Gender and Class in Contemporary South Korea

Intersectionality & Transnationality

Edited by
Hae Yeon Choo
John Lie
Laura C. Nelson

TRANSNATIONAL KOREA 4

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Institute of
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Acknowledgments

The work of this volume rests on decades of previous scholarship into gender and class in Korea. The book's chapters were introduced and then revised during a workshop held in 2015 at the Center for Korean Studies of the Institute of East Asian Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. The workshop and the revision and editing of the resulting manuscript were supported by an Academy of Korean Studies (KSPS) Grant funded by the Korean Government (MOE) (AKS-2012-BAA-2102). The editors would also like to thank Katherine Chouta of the Institute of East Asian Studies for guiding the publication process.

ONE

Introduction: Gender, Class, and Contemporary South Korea

HAE YEON CHOO, JOHN LIE, AND LAURA C. NELSON

Writings about gender and class in Korea are as old and almost as common as writings about Korea. This is hardly surprising; writers have frequently and explicitly invoked both gender and class to make sense of Korean life—a phenomenon obvious to outsiders and Koreans alike for as long as Korean society has been an object of analysis. To take just one example: the British author Isabella Bird Bishop's record of her travels to Korea in the 1890s is full of comments on Korean status distinctions. As for gender, one of her first observations—immediately following a remark regarding the "Oriental vices"—is the blanket declaration that "women are secluded, and occupy a very inferior position" (Bishop 1897, 14). More contemporary works on Korean history and culture regularly reference both the stark differences in gender roles and the cultural and resource differences associated with traditional, Chosŏn-era (1392–1897) positions as well as current industrial and postindustrial class stratification. Research on social dynamics in Korea cannot, and generally does not, ignore the structures and practices that assume women and men occupy separate yet interdependent positions, and that individuals and families are allocated different positions in Korean society according to their access to financial, cultural, and social resources.

Although gender and class have been central concerns in research on Korea for some time, we felt that the topic would benefit from some new scholarship, for two reasons. First, the structures and circumstances of South Korean society have continued their pattern of constant change into the twenty-first century, affecting both gender and class. Second, critical scholars have developed new perspectives on gender, class, and other

Authors' names appear in alphabetical order; all authors contributed equally to this introduction and to the editorial work of the book.

relations of power, adding more transnational and intersectional concerns than earlier scholars generally brought to their analysis. With these circumstances in mind, we invited a mix of seasoned and emerging scholars of gender and class in Korea to Berkeley for a workshop in the spring of 2014. In convening our workshop, we took inspiration from two previous volumes: *Dangerous Women: Gender and Korean Nationalism*, edited by Elaine H. Kim and Chungmoo Choi (1998), and *Under Construction: The Gendering of Modernity, Class, and Consumption in the Republic of Korea*, edited by Laurel Kendall (2002). These two important collections highlight the ways gender had become entangled with politics and the economy in the South Korean experience of modernization. Some of the papers made pathbreaking contributions to the study of hegemonic masculinity, workplace gender practices, gendered domestic labor, gendered labor in class-mobility strategies, and the ambivalent sexualization of South Korean women (Abelmann 2002; Cho 2002; Janelli and Yim 2002; J. J. H. Lee 2002; S.-H. Lee 2002; Moon 2002). Around the same time, several monographs appeared in which gender and class had particular relevance: the militarization of opportunity and belonging (Moon 2005), the history of women's labor activism (Kim 1997), the binational arrangements organizing Korean women's sexual services around U.S. military bases in South Korea (Moon 1997), and the ways women constructed meaning in opportunities that demarcated class differences (Nelson 2000). These and other works documented the centrality of gender and class as organizing principles in the transformations of the South Korean social landscape of the second half of the twentieth century. Needless to say, our focus on the present and the interdependence of gender and class is meant neither to ignore earlier contributions to the Anglophone scholarship on Korean women and gender relations (Chung 1986; Gelb 1994; Soh 1993), nor to downplay the relevance of the past (e.g., Kim 2015; Kim and Pettid 2012; Ko, Haboush, and Piggott 2003 [Chosŏn Korea]; and Choi 2009; Kim 2009; Yoo 2008 [colonial period]). We have, however, bypassed cultural representation of gender and class, in literary and other modes (see, e.g., Barraclough 2012), as well as the articulation of their relationships to postcolonial themes, such as the role of "comfort women" (Soh 2009), the pervasive presence of sex work (Cheng 2011; Lie 1995), Christian modernity and other religious formations (e.g., Chong 2009), the profound effects of biosociality and disability (e.g., Kim 2017), and other interesting and important issues.

These are important works, capturing the essence of a particular time and place: South Korea in the second half of the twentieth century. Yet the ineluctable passage of time has led to a new millennium, a new world. The tried and true theories and concepts of yesteryear are no longer very relevant to South Korea in the 2010s (Lie 2015a). Think only of the power

TWO

Changelings and Cinderellas: Class In/equality, Gendered Social Im/mobility, and Post-Developmentalism in Contemporary South Korean Television Dramas

JIN-KYUNG LEE

Many South Koreans have called their country the "Republic of Drama" (Dŭrama konghwaguk) for their enduring and avid love of television dramas. Since the very beginning of the country's television history in the 1960s, TV dramas have consistently placed two themes at the center of their representations of South Korea: the rich and the poor side by side and changing sexual and romantic mores. However, the substance and content of these intersecting issues of class and gender have evolved vastly, nearly beyond recognition, since the dawning of the age of television dramas (Kim 2012; Kim 2013).[1] This chapter explores the interconnections among three issues as formulated by contemporary TV dramas: class inequality, the gendering of social mobility or immobility (hereafter im/mobility), and post-developmentalism as a phantasmagoric and yet tangible ideological impetus and effect in contemporary South Korea.

To begin the chapter, I will briefly contextualize the contemporary historical moment by tracing the intimate relations between class equality and

[1] The two most popular topics for television dramas in the earlier decades were the class gap and male infidelity. The stories of infidelity eventually became narratives of divorce in the 1990s and later. Kim Han Sang (2013) argues that the work of one of the most successful and popular TV drama authors, Kim Su-hyŏn (who was vastly influential and progressive in terms of gender and sexuality issues), has been excluded from the larger scholarly efforts in rethinking gender, patriarchy, and women because feminist scholars have not taken the genre of television dramas seriously.

THREE

Shrewd Entrepreneurs or Immoral Speculators? Desires, Speculation, and Middle-Class Housewives in South Korea, 1978–1996

MYUNGJI YANG

Ms. Ahn, a sixty-four-year-old retired elementary school teacher, owns an old, 45-*p'yŏng* apartment in the Gangnam district.[1] As a solid member of the middle class, her life is quite stable and comfortable: about three million won (about 2,265 US dollars) of pension and allowance from her daughters every month ensure her financial security.[2] Above all, her apartment, her only major asset, is now valued at almost two billion won. The prime location and the possibility of reconstruction in two years have made her apartment more valuable, and she believes that the price will go up to 2.3 billion won right before the reconstruction project begins.[3] Although she often feels behind economically compared with her rich neighbors, who own multiple apartments or other properties, many of her friends and former colleagues are jealous of her. She is the only one of her group of college friends who has settled in Gangnam. Those who own homes elsewhere

[1] *P'yŏng* is a unit of measurement commonly used in Korea. One *p'yŏng* is about 3.3 square meters and 35.58 square feet. Apartments in Korea are the same as condominiums in the United States. But in Korea, the term "condominium" generally is used to refer to properties at resorts. Thus, I use the term "apartments."

[2] Won is the currency of South Korea. One U.S. dollar equals about 1,100 won (as of 2017).

[3] Since the mid-1990s, reconstruction has become common. Reconstruction (*chaegŏnch'uk*) is often differentiated from redevelopment of substandard buildings (*chaegaebal*). Targeting previously constructed mid- or high-rise apartment complexes, reconstruction projects transform them into higher-density complexes (Shin and Kim 2016). Major conglomerates with construction businesses such as Hyundai, Samsung, and LG often take over the reconstruction firms, and these high-profile brand names keep up the property values.

FOUR

"My Skill": Attachments and Narratives of Garment Workers in South Korea

SEO YOUNG PARK

"I have denied my skill for my entire life," said Oksun,[1] a former labor union activist and highly experienced seamstress in Seoul's Dongdaemun Market, a massive cluster of garment manufacturing, wholesale, and retail sites in downtown Seoul. I met Oksun in a beginning-level garment-making class offered by a non-profit organization in the neighborhood of Changsin-dong. Oksun taught several classes while I was conducting fieldwork there in 2009. "I have always been ready to leave this job even though I have never had the chance," she confided in me. Initially, I interpreted her words as testifying to the undesirable working conditions and negative representations of garment work in Dongdaemun. Oksun added a popular saying: "One who has good skills will end up with a lifetime of hard labor [*Kisul choŭmyŏn kosaengman handa*]."

Yet, after several interviews and casual conversations, Oksun told me that her feelings about her own sewing ability, which she referred to as "my skill" (*kisul*), were beginning to change. "I don't turn away from it anymore—it is what I have and what I do. I can say that, and there is nothing wrong with it." Gradually, I learned that Oksun's denial and later acceptance of her skill involved her own articulation of her lifetime of work within the historical context of women's garment labor and the labor movement. I also learned that Oksun's current attachment to her "skill" was not unique. This perspective had a significant place in the conversations I had with established and aspiring seamstresses during my fieldwork. While many of the women with whom I spoke were angered by what they saw as the devaluation of manual skills in South Korean society (*kisul kyŏngsi*

[1] The names of persons and organizations in this chapter are all pseudonyms, except for well-known figures such as the former president Jeon Doohwan and famous groups such as the Cheonggye Labor Union.

FIVE

Leave No Birthing Trace: The Politics of Health and Beauty in the South Korean Postpartum Care Market

YOONJUNG KANG

"My goal is *in three months* [emphasis original] to lose the entire baby weight and get my pre-baby body back with these postpartum care plans. I won't regret the money spent for that. A top priority for me now is to make my body regain enough strength and slimness by the time I return to work," said Mee-kyung,[1] a thirty-four-year-old mother who gave birth to her first child in September 2012, when I interviewed her right after she completed her two-week stay at a residential facility for postpartum care (*sanhujoriwŏn*) in Seoul's Gangnam district. When her pregnancy was confirmed, Mee-kyung had immediately laid out her postpartum care scheme, conferring with her husband and her mother. As a result, her three-month maternity leave was filled with a series of postpartum care arrangements: the first two weeks in the postpartum care facility, another two weeks with a postpartum home-care helper (*sanhudoumi*) at her home, and two months of additional convalescence in her mother's house located two hours' drive from Seoul.

At the postpartum care facility, one of the top-notch facilities in Seoul, Mee-kyung received very enviable postpartum care services, consisting of a variety of skin and body massages, yoga and Pilates classes, and a strict postpartum diet developed by a self-styled postpartum nutritionist. Even after being discharged, she occasionally visited the facility to use their highly reputed postpartum massage services. Entering her seventh week postpartum, Mee-kyung began to work out with a personal fitness trainer, expecting to accelerate her weight loss. Mee-kyung spent roughly the equivalent of seven thousand U.S. dollars for her postpartum physical

[1] All participant names used in this chapter are pseudonyms.

SIX

Gendered Narratives of Transition to Adulthood among Korean Work-Bound Youth

HYEJEONG JO

I was sitting at a dining table with A-ra and her boyfriend, Se-yoon, on a Friday evening.[1] A-ra, a twenty-year-old convenience store cashier, generously invited me to hang out with her and Se-yoon, a twenty-one-year-old assistant cook, at a small, sparsely decorated three-bedroom apartment that her parents owned. Sharing *ddeok-bbo-kki*, a common Korean street food, the three of us pleasantly bantered until A-ra asked me to remind her of my research topic. Despite my intention to casually introduce the research to my potential informants, my answer triggered a good-natured argument between them.

When I explained to A-ra that I would like to know how Korean high school–graduate workers (*go-jol no-dong-ja*) view their journey of becoming adults in Korea, A-ra bluntly said, "I think that a high school graduate is now a loser in Korea." Her sudden remark stopped our conversation short. Unsure of how to respond, I asked her why she believed so. She explained, "I couldn't understand why parents and other adults kept telling me to go to college until I actually started living without a college education. Having experienced what it is like to live without a college degree in Korea, I now see why people always talk about college." Quietly listening to A-ra, Se-yoon countered, "That's absolute nonsense. There are people who become successful without ever having entered a college classroom. I can live a happy life without a college education at all." A-ra half-jokingly rebuked Se-yoon, "You're just naive. I think that you don't think thoroughly." She chuckled as if trying to subdue the serious atmosphere. Irritated by what

[1] In this chapter, pseudonyms are used for names of people and places.

SEVEN

Diverging Masculinities and the Politics of Aversion toward Ethnically Mixed Men in the Korean Military

HYUN MEE KIM

For a very long time, the military in South Korea was an exclusively male social institution that enforced the idea of Korean ethnic purity, playing a pivotal role in the state's formation of a specific male national identity through mandatory military service. The military served to socialize, classify, and rank men in ways that fortified their relationships to the state based on ideas of "hegemonic masculinity" and idealized nationhood (Arkin and Dobrofsky 1978; Moon 2002; Sasson-Levy 2003). Many feminist works have critically examined the disciplinary nature of the military by associating masculinity with hypersexuality and the exclusion of women by considering women as objects of subjugation (Enroe 1980; Kwon 2000, 2013; Moon 2002, 2005). Moon (2002, 80) sees the South Korean (hereafter Korean) military as forming hegemonic masculinity through a number of interwoven notions and practices that reinforce the notion of adult males as family providers who remain distant from domestic responsibilities such as household work and childcare. One of these practices is the completion of a man's mandatory military service in his twenties, a critical rite of passage in the process of becoming a "real man" in South Korea.

Until recently, the military banned the conscription of ethnically mixed men—those with one Korean parent and the other parent of another ethnicity—on the grounds that they might upset the status quo. Male citizens who were not of pure Korean stock were exempt from the responsibility of military service until 2009, when the regulation was abolished as unconstitutional. Yet, despite the fact that male citizens of mixed descent have been drafted since 2012 as a result of the revision of the Military Service Act, their subordination as a racial minority has more than cancelled out their putative advantages as "males who have done their national duty" (*uimu*)

EIGHT

Maternal Guardians: Intimate Labor and the Pursuit of Gendered Citizenship among South Korean Volunteers Helping Migrant Women

HAE YEON CHOO

The era of late global capitalism is marked by an increasing "commodification of intimacy" that permeates everyday life (Constable 2009). New global "intimate industries" (Parreñas, Silvey, and Hung 2016) profit from *intimate labor*, the work of forging and nurturing interdependent relations as well as promoting recipients' "physical, intellectual, affective, and other emotional needs" (Boris and Parreñas 2010, 2). These industries transcend national boundaries, producing circuits of migration for domestic work, sex work, and cross-border marriages. Intimate labor migrants—disproportionately women and people who differ racially or culturally—enter the intimate spheres of nation-states that were not previously considered immigrant nations. Feminist scholars find that despite the unprecedented scale of the commercialization of intimacy, these intimate industries have not transformed existing social relations of inequality. Instead, they facilitate the reproduction of the hegemonic family formation as well as the cultural scripts of class-specific femininity and masculinity by, for example, relegating gendered care work to migrant domestic workers or to migrant women in cross-border marriages (Parreñas 2001; Yeoh, Chee, and Vu 2014).

This chapter delves into the on-the-ground processes by which people accomplish the reproduction and reconfiguration of social hierarchies in the face of the vast expansion of commercial intimacy on a global scale. I

An earlier version of this chapter was published in 2017: "Maternal Guardians: Intimate Labor and the Pursuit of Gendered Citizenship among South Korean Volunteers for Migrant Women," *Sexualities* 20, no. 4: 497–514. The current chapter is reprinted with permission.