting point from which to conceive their potential as the children of “Korea.” Examination of the CMCK choral program offers an intimate example of the rhetorical and performative articulation of the “multicultural” in South Korea.

To date, the great majority of academic research on Korea’s multiculturalism has focused on cognitive development and language acquisition in multicultural families, policies related to marriage migrants, and the ways in which Korean multiculturalism differs from other forms of multiculturalism (Kim, Im, and

\(^4\) Bell Hooks’s (2004) writing on race and power differentials stresses the gaze of the dominant reinforcing the relative weakness of minority populations. In the Korean case, the ‘pleasure’ derived from contact with the other rests in power differentials; obtaining pleasure from aiding the societal weak.
Han 2007; Y. Kim 2007; O 2007; Yang 2009). The few studies on children’s 
programs have been dedicated to suggesting curriculum and lesson plans for 
multicultural education (Ch’u 2010; Pak 2010). While there exist various 
programs, such as after-school language classes and mentoring, as an 
ethnomusicologist I find the choral activities particularly appealing since, in this 
case, musical aesthetics, cultural stereotypes, social hierarchies, and the dialogue 
of belonging intertwine in the performance of a Korea-specific multicultural 
identity. The Rainbow Chorus was the first of its kind in Korea and therefore is 
the most established of the multicultural children’s choirs. While in the past 
year, additional multicultural choirs for children as well as an adult professional 
a cappella ensemble have emerged in and outside of Seoul, this study remains 
focused on the Rainbow Chorus because of its solid presence and visibility in 
the Korean context. \(^5\) Nevertheless, my hope is this study can reach beyond its 
obvious limitations and reveal the ways in which a Korean domestic perspective 
on status, belonging, and race are played out in the activities of and public 
discourse about this multicultural chorus. \(^6\)

As a member of a “multicultural” family in Korea and a parent of one of 
the choristers and children enrolled in multicultural family programs, my access 
to the programs has presented an opportunity to examine multiculturalism in 
Korea from an alternative angle. \(^7\) Whereas the phenomenological twists and 
turns of contemporary ethnography often call for the researcher to consider her 
place within the research context (Titon 1997, 92), I have struggled with ethical 
issues of researching an issue that has become intensely personal. Interactions as 
a parent have revealed subtle assumptions regarding the label “multicultural;” 
not all multicultural children are equal and some more deserving of the label 
“multicultural” than others. For example, two children of American parentage 
(one a child of mine) were encouraged to join the Chorus, but the parents of 
both children were told repeatedly by the director that their child did not really 
“fit” in since “multicultural children are pitiful, you know (tamanhwa aidul 
pulssang hajanayo)” (Yi Hyŏnjŏng, personal communication, 23 February 
2012, Seoul). The children, being of American heritage, and therefore supposed 
high status, threatened the construct of the wretched multicultural family.

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\(^5\) These include professional adult group Montant and Nivea Korea’s Arůndūri Chorus both 

\(^6\) While recognizing the obvious merit of research on multicultural families in urban and rural 
settings, an examination of rural multicultural family centers is beyond the scope of this paper.

\(^7\) I received endorsement from Yi Hyŏnjŏng, the Director of choir programs at the CMCK, to 
conduct research and to write about my findings.
Experiences such as these allow me to contribute to current research on multiculturalism in the Korean context through a first-hand consideration of those often labeled "our future" (uri mirae). The paper should be seen as a heuristic case from which lessons regarding the expression of complex and burgeoning identities in contemporary Korea might be drawn. In the pages below, I briefly examine multicultural policy and rhetoric in South Korea before examining the CMCK's choral program, including training, performance contexts, and outreach.

South Korea's Multiculturalism and the Multicultural Family

Multiculturalism remains an idea in progress, manifest in government programs struggling to come to terms with difference and the desire for unity. In its ever-evolving form, multiculturalism fundamentally, "tries to restore a sense of wholeness in a postmodern era that fragments human thought and life" (Trotman 2002, ix). Multiculturalism has taken on meaning in policy form to handle difference within national borders. Canada instituted the first national policy in 1971, followed by similar policies in Australia and parts of Europe, in order to handle the needs of non-European migrants. Within the United States, multicultural policies have been amended over time from assimilationist policies, implying a "process of producing cultural and linguistic homogeneity" (Bolaffi et al. 2003, 186), to ones that emphasize integration, the recognition of heterogeneous groups as contributing institutionally to society at large (Kymlicka and He 2005, 26). 8 The North American construct of multiculturalism aims for an acceptance of hybridity while still recognizing cultural difference. The term "multicultural," rather than the terms "multiethnic" and "multiracial," leaves room for flexibility in interpretation, which explains its multiple and fluctuating interpretations around the world.

As the Asian region has begun to experience palpable population shifts, the governments and people of respective countries consider ways to accommodate minorities by following liberal democratic models of multiculturalism of places like the U.S. and Canada (Kymlicka and He 2005, 1). Yet, multicultural policies and/or ideals often have been taken at face value without consideration of the specific cultural context to which they would be applied. Policies of exclusion and assimilation (both representative of the Korean case, see Andrew Kim

8. Will Kymlicka (2004) discusses intercultural citizenship as recognition of diversity within the state along with links outside of perceived national borders.
2010) in tandem with a celebration of the exotic newcomer have worked temporarily, but have proven dissatisfactory solutions to incorporating the “other” into a seemingly homogenous population. According to Cornwell and Stoddard, “One can ‘do’ multiculturalism on a certain shallow level without addressing issues of domination, assimilation, hegemony, resistance, allocation of resources, and so forth” (2001, 12). In Asia, in particular, the key to success in integrating migrant and minority populations means a re-conceptualization of the state as transnational and a part of a greater cultural flow within the region.

Korea transformed in the 1990s from labor exporter to importer, offering an environment of economic growth that attracted foreign workers. After the initial wave of manual laborers, the mid-1990s saw a great increase in foreign women entering Korea to work in care-oriented services, and the general presence of foreign workers increased over 130% between 1997 and 2006. Social circumstances that both initiated and continue to fuel the accommodation of foreign workers include a population of men outnumbering that of women, Korean women unwilling to marry men in rural areas, an increasingly aging population, and a shortage of laborers willing to work in 3D jobs (dirty, dangerous, demeaning; see Connell 1993). These factors have meant an ever-increasing population of people who come to Korea not only to work, but take up roots as members of the society. South Korea is only beginning to grapple with this massive perceptual shift. The new migrant and permanent resident population has created cause for concern regarding integration of the “others” into Korean society as well as inspired a great deal of interest in “multiculturalism,” or tamunhwajui.

Emerging only recently on Korea’s socio-political, economic, and cultural radar, South Korea’s multicultural discourse became politically correct within a very short time span (Han Geon-soo 2007). With a national and cultural identity rooted in the early 20th century, Korea’s tanil minjok (a single people) ideal has emphasized homogeneity and racial distinction from Korea’s Asian neighbors. Emerging during the Japanese occupation period (1910-1945), this emphasis on shared bloodline, culture, and character traits set the stage for

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9. 88.5% unskilled workers (most of Chinese, Vietnamese, Philippine, or Indonesian origins), 10.2% professionals (most of U.S., Canadian, British, and Japanese origins), and 2% entertainment (most of Philippine, Chinese, Russian, and Ukrainian origins) (Han 2007:51).

10. Freeman (2005) and Abelmann and Kim (2005) address the rural bachelor dilemma in contemporary Korea through an examination of programs for migrant brides and the plights of rural families increasingly looking to foreign brides as marriage options for their eligible and aging bachelors.
contemporary ideas regarding citizenship and belonging (Shin 2006; Palais 1995; Cho 1998). While ethnicity remains important in claiming Koreanness, other factors, such as the ability to contribute to South Korea’s development and having South Korean citizenship, have begun slowly to compete with emphasis on bloodline (Yoon et al. 2008). The recent population changes and an ever-expanding diasporic community have challenged previous ideas on belonging, forging paradigm shifts related to what it means to be Korean. Despite these subtle shifts, Han (2007) contends multiculturalism has yet to be considered seriously beyond use in slogans or in rhetoric for a future Korea, a future in which diversity is needed “so that the country does not fall behind” (Andrew Kim 2010, 210).

There is no doubt, however, that multiculturalism has become increasingly significant in Korea. Andrew Kim’s survey of newspaper articles from 1960-1991 reveal tamunhwajuui (multiculturalism) conceptualized as an external concept, referring specifically to the socio-political and cultural climate of other countries. Yet, since the mid-2000s the term “multiculturalism” has been applied domestically with increasing frequency, aligning with a quest to globalize and keep up with foreign competitors (2010,106). The Roh Moo-hyun administration (2003-2008) instigated measures to alleviate the domestic labor shortages such as rights and benefits to migrant works and establishing social welfare programs for migrant brides and their families (see Andrew Kim 2010 for details of these programs). At present, out of a South Korean population of 49,219, 537, 2.54% are considered foreign (Ministry of Justice 2007; Ch’u 2010). The majority of these immigrants, especially those of Asian origin are from countries considered to be of low status compared to Korea, such as the Philippines, Vietnam, and Mongolia (Han 2007). So-Mang Yang divides foreign populations in South Korea broadly into four categories: marriage migrants (foreign spouses of Korean nationals), foreign workers, ethnic Chinese, and settlers from North Korea (Yang 2009, 20). Hierarchies in social status of migrants based on aspects such as profession and status of home country have

11. Recent works on multicultural education (see Pak 2010 and Ch’u 2010) emphasize Korea’s non-homogeneous roots in efforts to debunk such an ethnic-nationalist ideal. Pak Ch’önung, for example, retraces Korean history, detailing episodes of racial and cultural interchange and fluidity from the time of the Three Kingdoms (57-668) through the Chosön era (1910-1392).

12. Research conducted by The Survey Research Center at Sungkyunkwan University (Korean General Social Survey) in 2003 and 2007 report similar findings.

13. Evidence of this can be found in the National Assembly’s discouragement of the use of terms such as t’wigi (half-breed), bonhyööl (mixed blood) and sansu byölt’ong (pure blood).
been noted.\(^\text{14}\)

Popular conceptions often cast assumptions about the gender, socio-economic status and home country of those labeled “multicultural.” A *tamunhwa* survey sent home from my daughter’s school, for example, assumed that the non-Korean parent in the household was 1) a woman and 2) from East, South, Southeast, or Central Asia. Assumptions regarding the gender and home-country of the multicultural parent serve to solidify the perception of “multicultural families” (legally defined as one Korean spouse and a foreign national with Korean residency) as the socially marginal, particularly because other Asians and people of color are typically understood as inferior to Koreans (Freeman 2005, 96; Chŏn et al. 2008, 123). In-Jin Yoon et al. note, “[T]he public perception that [immigrants] are disadvantaged and mistreated helps South Koreans to have sympathy toward them” (Yoon et al. 2008). Such perceptions feed government policies of support for foreign residents, such as the free daycare program for multicultural families instituted in March 2011, as well as the public’s support of these programs.\(^\text{15}\) Hideko Yamaguchi, President of the Seoul Marriage Immigrants Network (SMIN) contended, “There are gaps among multicultural families, just like other Korean families. So it is a misconception to ‘help’ [all] multicultural families because they are [all] poor” (2010).

Nevertheless, many of the multicultural families remain stereotyped as poor, uneducated, and needy, bearing much of the responsibility to assimilate with the help of free programs offered at multicultural centers. The social service organizations known as “multicultural family support centers” focus energies on programs aiding the assimilation of marriage migrants into Korean society. Located in cities and in the provinces these centers provide services such as Korean language education programs, educational programs for couples and families, programs to promote cultural understanding, childcare support, and interpretation and translation (R. Kim and T. Kim 2011). As of spring 2011, the CMCK reported a total of 200 multicultural centers in Seoul and 160 in the provinces. The centers also spearhead initiatives to prevent prejudice against

\(^{14}\) Yoon, Song, and Bae verified this with a review of the 2006 Korean Consciousness and Value Survey. In this survey, many South Koreans admitted to treating people from advanced countries better than people from developing countries, as well as a difference in attitude towards people based on skin color (Yoon et al. 2008: 334-335). Also, see the detailed individual case studies in Han 2007; Freeman 2005; Abelmann and Kim 2005.

\(^{15}\) Following a Ministry of Health and Welfare report citing the average income of multicultural families at 40 percent lower than that of the typical Korean household, the Lee Myung-bak administration announced in September 2010 that the state would direct 3.26 trillion won to cover free childcare. All multicultural families receive this benefit, regardless of family income.
multicultural families, such as public programs aimed at raising awareness of cultural diversity.

As noted briefly above, not all foreign individuals with children are included into the categorization “multicultural family” (tamunhwa kajōng). According to the Support for Multicultural Families Act (2008), “Multicultural family support provisions are applied to families in which a foreign national [or naturalized citizen] and a Korean national in a de facto marriage are raising their children.”16 2009 statistics from the Korean National Statistics Office indicate out of 309,759 marriages reported nationally, 33,300 were international marriages (kukche kyörbon), 2010 figures released by the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology, indicate approximately 30,000 children born of these international unions currently attend elementary and middle schools.17 Figures released by the Ministry (see Table 1) reveal a steady increase in school enrollment of children of international marriages.

This growing presence of tamunhwa kajōng progeny has inspired multicultural education programs in schools and community centers. Such programs have been designed to both assimilate tamunhwa children into society as well as educate non-tamunhwa children about them, emphasizing surface-level distinctions such as food, music, dress, and accessories (Su 2007). Yet, with the focus on the assimilation of multicultural children and simple cultural

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lessons for “regular Korean children,” much development is needed.18 Educators are now encouraged to teach about cultural tolerance, with lesson plans that focus on commonalities and understanding cultural, and sometimes physical, differences (Ch’u 2010). The later aspect, in particular, has garnered recent attention with the publication of reports on attitudes towards multicultural children, beginning with a 2006 report by the Han’guk ch’ŏngsonyŏn sangdamwŏn (Korea Youth Counseling Institute) which indicated that while many multicultural juveniles see themselves as Korean, “regular youth” (ilban ch’ŏngsonyŏndŭl) perceived the multicultural youths as different (83). The tamunhwa programs and suggested curricula represent a work-in-progress, a process in which ideas regarding Koreanness and foreignness are continuously revised.

The Center for a Multicultural Korea’s Rainbow Chorus

The CMCK includes programs designed primarily for multicultural children (tamunhwa ŏrinidŭl) who now make up this second generation of multicultural residents in Korea.19 The Center’s programs have been developed to bolster the confidence of the socially disadvantaged and to intercept cultural clashes, preventing potentially chronic social problems before they build momentum. The Rainbow Chorus serves as the Center’s most active, and most public, program.

Recognizing the precarious situation of most young multicultural children, former broadcasting radio announcer Yi Hyŏnjong and a group of her colleagues founded CMCK in 2008. They were both intrigued by the concept of ‘multiculturalism’ in Korea and prompted by the impact of NFL star Hines Ward’s visit to Korea. Accompanied by his Korean mother, Ward’s visit was a pivotal moment for the media promotion of a multicultural ethos in Korea. The

18. The phrases ilban ŏrinidŭl or Han’guk ŏrinidŭl (regular/Korean children) appear often in the literature about multicultural families (see S. O, Y. Kim, and Y. Kim 2009, 137, Yuyŏng Kim 2009, 30) as a normative standard against which children of multicultural families are compared. The contrast symbolized in the expression – representing multicultural children as different and therefore not normal within Korean society – is one strongly evident in Korea’s multicultural rhetoric.

19. “Multicultural children” are referred to as tamunhwa ŏrinidŭl or tamunhwa aidŭl in the spoken vernacular. Sometimes the phrase used is oeguk ŏrinidŭl (foreign children). Writers of recent literature on multiculturalism and multicultural education in Korea appear to prefer the term tamunhwa kajŏng chanyŏs or tamunhwa kajŏng adong (children of multicultural families). (see Pak Ch’ŏnûng 2010).
media frenzy surrounding his visit highlighted the “plight of mixed race children,” providing NGOs fuel to pressure the government into developing constructive policies for multicultural families (Andrew Kim 2010, 118). With the granting of facilities by the Myŏngnak Buddhist temple in Seoul, Yi and her colleagues embarked on creating social programs that would help the growing number of multicultural families within the community. They had noticed that, while most programs focused on the rights of migrant workers or assimilating foreign-born wives into the culture, few existed that focused exclusively on the welfare of the children.

The multicultural first generation (tamunhwa ilsedae) made a deliberate choice to come here ... many have had a hard time living here, you know? Those from Southeast Asia, in particular.... The second generation didn’t have a choice to be born here, but they were. If we just let these children go, then it will be a big problem in Korea. So, we started to focus our attentions on children. (Yi Hyŏnjŏng interview, 15 March 2011, Seoul)

Initial programs included a mentor program through which college students volunteered their time in Seoul-area schools to mentor a multicultural child and
help the children with their homework.

Yi noticed the overall lack of confidence and defeated demeanor of the children who suffered teasing and bullying at their respective schools. In a search for ways to help the children, she was inspired by activities of the African Children’s Choir, a chorus famed for taking children from dire situations and instilling them with hope and potentially better futures, and the French film “The Chorus,” in which a music teacher transforms at-risk boys in post-World War II France. 20 “When I saw that film,” Yi recalls, “I thought, ‘wow, a chorus could really have power [hapch’angdan him i ikkuna].’” In July 2009, the Rainbow Chorus – Korea’s first multicultural children’s chorus – took form and the following is her narrative regarding its beginnings:

There weren’t that many children from America like your daughter. The children were mostly from Japan, China, South and Southeast Asia. They were so gloomy and when I got them together they didn’t really respond to me. But, then we went to camp and kept practicing, and the children became close because they could relate to each other since they were all multicultural youngsters. There, we shot a documentary, and when the children did interviews they cried and related their stories; it was like they were releasing all of this pent up tension and energy. When it was broadcast many people saw it. We started to get support from people .... The result of all these activities was a noticeable change in the children. They were much brighter and more confident. The before and after case was so significant from doing the choir, and in the process I learned a lot about these children and how to teach them. (Yi Hyŏnjŏng interview, 15 March 2011, Seoul)

Yi’s learning curve was, perhaps, as steep as the children’s. While she has a background in both broadcasting and community services, Yi had no experience in directing a children’s choir. Neither did she have any experience in music performance and practice. Although manuals on the direction of children’s choruses emphasize the role of the chorus as providing a music educational experience in addition to benefitting the developing psyches of young children, the role of the Rainbow Chorus appears to rest wholly on extra-musical elements such as identity, confidence, and promotion of multicultural education.

Two significant ideas emerge from Yi’s narrative above: one of social hierarchies in Korean society and the other of transformations within these hierarchies. Yi’s delineations between children of different origins reflect domestic Korean ideas regarding regional and international hierarchies. Domestically, Korea is often placed in the top tier of regional developments, and

the sense of economic superiority that this position fosters leads to common cultural perceptions in Korea of individuals from Southeast Asia and South Asia as occupying a lower social position (Kyŏngsŏk O 2007; Korean Women’s Development Institute 2007; Sukhyŏn Wŏn 2008). Particularly because they are considered of low social status, many individuals from those regions receive a great deal of pity from the Korean populace, but most of this pity derives from a sense of regional paternalism. Individuals from developed and relatively powerful nations, on the other hand, are considered to be of relatively high status and, thus, treated accordingly. Yi’s emphasis on the origins of these children’s parents draws the listener to an assumed understanding of their low social status and marginal position in Korean society. This strengthens her conviction regarding the urgency in providing these children with a social outlet and support.

Yi also accentuates the “before and after” experiences of the children, transformed by the newfound ability to express themselves openly in an environment with other children of similar backgrounds and experiences. This particular idea serves as the crux of the Chorus’s appeal. When emceeing performances of the Rainbow Chorus and in media appearances, Yi consistently refers to the transformative role of the Chorus in the lives of these children. Such a change remains one of the foundational goals of the chorus. The employment of children’s choruses in social reform has been a relatively common practice historically. In Victorian England, for example, institutions for working class children used the choir experience to refine children’s characters as well as to alter society’s perceptions of the working class (see Olwage 2004). Such rhetorical framing of the Chorus’s purpose guides expectations regarding the Chorus’s goals: to demonstrate how the performance activity, and participation in CMCK’s programs, benefit the children of multicultural families.

The Chorus has been able to garner support from major corporations like KBS broadcasting and government organizations such as the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism. The children perform at multiple events – benefits, promotions, awards ceremonies – and often with well-known artists such as In Suni (the well-known “Blasian” artist) and the K-Pop girl group Kara. The Chorus has also been featured in commercials for government campaigns aimed at encouraging empathy toward marginal populations, like the handicapped or ethnic minorities; most notably a multicultural family campaign sponsored by the Presidential Council on National Branding (Taet’ongnyŏng chiksok kukka pûraendŭ wiwŏnhoe) and the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family (Yŏsŏng kajokpu). In the televised campaigns,
children from the Chorus are featured telling their dreams and a voice over states: "Our dreams are different, but our spirit is the same. If we work together like voices in harmony (hwai'm ch'ŏrŏm), we can become one and build a better Korea (Taeban min'guk). Living together with multicultural families we can build a stronger Korean society."\(^{21}\) The children are shown in concert regalia ("ethnic" costumes, as described below) and parents are shown in the audience both smiling and wiping tears from their eyes. The children were also featured in Hyundai Motors Gift Car Campaign commercials as potential recipients of a mini-van for their chorus activity use. Individuals pledged their support and left messages on the message board for the children such as following one, by a child: "Rainbow Chorus, we’re the same age! I want to be a caring friend and help you. Be strong. ^^"\(^{22}\) The children, in these campaigns and in performance, represent a community in need of support from the larger Korean community. In addition, because "social diversity has been identified as an index of [Korea's] stature among nations" (Abelmann and Kim 2005,107), the children also represent a community needed in Korea's quest for global competitiveness. Gaining international acknowledgment of Korea's cosmopolitan efforts at tolerating ethnic and cultural diversity appears to be a primary goal in the campaigns to encourage social inclusivity.

Training and Performance Competence

Performance style and repertory support this message of "hope," and serve to showcase the children's performance abilities, despite the fact that they are multicultural. The common perception regarding multicultural families lacking the resources for success available to average Korean citizens fuels an assumption that these children cannot compete with "regular" Korean children. In the fall of 2009, a flyer was sent home from school offering an audition opportunity for the musical "Annie" and free pre-audition training for tamunhwu children. After an initial pre-audition, the tamunhwu children would train for two weeks in order to prepare them for the real auditions with "Korean children" (Han'guk ŏrinidŭl) – despite the fact that the majority of these tamunhwu children were Korean by nationality, having been born in Korea and to a father or mother who is Korean.\(^{23}\) The flyer included the statement, "This is an

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21. The video can be found online at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uaW6Ov4k9zl&feature=related Accessed 20 April 2012.


23. One exception was a child of parents from Nigeria.
opportunity for even multicultural children to become musical stars in Korea! (tamunhwǝ ǝriniidul to Taehan min'guk myujik'ol siut'a ka toel su innin khoe)" (my emphasis). A film crew from the Educational Broadcasting System (EBS) followed the children's training, with the final episode featuring the auditions in which all but one tamunhwǝ child failed to make the final cut. At the audition, "regular children" were shown acing their auditions while many of the tamunhwǝ children were shown crying or bombing the audition. The program underscored cultural stereotypes regarding the inability of tamunhwǝ kids to succeed in the Korean context due to language barriers and poor access to resources. While my conversations with parents of the children revealed their delight at receiving such an opportunity, as a parent of one of the “auditionees” and having understood fairly early on in the process that this was no “audition,” I found the entire matter heartbreak. From my perspective, the children – and their parents – were unwittingly duped into filming a TV show for which the only outcome was a reconfirmation of the children’s low and marginal status (in this case, in connection with their abilities and competitiveness) in Korean society.

In order to acquire competitive competence, the children of the Rainbow Chorus learn vocal production techniques, diction, interpretation, and performance presentation. While Yi notes that it is not the children’s abilities – even offering the perspective that the chorus itself is “not that great” (Yi Hyônjŏng interview, 15 March 2011, Seoul) – but rather the identity of the children that intrigues audiences, performance presentation is taken quite seriously as an indicator of program success. Proficient performances facilitate audience interest and highlight the efficacy of the Center’s programs. Therefore, fine performance aptitude fuels enthusiasm regarding the chorus as a “success story” and supports the Center’s efforts to support multicultural families since such aptitude is “rarely neutral with reference to the operations of power in wider culture” (Garnett 2005, 262). The children, in the quest for performance competency, become emissaries for the potential in the multicultural community – responding to societal assumptions regarding capabilities – while simultaneously advertising the social programs the community would need to succeed. The group comes together in performance through vocal skills, costume, movement, and rhetoric, augmenting the identities of the children and the goals of the Chorus.

Most noticeable is the performance behavior of the children – with backs straight and chins up, their posture serves to communicate solid training and confidence. As Yi confirmed above, while the abilities of the children might not be of the highest standards, the physical presentation of the children remains the
crux of their appeal. Paul Roe warns us that “audiences hear partly through their eyes” (1983, 65) in an effort to underscore the fundamental practice of good deportment in performance. Traditionally, chorus practice has stressed uniformity of chorus members (Calame 2001, 22-33). Deportment is indispensable to good choral practice, and refers to not only physical presentation of the members but also to their focus on the choir director. The chorus director represents authority on stage, and the power of the figure conducting the group singing performance is evident in the directive “All eyes on the choir director.” The conformity valued in a choral performance is enforced and controlled by the chorus director. Compliance to standards, evident in proper and uniform demeanor, encourages companionship and citizenship among the members.

Costume and physical presence enhance the effectiveness of proper deportment. In the case of the Rainbow Chorus, the varying skin tones, facial features, and dress of some of the children – most noticeably that of an Iraqi girl with head covering – communicate difference, lending authenticity to their performance as multicultural children. To augment this “authenticity,” the children are dressed in ethnic costumes for the vast majority of their performances (see figure 2). These costumes are often at odds with a child’s actual heritage, such as a child of Chinese and Korean parentage wearing a kimono or a child of African parentage dressed in Swiss national costume; evidence of a homogenization of the “other” in contrast to “Korean” in this context. The costume choice essentially aids the visual impact of the children’s presence as “multicultural” since the majority of the children remain physically indistinguishable from their Korean peers.

Such an apparent spotlighting of ethnicity coincides with the discourse of televised multicultural family campaigns (“although their skin color is different/ p’ibu saekkal taru˘ijinan” ... ) which inevitably underscore a difference in skin color and customs from typical Koreans. However, in reality, physical differences are often slight, which points to the pervasiveness of the tanil minjok ideal in constructing difference and the influence of imported ideas of “diversity” stressing skin color, cultural, and costume differences in framing this difference. In this respect, bloodline underscores notions of belonging and non-belonging, for which “difference” remains a condition. Children whose features and/or skin tone are noticeably different will stand out as a “foreigner,” an often privileged position for children of mixed white heritage but precisely the opposite for children of mixed black heritage (Chôn et al 2008, 123).24 Some

24. Research conducted for Honbyŏresो tamunbwaro [From Mixed-Blood to Multicultural]
Figure 2. The Costumes of the Rainbow Chorus (photo by author)

children who are able to physically “pass” (*t’i ka naji annin*) as Korean go to
great lengths to hide their parentage from peers or risk treatment as outcasts if
their identity is revealed, such as one child who was “outed” by her teacher as
the child of a Japanese mother during a lesson on the Japanese occupation (Kim
Wŏn 2011, 165-168). Those who look similar to Koreans are often referred to
as “Korean-like” (*Han’gyugin katta*) but still not 100 percent Korean (Chŏn et al
2008: 123) particularly due to the fact that one parent is not Korean. While
other factors such as linguistic competence weigh in on marking difference
(Chŏn et al. 2008, 56), in the context of the Chorus, costume remains crucial in
framing notions of perceived “difference.” Such a framing is not exclusive to
the Chorus. The newly-formed Crayon Angel Choir, for example, promotes
their Choir as a “gathering of various colors, like crayons in a box.”

The chorus director and the teachers who help with the Chorus’s training

(Chŏn et al. 2008) revealed many African mothers had heard of black children taunted at school
and feared their children would undergo such treatment (123). While a detailed examination is
beyond the scope of this paper, Sue-Je Gage notes, as well, that it is not only skin tone, but the
gender of the parent that matters. For example, Korea’s history of camp towns and military men
fathering children of Korean women underscores prejudice, in particular, against children with a
white or black father and a Korean mother (2007, 89).

25. http://blog.naver.com/PostView.nhn?blogId=gicityi&logNo=120124829135&categoryNo=18
&vewDate=&currentPage=1&listtype= Accessed 30 April 2012.
focus heavily on diction and vocal quality. Any mispronunciation of the lyrics could result in a discrediting of CMCK (signaling improper assimilation) as well as the performance skills of the children. Choral manuals heavily stress diction as a crucial aspect in determining the audience’s perceptions of the chorus’s ability (Roe 1983, 80; Sears 1985, 75). Therefore, during regular Wednesday and Saturday rehearsals, teachers spend a great deal of time training the children to enunciate and articulate the lyrics properly. Proper articulation provides a foundation for good vocal control and acceptable vocal quality. In one rehearsal I witnessed last fall, the teacher singled out a child who appeared to barely mouth the words and, therefore, was not exerting the proper performance energy. “If you want to sing like that, you can leave. Otherwise, open your mouth and project – show us you know what you’re singing and that you mean it.”

Vocal quality communicates much about social class and character; a perceptual construct with origins in Victorian England where “the embourgeoisement of the singing voice bought the idea of othered voices into play” (Olwage 2005, 206). A “good tone” was considered refined and cultured, while a “bad tone” communicated a vulgar character. Children’s voices were labeled “anachronistic,” so, while archaic, the voices had the potential to be molded. The preferred vocal quality for both boys and girls in the Rainbow Chorus is a thin rather falsetto-like vocal timbre produced so as to accentuate the childlike nature of the singer, as well as to demonstrate a higher level of musical ability than an untrained child. Slightly different from the tongyo voice, a flat, simple and natural vocal production common in Korean children’s songs, the desired Rainbow Chorus voice is at once child-like, but ornamented and controlled, conveying a higher level of vocal training than that required for children’s songs.26 Communicating knowledge of pitch and vocal control, the vocal quality demonstrates the children have been trained. The cultivation of the voice signals the cultivation of the child.27

The repertory sends a message regarding the identity and aims of the chorus. “We like to include …lyrics with a positive message. ‘Na to balsu itta’ (I can do it, too!), that kind of theme” (Yi Hyŏnjŏng interview, 15 March 2011, Seoul).28

26. Tongyo designates children’s songs in Korean. Most repertoire in the tongyo category emerged during the 20th century in tandem with the importation of a Western education system.
27. In pre-abolition era America, the Juvenile Choir of Boston wowed audiences with their singing ability. Commentary, such as “their voices were as sweet as if they had been white …. exposed problematic concepts of class and race” of the time (Brown 2002, 67).
28. These songs are also included in the repertory of the newly-formed Arûmdûri Chorus and Asia Children’s Chorus.
Many of the songs include messages related to acceptance, dreams, hopes for a better world, and the beauty of life. In In Suni’s “Kōwi ūi kkum (Goose Dream)” the protagonist struggles against impossible odds to attain her dream.

Yes I, I have a dream, I believe in that dream, watch me
I can face that wall called destiny, standing there coldly
One day, I can climb over that wall, and fly high into the sky
Even this heavy world cannot weigh me down
Be with me on that day at the end of my life, the day that I’ll be smiling

Such lyrical content emphasizes the Chorus’s call for societal support for the dreams of the children, something important for the success of ‘multicultural’ children. In addition, songs such as “Arūndaun sesang” (Beautiful World) provide a forum for the children to sing of acceptance with lyrics such as “When I’m feeling down, I look towards the sky. We’re all one under the sun.” The performance space confers a political role on the children who become, in asking the audience for acceptance and support, spokespeople for the multicultural population. Even musical numbers such as Andrew Lloyd Weber’s “Any Dream Will Do” work to fulfill this purpose.

Lois Brown’s examination of the Juvenile Choir of Boston, as well as studies of more recent minority and marginal population choruses, revealed the significance of repertoire in both delivering a message and claiming a rightful ownership of place (Erlmann 1994; Barz 2006). She notes that when the children sang patriotic songs, they “refuted colonizationist propaganda by celebrating America as the rightful homeland of African Americans” (Brown 2002, 72). Likewise, the Rainbow Chorus’s inclusion of Korean folksongs in their repertory such as “Toraji” (bell flower song) or “Arirang” signifies not only their correlation with a Korean identity, but their identity as Koreans. While difference and pursuit of acceptance remain the underlying current of songs such as “Goose Dream” and even their rendition of Abba’s “I Have a Dream,” mastery of Korean pronunciation and articulation combined with songs deeply connected to Korean nationalist identity offer the children an opportunity to celebrate Korea as their rightful homeland.

Rhetoric of Acceptance and Transformation

Most striking in the performance experience is the simultaneous rhetorical emphasis on difference and the children’s lack of difference, their inherent sameness. On one hand, the children are promoted as members of a community
understood to be underprivileged. The rhetoric stresses the nurturing of the children at the Center and the transformation, mentioned above, all are experiencing as members of the Chorus. On the other hand, rhetorically the brochures for the chorus and emcee comments during performance convey the message that these children are people “just like us.” Performance, in this regard, serves as a normalizer, a way to blur the differences between these children and “Han’guk ōrinidīl.” For Yi, this remains one of the primary aims of the Chorus.

What we hope for us is for our people (uri kungnin) to think of our tamunweba children as just the same as our sons and daughters (uri nara adīl, ttal ida).... I want to say, “Look at them – they are an icon of tamunwea.” When you see them on stage, people can be deeply moved by them and think “Really there is no difference.” That’s what I want people to understand. (Yi Hyŏnjŏng interview, 15 March 2011, Seoul)

Mid-way through a spring 2010 performance with In Suni, the emcee asked In how she felt to be performing with these “special” children. In retorted, “Are they different? They don’t seem that different to me. And, even if they are, what’s the issue? Being different...isn’t that what this world is about?” While distinction remains the Chorus’s selling point, the role of the Chorus in connecting the multicultural world with that of the average Korean underscores its appeal, reflecting a desire for assimilation; “the prevailing approach to national or ethnic difference in South Korea” (Abelmann and Kim 2005,107).

The display of critical personal and outward benefits of choir membership appears particularly crucial in forming bonds of commonality with the Korean population. At the Rainbow Chorus’s 2010 Annual Concert (chŏnggi yŏnjuhoe) a film crew from the SBS network interviewed the parents. The one question posed to a group of parents chosen for interview was, “Can you tell us how your child has benefitted from participation in the Chorus?” When parents detailed the educational benefits of participation, the reporter re-asked the question with a new emphasis: “No – I mean, how has the Chorus changed your child?” With the parents led to answer in a particular way, most replied, “[S/he] seems more confident now,” or “[His/her] personality has brightened.”

29. A child of a Korean mother and African-American military father, In Suni (b. 1957) is known to have led a difficult life in Korea due to her identity. She has become a model for multicultural children.

30. Parents initially responded that benefits included trips to new places and opportunities to meet famous musicians. In my own interviews, parents have listed benefits such as free music training and the 30,000 won transportation fee provided monthly per child.
The final broadcast version emphasized the power of transformation inherent in chorus participation. Previous broadcasts in 2009 and 2010 also zeroed in on change as a success marker for CMCK’s Chorus. Children interviewed for one Mumbwa (culture) Channel 2009 broadcast detailed participation had given them the opportunity to learn music theory and performance and make friends. One, a child of a Pakistani father and Korean mother who had suffered teasing at school, when asked by the reporter what she might say to kids at school now, stated, “I’d tell them, ‘Don’t make fun of me, I’m a person like you.’”

While Yi and the media underscore the importance of the Center’s space in nurturing this transformation, the winter and summer camps for the children serve a pivotal role in cementing the CMCK’s goals. The children attend winter camp in January and summer camp in August. With lines of communication cut from the outside world (their mobile phones are confiscated), the children are taken to a camp site outside of Seoul for three days and participate not only in intense musical training, but in games and activities that encourage the kids to bond and openly express their struggles with acceptance or identity, assumed commonalities of the multicultural experience.31 In an interview, a Vietnamese mother of a chorister said that, while her children had been made fun of and teased for being “foreigners” at school, at camp, “they get along well and everyone is good to them.” Yi notes that children first tend to assess the origins of fellow campers by asking from where their parents hail before moving on to connect at a deeper, personal level (Yi Hyŏnjŏng interview, 15 March 2011, Seoul). The camp helps to create an alternative space of existence, one within which the ambivalences of the multicultural identity can be articulated as normal and meaningfully connected to the chorus experience.

A latent society-wide transformation is assumed by Yi and other advocates for multicultural education and outreach to follow the internal transformation of the children (Yi Yunjŏng 2010). As in Yi’s comments regarding the impact on audiences who witness the Rainbow Chorus perform, the CMCK’s rhetoric also extends to service. That is, in serving the multicultural population and working for a diversified Korea through the children, the CMCK’s choral programs have a bearing, as well, on Korean society as a whole. Other multicultural children’s choruses, like the Crayon Angel and Arumduri choruses, represent their choral activities in a similar light. Stated Chorus goals include an improvement in the children’s self-esteem, development of the children’s talents, and to raise social awareness of multicultural families. For the latter to be achieved, the children’s

31. CMCK employees contact the parents and send regular update on the children via text messages.
transformation must be articulated and convincing.

With the success of the Chorus, the Center created the National Multicultural Children’s Chorus Competition (Chŏn’gŏk tamunhwab oŭini hapch’ang taeboe), “in hopes that kids from all over the country could, even just for a little while, experience the same type of thing we are experiencing at the tamunhwab center” (Yi Hyŏnŏng interview, 15 March 2011, Seoul).\(^{32}\) 2010 was the inaugural year for the competition. To qualify for the competition, teams must consist of at least 50% multicultural kids. The second annual competition occurred on June 5, 2011, advertisements for which promised bonus points for 100% tamunhwab choirs or performance of traditional Korean children’s folk songs. Success, according to Yi, is measured by change in the children. “Just a few hours a week can have a great impact. All working together, you can really see them change” (Yi Hyŏnŏng, interview, 15 March 2011, Seoul).

Yet, the transient nature of the competition begs the question of sustainability of the experience. The director of one of the competing choirs from a Seoul-area elementary, contacted teachers at all grade levels in an effort to include as many multicultural children as possible in the formation of a temporary chorus.\(^{33}\) By the end of the recruitment period, the chorus included children hailing from Poland, India, Afghanistan, and Iraq along with children of mixed Korean heritage. The chorus met every morning for six weeks to rehearse the song, “Wonderful Korea,” and accompanying movements. For the final performance the multicultural children were placed up front, in the first row of singers (a practice consistent amongst the competitors), on display (see Figure 3). In brief on-site interviews one Korean parent expressed excitement at their child’s participation, while several non-Korean mothers conveyed reservations about their children being made to sing an overtly patriotic song while wearing a foreign costume and waving a foreign flag, as well as the use of their “multicultural” children solely for the purposes of the competition. The chorus could not be sustained beyond the competition, with the exception of an encore performance for a government official visiting the school.

The weak sustainability of such an experience outside of CMCK’s walls brings to bear the questions regarding the efficacy of such a competition and whether the space of the Center itself serves as an important factor in creating the potential for transformation. From the camp experience to the extended

\(^{32}\) The event is sponsored by the CMCK, MBN and KBS broadcasting, the Prime Minister’s Office, Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology, the Ministry of Justice, the Daily Economics Newspaper, and the Community Chest of Korea (Sarang ūi Yŏlmae).

\(^{33}\) To protect the privacy of the children, the school will remain unnamed.
periods of time children spend together rehearsing and performing, the space formed through consistent and continuous activities appears to be essential to a genuine process of transformation. The success and viability of the transformative experience, it seems, comes from the community space created at the CMCK, and not a hodgepodge collection of multicultural children thrown together for a competition.

Conclusion

The protagonist of the CMCK’s children’s book *Children Singing of Hope: The Rainbow Chorus* (Ko 2011) is a young girl named Julie. With a mom from the Philippines and a Korean father, Julie is described as a girl with dark-colored skin and having double eyelids. She is teased at school, particularly by a fellow student who rudely tells her during an argument, “Go back to the Philippines!” (Ko 2011, 11). The relentless teasing causes Julie to become sullen and express herself negatively around her peers. Fearing for her well-being, her parents seek out the Rainbow Chorus, hoping it will provide Julie with a comfortable social outlet. Julie initially resists the directives of the choral director as well as
socializing with the other children. She refuses to cooperate and blend her voice with the other children. Julie’s insistent use of her uncultured or natural voice (see above section on “good” vs “bad” tone) symbolizes her reluctance to accept the cultivation desired of her in the Korean context. The chorus director has no choice but to ask her to leave.

During her hiatus from the Chorus, Julie experiences several hardships, until she decides she must change her responses to the conflicts she experiences. Her stubbornly unrefined singing serves as a metaphor for her troubles in her Korean school and environment. She makes friends with her former bully and rejoins the Chorus. When she reunites with her friends at Rainbow Chorus rehearsal, many admit they, too, experienced difficult times and that they all discovered, as well, their own struggles in balancing difference and sameness. Julie’s initial refusal to fit in with the Rainbow Chorus children connected to her daily refusal to accept being different from her classmates. Finally, Julie succumbs to the authority of the chorus director and realizes the significance of the Chorus in both helping her cope with her difference within Korean society as well as teaching understanding to others within this cultural context. Julie’s transformation is complete. While Julie’s transformation appears to take place outside of the Chorus, the change becomes possible because of the Chorus’s influence. Upon return, she focuses on finding her “good voice” and blending with the other bi-racial children.

While a fictional children’s story, Julie’s tale nonetheless poignantly communicates the outlook fueling CMCK’s choral program. The children, already in a liminal place socially, further augment that liminality through membership in the program. Ironically, it is within this augmented space that an altered positioning of the children as “multicultural” takes form. The space is one within which difference is not only normal, but expected, and it is that very difference motivating the goals of the program and fueling rhetoric. The children’s status as “different,” publically displayed in the act of performance, makes the rhetoric of assimilation – or sameness (“children like us”) possible. Despite new research on the benefits of recognizing heterogeneity within the nation through a process of integration in the Korean context, the dialogue of difference dissolving with an emphasis on cultural homogeneity through assimilation remains strong. This may be, perhaps, the underlying reason behind the Rainbow Chorus director’s insistence on the ways by which the children can be changed through the experience in the Chorus. Considering the rhetorical presentation of choir goals and symbolic value as well as the director’s statements, the success of the Chorus appears to depend on the convincing adaptation of the choristers into acceptable members of Korean
society. Although many of their opportunities connect to their identity as ‘multicultural,’ successful transformation into a “likeness” of Korean children seems compulsory and looks to mark the triumph of the program as a vehicle for assimilation.

The CMCK’s programs tend to rely on a sense of marginality in the children’s social status, something often framed through an emphasis on the children’s identities as offspring of marriage migrants from other Asian countries. In interviews with Yi, her stress on the children’s heritage as a sign of their low social status reflects a domestic emphasis on Korea’s distinction from poorer and less powerful Asian neighbors. Such a narrative choice is strategic, revealing a reality in which the more needy and underprivileged the children seem, the more likely they are to garner support from the public and funding agencies. This may also explain the subtle discouragement of participation directed at families of mixed Anglo-American and Korean heritage. In addition, due to the cultural disparities between many children of multicultural families and their Korean counterparts, a transformation into an individual who blends harmonically with the society’s majority is crucial. Therefore, a calculated use of the children’s identities and experiences as underprivileged lends strength to the stories of the children before and after joining the chorus. A convincing neediness and, likewise, convincing alteration of the children’s circumstances serves the program well. At the same time, such a transformative narrative melds with the current construct of “multicultural” in Korea, a construct essentially assimilationist and hierarchical in nature.

Despite budding institutional rhetoric of diversification and social acceptance of this diversity (as witnessed in the televised campaigns and the National Assembly’s concern with labels for the mixed-race population described above), the onus of the transformation remains the realm of the minority populations. Underscored by the insistence on transformation of the children (evident in the fictional tale of Julie), the successful assimilation of the children depends on their ability and willingness to transform into an acceptable ideal of “multicultural” in the Korean context. With the bulk of the multicultural programs aimed at training women and children to adapt to the Korean environment and programs for the majority population merely introducing “regular” Koreans to foreign or exotic cultures, the pressure to successfully build a multicultural Korean society rests in the hands of multicultural families. This makes the Chorus an ideal and measurable vehicle for Korea’s multicultural aspirations. As the children are trained to embrace their social voice and blend with their peers, they are figuratively adapting to their rightful position in Korean society. Simultaneously, the liminality of that position finds
reinforcement in rhetoric reinforcing their inferiority within Korean society and, therefore, their inability to threaten the status-quo (the dominant, “homogenous” population). This latter point, in particular, remains crucial in the reception of these “others” in Korean society. In the case of the Chorus, costumes worn in performance mark the children as a discernible other although, in the case of many of the children, skin tone, hair color, facial features fail to reveal difference. Performance renders children’s alterity visible and public, and the public rhetoric about the Chorus and the children rationalizes the suitability of this alterity through stress on linguistic and behavioral characteristics acceptable to the Korean majority. Still, instead of recognizing diversity the Chorus’s performances play into old paradigms of “foreignness” and “belonging” which have built contemporary ideals of national identity. Performance exhibits the children as representatives of a safe and comfortable alternative identity; Korean-enough to not disrupt pre-existing societal structures but foreign-enough to serve a purpose in marking Korea as a nation melding with global demographic trends.

The children’s place within Korea’s contemporary power relations paradoxically appears to empower the potential of the children as contributing members to an ethnically diverse Korea of the future. At the fall 2011 annual performance, the director addressed this potential by stating, “All of these children speak two languages. Don’t you envy them? Think about what these children can do for Korea’s future and how bright our future is because they are here.” 34 The emblematic potential of chorus participants provides an undercurrent to the Chorus’s presence. Public performances showcase this potential, and a compilation of rehearsal, discipline, obedience, and performance competence aims to bridge the socio-cultural and political landscape (Liz Garnett 2005, 262). Desirable performance standards and practice translate into ideals of desirable personhood “so as a result it is not possible to separate out these behaviors that are conceived in terms of political axes of identity (race, class, education level, and regionality) from those that are ‘purely’ technical or musical” (Liz Garnett 2005, 262). Like the Jubilee Singers’ or the Hampton Choir’s sojourns in Europe, the children of the Rainbow Chorus

34. However, a survey of the bilingual capabilities of multicultural children revealed the majority use Korean most often and experience difficulties in speaking their “mother’s” language (Pak 2010, 265). At CMCK’s second annual national bilingual speech competition on March 21, 2011, children were to deliver a speech in both Korean and their “native” tongue. Most children could deliver the Korean speech with confident fluency, but most could not present in their “mother” tongue with equal competence. A few of the children could not finish the “mother tongue” speech.
employ visual distinction, proper diction, clear vocal quality, and concise choreographed movement designed to shatter assumptions regarding the children’s capacity for artistic, and thus, human, expression.

The “third space,” formed through rehearsal, bonding, and performance activities, represents a carefully molded beginning; a strategic space factoring into a burgeoning ideal of pluralism fundamental to Korea’s status as a first world nation. The public rhetoric regarding the children’s potential and supposed multi-lingual abilities signifies the Chorus as an embodiment of the “global” within Korea’s borders. While their role as a device for Korea’s global prospects empowers the children, this power remains both limited and limiting. Representatives of a domestic multiculturalism, the children perform a diversity and cosmopolitanism foundational to impending socio-political and cultural shifts. Yet the effects of this performance remain most palpable within the Center’s training and performance spaces. The rhetoric of multiculturalism, the nexus of which revolves around multicultural families, has yet to provoke consistent and far-reaching consequences in Korean society. As such, their “empowerment” as beacons of a global Korea limits their status; visible and valuable, yet caught in an opaque space of otherness. Whereas currently the othering inherent to the Chorus’s public performances and rhetoric frames possibilities for both the children and Korea, the prospects of Korea’s multiculturalism, as well as the prospects of the Chorus and others like it, remain uncertain.

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