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ETHNIC IDENTIFICATION OF CHILDREN IN INTERNATIONAL FAMILIES: A CASE STUDY OF RUSSIAN-SPEAKING CHILDREN IN SOUTH KOREA

In recent decades, South Korea has experienced a sustained rise in international marriages, reshaping the nation's sociocultural landscape. While much attention has been given to multicultural families formed through marriages with women from Southeast Asia, studies on Russian-speaking women from CIS countries and their children born or raised in South Korea remain limited. This paper examines the processes of ethnic identification among these children, drawing on qualitative and quantitative data collected since 2013 through field research.

Grounded in key theories of ethnic identity – Erikson's psychosocial development, Gordon's assimilation, Greeley's pluralism, and Cooley's "looking-glass self" – the study also considers prominent South Korean research on multicultural families, including the 2015 National Multicultural Families Survey. Employing a mixed-methods approach of unstructured interviews, surveys, and discourse analysis, the research reveals different patterns of ethnic identification within these families.

Preliminary findings indicate that children of Russian-speaking marriage migrants often adopt situationally dependent ethnic identities. Their sense of identity is shaped by external factors (appearance, language proficiency), family dynamics (parental ethnic status, naming practices), and institutional context (education system, state policy). Adolescents who migrated with their mothers tend to develop hybrid or multicultural identities, whereas those born in Korea are more likely to assimilate into Korean society more fully. The study emphasizes the influence of the post-Soviet cultural background in shaping these identity dynamics and calls for more nuanced multicultural policies in South Korea.

Keywords: ethnic identity, multicultural families, Russian-speaking migrants, interethnic marriage, South Korea, children of migrants.

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Халықаралық отбасылардағы балалардың этникалық идентификациясы: Оңтүстік Кореядағы орыстілді балалар мысалында

Соңғы онжылдықтарда Оңтүстік Кореяда халықаралық некелердің тұрақты өсуі байқалып, елдің әлеуметтік-мәдени кеңістігі түбегейлі өзгерістерге ұшырауда. Зерттеулердің басым бөлігі Оңтүстік-Шығыс Азиядан шыққан әйелдермен құрылған мультимәдени отбасыларға арналса, ТМД елдерінен шыққан орыстілді әйелдер мен олардың Кореяда туған немесе өскен балаларына қатысты еңбектер әлі де аз. Бұл мақалада 2013 жылдан бастап жүргізілген далалық зерттеу негізінде осы балалардың этникалық идентификация үдерістері қарастырылады.

Этникалық идентификацияның негізгі теорияларына сүйене отырып – Э. Эриксонның психоәлеуметтік даму теориясы, М. Гордонның ассимиляция тұжырымдамасы, Э. Грилидің плюрализм идеясы және Ч. Кулидің «айнадағы Мен» концепциясы, зерттеу сондай-ақ мультимәдени отбасыларға қатысты Оңтүстік Кореядағы жетекші еңбектерді, соның ішінде 2015 жылғы Ұлттық мультимәдени отбасылар сауалнамасын ескереді. Әдіснамалық тұрғыда құрылымданбаған сұхбаттар, сауалнамалар және дискурс талдау қолданылып, отбасылардағы этникалық идентификацияның түрлі үлгілері анықталды.

Алдын ала нәтижелер көрсеткендей, орыстілді некелік мигранттардың балаларының этникалық өзін-өзі тануы жиі жағдайға тәуелді болып қалыптасады. Олардың этникалық сезімі сыртқы факторларға (сыртқы келбет, тіл меңгеруі), отбасылық динамикаға (ата-ананың этникалық мәртебесі, есім беру тәжірибесі), сондай-ақ институционалдық жағдайға (білім беру жүйесі, мемлекеттік саясат) байланысты. Аналарымен бірге көшіп келген жасөспірімдер аралас немесе мультимәдени идентификацияға бейім болса, Кореяда туғандар корей қоғамына толық

ляциялануға жақын. Зерттеу посткеңестік мәдени ортаның ықпалын айқындап, Оңтүстік Кореядағы мультимәдени саясатты неғұрлым нәзік әрі кешенді ету қажеттігін көрсетеді.

Түйін сөздер: этникалық идентификация, мультимәдени отбасылар, орыстілді мигранттар, этникааралық неке, Оңтүстік Корея, мигрант балалар.

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Этническая идентификация детей в международных семьях: на примере русскоязычных детей в Южной Корее

В последние десятилетия Южная Корея переживает устойчивый рост числа международных браков, что трансформирует социокультурный ландшафт страны. Хотя значительное внимание уделялось мультикультурным семьям, сформированным через браки с женщинами из стран Юго-Восточной Азии, исследования о русскоязычных женщинах из стран СНГ и их детях, рожденных или выросших в Южной Корее, остаются ограниченными. В данной статье рассматриваются процессы этнической идентификации этих детей на основе качественных и количественных данных, собранных с 2013 года в ходе полевых исследований.

Опираясь на ключевые теории этнической идентичности – психосоциальное развитие Э. Эриксона, ассимиляцию М. Гордона, плюрализм Э. Грили и концепцию «зеркального Я» Ч. Кули, исследование также учитывает ведущие южнокорейские работы по мультикультурным семьям, включая Национальное обследование мультикультурных семей 2015 года. Используя смешанную методологию – неструктурированные интервью, опросы и дискурс-анализ, исследование выявляет различные модели этнической идентификации в этих семьях.

Предварительные результаты показывают, что дети русскоязычных брачных мигрантов часто формируют этническую идентичность, зависящую от ситуации. На их самосознание влияют внешние факторы (внешность, владение языком), семейная динамика (этнический статус родителей, практика выбора имени), а также институциональный контекст (система образования, государственная политика). Подростки, мигрировавшие вместе с матерями, склонны формировать гибридные или мультикультурные идентичности, в то время как дети, рожденные в Корее, чаще полностью ассимилируются в корейское общество. Исследование подчеркивает влияние постсоветского культурного фона на процессы идентификации и указывает на необходимость более нюансированной мультикультурной политики в Южной Корее.

Ключевые слова: этническая идентичность, мультикультурные семьи, русскоязычные мигранты, межэтнический брак, Южная Корея, дети мигрантов.

Introduction

The rapid growth of international marriages in South Korea since the 1990s has led to the emergence of new social categories, including multicultural families and children born into mixed unions. While the official *Damunhwa* (다문화) policy aims to promote cultural diversity, it often overlooks the distinct trajectories of various migrant groups, especially Russian-speaking women from CIS countries such as Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Russia. Their children, raised in Korean society, face complex identity challenges that are underexamined in both policy and academic literature.

In recent years, issues of multicultural children have been considered in the context of “South Korea’s process of transformation from an ethnically homogeneous society to a multicultural one.” The identity of children from international marriages is

becoming “a new area of tension and transformation” (Guney, 2023).

This study builds upon a decade-long investigation of marriage migration from the CIS to South Korea, with a focus on the ethnic identification of children born in mixed-ethnic families. By drawing on data collected since 2013 under the Korea Foundation Fellowship and supplemented by planned fieldwork in 2025, the research offers a multidimensional analysis of identity formation. Central research questions examine how these children perceive and experience their ethnic identity and assess the influence of language, naming practices, family background, schooling, and societal perception.

The theoretical framework is grounded in Erikson’s theory of psychosocial development, particularly the *identity versus role confusion* stage, which emphasizes adolescence as a critical period for identity shaping. Erikson describes adolescence

(12–18 years) as the “identity versus role confusion” stage, where individuals explore roles, beliefs, and values to construct a coherent sense of self. Successful resolution yields identity and fidelity; failure leads to confusion and uncertainty. (Erikson, 1968.) It also incorporates Gordon’s seven stages of assimilation, illuminating the progressive integration of minorities through language, marriage, structural inclusion, and eventual identification with the host culture. Gordon’s assimilation model outlines stages including acculturation, structural assimilation, marital assimilation, and identification with the host culture (Gordon, 1964.). In addition, Cooley’s concept of the *looking-glass self* underscores how children internalize others’ perceptions to form their self-image. Cooley’s looking-glass self explains how self-concept evolves through imagining how one appears to others, interpreting their judgments, and internalizing these perceptions (Cooley, 1902).

Historiographical Review and Theoretical Framework

The phenomenon of interethnic marriages in South Korea has been widely discussed in both Korean and international academia. Initial studies focused primarily on the adaptation problems of foreign wives, especially those from China, Vietnam, and the Philippines (Kim, 2007; Lee, Williams, 2016; Lacaba, 2018). These studies focused on language barriers, cultural misunderstandings, and economic difficulties. Only recently has attention shifted to the children of such unions, often referred to as “multicultural youth” (다문화 청소년), whose integration into Korean society has raised new questions about national identity and belonging.

However, the experiences of children born to Russian-speaking women from the post-Soviet space remain understudied. Existing studies of Russian-speaking marriage migrants (Yem, 2014; Yem, Epstein, 2015) point to significant differences in mentality, upbringing, and expectations compared to migrants from Southeast Asia. These differences affect family structure, parenting models, and ultimately the ethnic self-identification of children.

The theoretical basis of this study is based on numerous concepts of ethnic identity. Erik Erikson’s theory of development defined identity formation as the central task of adolescence. Building on this, Gordon’s assimilation theory, Glazer, and Moynihan’s pluralistic model allow for the analysis of cultural integration and preservation. Cooley’s

“looking-glass self” theory (1902) provides insight into how external social perceptions shape internal self-perceptions. Later works on bi-ethnic identity emphasize fluidity, hybridity, and situational self-categorization (Phinney, 1990; Gonzales-Backen, 2013).

Researchers have also proposed models of ethnic identity in transnational and multicultural contexts, including concepts of symbolic ethnicity, cultural poverty (Gans, 1979), and segmented assimilation (Portes, Zhou, 1993). In Korea, the 2015 National Survey of Multicultural Families provided extensive data but did not include a detailed analysis by ethnic group. At the same time, media discourse analysis (Song, 2019) revealed the ways in which public narratives interpret multicultural children, often reinforcing essentialist categories.

This study aims to bridge the gap between identity theory and the specific post-Soviet experience of Russian-speaking marriage migrants and their children in Korea. The inclusion of historical, cultural, and sociological aspects contributes to a more nuanced understanding of multiculturalism in South Korea.

Research Objectives and Methodology

The purpose of this study is to examine the processes of ethnic identification among children born to Russian-speaking women from the CIS who entered into interethnic marriages with Korean men. Particular attention is paid to how these children, whether born in South Korea or brought to the country from previous marriages, construct and transform their sense of ethnic belonging within the Korean sociocultural environment.

The research addresses family structures and cultural practices in Russian-speaking interethnic households, while also exploring the models of ethnic identification among children in these families. Special emphasis is placed on the role of naming practices, language use, and parental background in shaping identity, as well as the influence of public perception, the school environment, and state policies on the dynamics of belonging. The study also investigates the specific experiences of children of Koryo-saram women from the CIS and compares them with those of children of other Russian-speaking migrants.

It is hypothesized that children born in mixed marriages tend to identify primarily as Koreans, particularly when socialized through the Korean school

system. At the same time, children who arrived in the country with their mothers from previous marriages gradually shift their identification toward a Korean orientation. Adolescence emerges as a critical stage during which many develop dual or hybrid identities, maintaining symbolic ties to their maternal culture. Naming practices serve as both indicators of parental strategies and active factors shaping self-identification. Moreover, phenotype, language competence, and socio-economic status mediate both public perception and the child's internal self-concept.

Methodologically, this study employs a longitudinal and mixed-methods approach, enriched by ethnographic sensitivity to participants' lived experiences. The empirical basis consists of unstructured interviews with fifty-four Russian-speaking marriage migrants conducted in 2013 and revisited in 2024–2025, along with in-depth interviews with their children aged ten to nineteen.

Recruitment of participants followed a *snowball sampling* strategy: the first respondents introduced the researcher to friends, acquaintances, and members of their informal networks. These initial interlocutors often shared not only their personal migration histories but also spoke candidly about the challenges of raising children in Korea. Conversations unfolded in varied formats—from shorter sessions of around thirty minutes to extended dialogues lasting three or even four hours, depending on the respondent's willingness and availability.

For those hesitant to participate in face-to-face interviews, a written questionnaire was offered. This instrument was carefully designed in line with ethical committee requirements and guaranteed full confidentiality, ensuring that even the most sensitive experiences could be documented with respect and trust.

Fieldwork was carried out not only in Seoul but also in satellite cities across Gyeonggi-do and Jeollanam-do, reflecting the geographic dispersal of Russian-speaking marriage migrants in Korea. The majority of respondents were women from Russia, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan, thereby capturing both post-Soviet diversity and commonalities in adaptation strategies.

In addition to these primary sources, the study integrates discourse analysis of Korean mass media representations of multicultural families and children, as well as statistical data from government sources, including the National Multicultural Family Survey (2015) and reports of the Ministry

of Gender Equality and Family. Participant observation in multicultural family centers and language programs further deepened the understanding of everyday practices and institutional contexts.

A telling example comes from an interview with a mother from Kazakhstan, married to a Korean farmer in Jeollanam-do:

"My son's name is Minjun, but at home I still call him Sasha. He doesn't like Russian now. He says he's Korean, not Russian — and I feel like I lost part of myself." (Respondent 11, 2013)

This statement illustrates the symbolic dissonance between private and public identity. In the Korean public sphere, a Korean name ensures belonging, whereas the maternal naming tradition retains emotional significance but remains socially invisible.

Empirical Findings: Naming, Schooling, and Ethnic Identity

Preliminary findings indicate that the ethnic identity of children of Russian-speaking marriage migrants in South Korea is dynamic and context-dependent. One of the most salient markers of identity is the practice of naming, which becomes a symbolic site of negotiation between paternal and maternal cultural traditions. In most families, children were officially given Korean names to facilitate integration into schools and society at large, while Russian names continued to be used in the private sphere. In certain cases, adolescents rejected their Russian names entirely, perceiving them as unnecessary or stigmatizing. A telling example is provided by a mother from Russia living in Suwon, who explained that her daughter's official name is Yuri, but she had also been baptized as Elizaveta. The girl stated: *"I am Korean, but I like when you call me Liza,"* (Respondent 17, 2013) thereby reflecting her dual symbolic attachment.

The linguistic environment of these families further illustrates the tension between public and private spheres. Children attending Korean public schools predominantly use Korean in everyday communication, while Russian is often restricted to exchanges with the mother or maternal grandparents. In some instances, children deliberately avoided speaking Russian in order to reduce the risk of peer ridicule.

An Uzbek-Russian respondent living in Seoul recounted:

“My son understands Russian, but doesn’t speak. At school, he was teased when I came to pick him up and spoke Russian. Now he asks me to talk only in Korean.” (Respondent 39, 2013)

Such accounts demonstrate how discomfort with the maternal language is directly linked to children’s efforts to avoid stigma, especially in primary and middle school settings.

Self-identification also reveals significant variation. Most children born in Korea tended to provide monoethnic responses when asked, “Who are you?” most frequently answering “I am Korean.” By contrast, adolescents who had migrated from the CIS formulated more nuanced identities, such as “half Russian, half Korean” or “a Korean citizen, but with another culture.” A fourteen-year-old boy from Kazakhstan, who had arrived in Korea at the age of seven, explained:

“Sometimes I feel like I have two faces. At home I eat borshch and watch Russian cartoons. Outside, I am like all Korean boys.” (Respondent 39, 2013)

Such statements reveal the emergence of situational and hybrid identities, in which children navigate between cultural codes and highlight different aspects of the self depending on the social context.

Taken together, these empirical observations demonstrate that the processes of ethnic identification among children of Russian-speaking migrants in South Korea develop at the intersection of symbolic naming, linguistic practices, and social experience. School environments and broader societal expectations often stand in tension with familial memory and maternal cultural continuity, producing identities that are fluid, contextually adaptive, and sometimes internally divided.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that the ethnic identity of children from Russian-speaking migrant families in South Korea is neither static nor linear, but rather contextual and relational. These results resonate with theories of situational ethnic identity (Phinney, 1990), symbolic ethnicity (Gans, 1979), and the looking-glass self (Cooley, 1902), all of which emphasize the decisive role of social perception in the formation of self-identification.

Processes of assimilation and resistance were particularly visible in the data. Gordon’s (Gordon, 1964) classical assimilation model assumes a linear

progression toward the norms of the host society, often resulting in cultural loss. This trajectory is evident in naming practices and language use among the children, yet symbolic resistance persists in domestic rituals, food practices, and the maternal use of Russian names. In many families, Russian cultural capital is retained symbolically but loses its functional value. Children’s testimonies also reflect aspects of the pluralist framework advanced by Glazer and Moynihan, which allows for the preservation of heritage identity within the host society. Nevertheless, the Korean model of multiculturalism tends to promote assimilation rather than genuine pluralism, producing tensions both within the family and in the child’s self-concept.

The post-Soviet specificity of Russian-speaking migrants adds further complexity. Unlike many marriage migrants from Southeast Asia, Russian-speaking women often possess higher levels of education and a strong sense of individualism rooted in post-Soviet upbringing. These values shape their parenting strategies, which may clash with the patriarchal norms prevalent in Korean family structures. The case of Koryo-saram (ethnic Koreans from the CIS) is especially illustrative. Although legally and phenotypically closer to the Korean mainstream, their children often struggle to achieve a sense of authenticity.

As one respondent, a fifteen-year-old girl from Gyeonggi Province, explained:

“Although I am half Korean, my classmates say I am not a ‘real’ Korean, because my mother speaks Russian and I was born in Almaty.” (Respondent 39, 2013)

This reflects an inversion of the “one-drop rule”: partial foreignness outweighs ethnic commonality in social perception.

Broader public narratives and structural constraints exacerbate these tensions. Korean mass media and official discourses frequently exoticize or stigmatize multicultural families, framing them as deficient or in need of assistance (Song, 2019). Children internalize such narratives, particularly when they encounter academic difficulties, bullying, or institutional neglect. The absence of structured support for Russian-speaking children contributes to further fragmentation of identity. Data from the National Multicultural Family Survey (2015) show that school adaptation and psychological well-being are closely linked to the perception of acceptance (Xie, Zou, Wang, 2022). The present findings con-

firm this pattern: children who feel recognized and supported by peers and teachers demonstrate higher self-esteem and are more likely to sustain dual or hybrid identities without experiencing shame.

In sum, the discussion highlights the contradictory interplay between assimilationist pressures and symbolic resistance, the distinctive post-Soviet background of Russian-speaking mothers, and the persistent structural challenges within Korean multiculturalism. These dynamics produce identities that are fluid and situational but also marked by conflict between external categorization and internal self-definition.

Conclusion

This study has highlighted the underexplored experiences of children born to Russian-speaking marriage migrants in South Korea. Their processes of ethnic identification emerge from a complex interplay of family dynamics, school environments, public perceptions, and structural policies. While many children outwardly assimilate to Korean social norms, their inner sense of identity often remains fluid, hybrid, and situational.

The specific influence of post-Soviet mothers—characterized by strong educational aspirations, cultural pride, and distinctive linguistic practices—creates unique trajectories of identity formation. These children cannot be understood simply as fully Korean or as “foreigners.” Rather, they represent a distinct biethnic group that challenges essentialist understandings of national identity in South Korea.

By addressing this overlooked dimension, the study contributes to Korean studies and fills a significant gap in the literature on multicultural youth. It also suggests that future multicultural policy in South Korea should take into account the diversity within migrant groups and adopt a more inclusive, pluralist approach. Such a framework would allow biethnic children not only to adapt successfully but also to thrive without relinquishing their maternal heritage.

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