

Book Review**Ahn, J.-H. (2018). *Mixed-Race Politics and Neoliberal Multiculturalism in South Korean Media*. Palgrave Macmillan.****Myoung-Sun Song¹**

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Ji-Hyun Ahn's *Mixed-race politics and neoliberal multiculturalism in South Korean media* (2018) is a nuanced exploration of the historical, sociocultural, political, and economic matrices that govern how mixed-race bodies are situated, mediated, and incorporated into the nation building project of a neoliberal and multicultural South Korea (henceforth Korea). In this timely study, Ahn focuses on “four televised racial moments” and the role they play in the re-structuring and re-imaging of Korean national identity and Koreanness in a global world. Gleaning from Lawrence Grossberg’s “conjunctural analysis” (as cited in Ahn, 2018, p. 22), Ahn conceptualizes these “televised racial moments” as “emblematic media event[s] signaling different aspects of contemporary racial politics that perform a more complex discursive function than simply illustrating the social inclusion of diverse racial/ethnic groups in Korean society” (p. 23). As such, these moments serve as important case studies that demonstrate Korea’s negotiation of the nation vis-à-vis the changing formations of racial identities within its society. The book is strategically and effectively organized into Part 1 and Part 2, wherein each part contains two case studies. The two case studies written as two separate chapters, in turn, offer a comparative analysis that works to complement one another. Part 1 takes an in-depth look into Amerasian celebrities widely spotlighted by the Korean media and embraced by the Korean public. Part 2 delves into mixed-race children from diverse configurations of multicultural families on Korean television programs.

To situate these televised racial moments, Ahn lays out a comprehensive trajectory of racial formation in Korean society that are affected by and intertwined within history. In Chapter 1, Ahn explicates the term “neoliberal multiculturalism” to emphasize that “multiculturalism as a national racial project” (p. 7) functions so that race becomes a key dimension in the multicultural discourse of Korean society. Media representations become essential in contextualizing Korean

multiculturalism as a “national racial project in the era of neoliberal transformation” (p. 7). This is further complicated by other dimensions including gender and class. In better understanding racialized bodies as subjects, Ahn constructively proposes the term “mixed-race as method” (p. 11) which allows the readers to theorize two historically predominant mixed-race groups in Korea: Amerasians and Kosians. One strength of this analytical framework is that even though the four case studies that Ahn investigates are specific to Korean media, the interpolation of these terms—and the politics behind the naming of each term—offers a global perspective on racial hierarchies which are already transnational in nature.

In Chapter 2, Ahn traces the shift from “a modern monoracial Korea to a multicultural, global Korea using a race-nation-media framework” (p. 64). This framework invites the readers to think critically about where, when, and how race, media, and the nation intersect. At this intersection, Ahn demonstrates how the Korean state’s nationalist drive ushers in the need to re-imagine a global Korea through its discourse on multiculturalism. To attain a “global Korea,” Korean multiculturalism needs to be understood as a “neoliberal racial project” that is located in state policies and related efforts as the nation searches for “a new Koreanness suitable to the era of globalization” (p. 46). Simply put, as Ahn rightfully illustrates, “multiculturalism was introduced as an immigration policy to manage increasing numbers of various types of immigrants whose presence was meant to benefit Korea economically” (p. 51). As such, Korean multiculturalism values and prioritizes certain types of bodies as belonging to the nation, depending on what they can offer to it. In this way, Ahn emphasizes that “Korean multiculturalism should be understood as a complex interplay among various actors (e.g., popular media, government, academia, and civil organizations) and vectors (e.g., political orientation and sources of funding)” (p. 48).

In the inclusion of certain bodies as worthy

and belonging to the nation, media and popular culture play a significant role in the re-production, re-articulation, and re-imagination of this new Korea. For example, different racial groups did not appear regularly on Korean television until the mid-2000s (p. 60) which coincides with the period that the Korean government officially began utilizing the term multiculturalism in “its initiative to develop a ‘multicultural society’ (*tamunhwa sahoe*)” as part of its national policy (p. 48). Ahn delineates contemporary entertainment programs that feature non-Korean cast members into four categories: (1) reality documentary format shows that feature ordinary female marriage migrants, their husbands, and their mixed-race children; (2) commercial entertainment shows that feature ordinary foreigners—often professionals and cosmopolitan subjects—who live and work in Korea; (3) talk shows that feature North Korean defectors who shed light on their previous lives in the North and attempt to bring understanding between the two countries; and (4) observational reality shows that feature ordinary mixed-race individuals including children and families (pp. 61-63). While these programs are vital in their function of creating awareness on the increasing population of multiethnic, multiracial, and multicultural groups within Korea; it is equally important to note that cultural differences are commodified and diversity functions to maximize the profit of these shows. Within this milieu, Ahn interrogates the “four televised racial moments” chosen for this book.

In Chapter 3, “From National Threat to National Hero,” Ahn examines Hines Ward, a prominent football player who led his team—the Pittsburgh Steelers—to win the Super Bowl in 2006. Born to an African American GI and a Korean mother, Ward’s body must be read in the larger history of Amerasians who are “the first generation of the mixed-race population that emerged after the Korean War” (Ahn, 2018, p. 81). Ward—whose parents divorced when he was only one years old—needs to overcome not only racial prejudice,

but also financial burdens. Within Korean media discourse, he is able to achieve this through the unyielding strength and sacrifice of his Korean mother. Ahn labels “The Hines Ward Moment” as “the first time Korean television represented a black body with honor and respect” (p. 77). Through a careful analysis of Ward’s triumphant return to Korea as a successful international sports hero, Ahn argues that “it is not Hines Ward the individual who created this moment” (p. 80), but a product that is “driven by the articulation work of major players—government, commercial media, and academia—all aspiring to brand Korea as a multicultural and global power” (p. 80). In this process, what remains problematic is the attempt at erasing Korea’s racist past, particularly towards black mixed-race individuals. Included in this erasure is the idea that “one drop of Korean blood is enough to be Korean only so long as one remains faithful to Korea’s emerging global image” (Ahn, 2018, p. 26).

In Chapter 4, “Consuming Cosmopolitan White(ness),” Ahn examines Daniel Henney who rose to fame in Korea for his supporting role in the hit 2005 television drama *My Lovely Samsoon*. Born to an Irish American father and a Korean adoptee mother, Henney embodies what Ahn calls “Asianized (Western) cosmopolitanism” (p. 104). White mixed-race celebrities differ from other mixed-race figures like Ward in that while they retain a sense of “white exoticism,” they also have “Korean familiarity” (p. 107). As such, whiteness is not simply a racial category, but functions more so as desirable cultural values characterized by “cosmopolitanism, soft masculinity, high social class, and Americanness” (p. 114). Ahn points to Henney’s racial ambiguity by using examples of how his body is read differently in the United States, Korea, and Japan. Through each of these readings, “Henney’s racial(ized) body points to his flexible citizenship as well as his hybrid, multiple identities and signifies differences in racial relations across different countries and regions” (p. 111). Although Henney’s whiteness

and transnational mobility is commodifiable and marketable in a neoliberal media market, it also comes at a cost when his Koreanness is put to the test, especially for his lack of Korean language proficiency. It is notable to add that Henney’s more recent televised appearances on reality programs like *I Live Alone* in 2016 and 2018 have worked to highlight and praise his noticeably increased fluency in the Korean language.

In Chapter 5, “Televising the Making of the Neoliberal Multicultural Family,” Ahn examines the KBS program *Love in Asia* which ran for almost a decade (2005-2015) and became the longest running Korean show that deals with multicultural families and their mixed-race children. *Love in Asia* is a hybrid genre combining entertainment and education (p. 134) and it accomplishes this through its format of reality television meets human documentary. Each week, the program showcases a multicultural family primarily consisting of a Korean husband, non-Korean wife, and their mixed-race children. Ahn argues that the show “mobilize[s] cultural difference and commodifie[s] (exotic) culture from the non-Korean spouse’s country to maximize the audiences’ viewing pleasure” (p. 153). In this process, the female marriage migrants’ culture and home countries become “othered.” This representation renders further problems in that it places Korea in an economically powerful status, “elicit[ing] nostalgia toward developmental nationalism while revitalizing the national aspiration for economic development in the contemporary era” (p. 153). In addition, the female marriage migrants and their children are positioned in their productive roles as “useful economic citizens who could help build a neoliberal multicultural Korea” (p. 153). In this narrative, Ahn reveals how metaphors like “the Korean Obama” and “cultural bridge” become prevalent wherein children of multicultural families must be transformed into model citizens who contribute to the robust building of a neoliberal multicultural society.

In Chapter 6, “This Is (Not) Our Multicultural Future,” Ahn examines *Rainbow Kindergarten* (2011) and *Cackling Class* (2013), two television programs on tvN that mainly cast biracial children. These programs are situated in what Ahn calls “the familial turn in Korean (reality) TV” (p. 162). This shift is marked by the rise and popularity of observational reality television wherein “meek entertainment genre feature family and children as central themes” (p. 162). These shows are noteworthy in that they offer moments of self-reflexivity for both the programs’ participants and their audiences (p. 163). In essence, while each show features biracial children, they differ in that *Rainbow Kindergarten* involves Korean mothers and foreign (read Western European/American white) fathers and *Cackling Class* involves Korean fathers and Asian—exclusively Vietnamese—mothers. In turn, families on *Rainbow Kindergarten* are described as “global,” while families on *Cackling Class* are described as “multicultural.” While both programs serve as meaningful sites where biracial children and their multicultural families become visible, Ahn points to the limitations in that light-skinned children are featured as “objects of fascination that produc[e] humor and commercial value” whereas biracial children with Southeast Asian parents “bec[o]me visible only under the humanistic and paternalistic impulse, even when appearing on commercial entertainment TV shows” (p. 186).

Understandably, the focus of Ahn’s work remains largely on race although it is hinted throughout the chapters that gender and class may be as equally important in the ordering of neoliberal multiculturalism in Korea. For future conversations, how might young(er) white mixed-race female K-pop idols like Jeon So-mi and Nancy configure into these debates? How might their bodies and their stories juxtapose that of black mixed-race female artists like Insooni (pp. 82-88), Yun Mirae (p. 83), and Sonya? How might their bodies and their stories juxtapose that of “Jennifer Young Wisner, Diana Kim, and Bianca Mobley, [whose]

exotic appeal and white appearance was not mobilized in Korean commercial popular culture as they were for the male stars” (p. 108)? Or how might non (white) American and non (Southeast) Asian mixed-race celebrities like Han Hyun-Min fit into these discussions? Ultimately, what will “our multicultural future” (p. 159) look like as mixed-race children become adults and form families of their own? How will these ever-evolving configurations be re-incorporated, re-negotiated, and re-presented in the wider nation building project and discourse of Korea?

All-in-all, Ahn’s scholarship provides a sturdy foundation and fertile space that opens and nurtures opportunities in the re-envisioning of Korea’s mixed-race past, present, and future. This monograph is a valuable and welcomed resource for those teaching courses in numerous disciplines including but not limited to Communication Studies, Media Studies, Critical Race Studies, Ethnic Studies, East Asian Studies, and Korean Studies. While theoretically rich, the writing remains lucid and engaging. Ahn’s meticulous and rigorous work is well-exemplified in the relevance, applicability, and versatility of the four case studies individually and collectively. *Mixed-race politics and neoliberal multiculturalism in South Korean media* is highly recommended to be read in its entirety at the graduate level or assigned in one to two chapters at the undergraduate level.

REFERENCES

- Ahn, J.-H. (2018). *Mixed-race politics and neoliberal multiculturalism in South Korean media*. Palgrave Macmillan.