

Gender and Class in Contemporary South Korea

Modern Korean Society

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Intersectionality and Transnationality

- Intersectionality
 - In contemporary feminism “attempt to take into account the ways different social hierarchies (class, gender, race, etc.) combine, overlap or intersect”
 - This means paying attention to the *relations and interactions* between different kinds of stratification
- Transnationality
 - Eschew “methodological nationalism”—i.e. treating South Korea as a self-evident, separate, ethnically defined and homogeneous unit
 - This means paying attention to how cosmopolitan engagement, immigrant workers, tourism, international marriages and other transnational phenomena affect class, gender and race hierarchies

“Open Society” narratives in developmental South Korea

- Between 1960 and 1990 South Korea rapidly industrialized and a majority of the population moved from rural to urban areas
 - As a result most people experienced advances in their standard of living (diet, health, well-being)
 - “We used to all be poor together” narratives—celebrated current standard of living, but also nostalgia for the communitarian values of shared poverty
- Korean War 1950-3 created downward mobility, devastation, and a redistribution of wealth so that people were relatively equal when development started off
- The current relatively homogeneous (and small) rural sector is easy to project on the past (that was very stratified in reality until land reform and the Korean War) allowing people to imagine that where they ended up is due to their personal qualities (hard work, education, etc.) rather than privilege
- Official discourses emphasized “meritocratic” elements of education (exam system)
- Typical narrative—Melodrama of how my personal and family traits got me where I am
 - Melodrama—individual, interiority, psychology, big coincidences

“Closed society” narratives in developmental South Korea

- These narratives are “counter-hegemonic”
 - 1993 President Kim Young Sam promoted law by which politicians and government officials had to publish their assets, confirming that political connections can lead to wealth and power
 - Conspicuous consumption of the rich began to be visible in the 1980s, especially in Seoul’s Kangnam neighborhood (Apkujǒng munhwa)
 - Rampant real-estate speculation in the 1980s and 1990s led to feelings of being “left behind”
- Typical narrative, “Why haven’t I progressed further”?—is it my personal fault, or are there structural impediments to my progress?

Jin-kyung Lee “Changelings and Cinderellas”

- Drama under Park and Chun (1972-87)
 - Government censorship of “inappropriate themes” during Yusin that was not present before
 - Marital infidelity (i.e. liberated women), anti-Confucian mores (i.e. uppity women and youth), conspicuous consumption censored
 - Individualism (kaeinjuŭi) = selfishness (igijuŭi), consumption (sobi) = greed (yoksim), narratives of “over-consumption” (kwasobi) associated with 1997 currency crisis
- “master narrative” the “rags to riches” story
 - Example: “Love and ambition” (Sarang kwa yamang)
 - Typical plot: working-class boys or brothers make good, with a subplot of their romantic entanglements

Post development new “master plots”

- Changeling switched at birth (Western example: Mark Twain, *The Prince and the Pauper*)
 - *I Summon You, Gold!*—one twin sister adopted into a wealthy family, and the other into a working class family
 - *Birth of a Rich Man*—a boy born out of wedlock searches for his *chaebŏl* father
 - “good twin” (born rich, raised poor) reclaims her rightful place, while evil “bad twin” (born poor, raised rich) gets her just deserts
- Cinderella plot
 - Poor but good girl marries *chaebŏl* heir
 - Jummarella (쥬마렐라)—newly divorced middle-aged woman finds a career and a new prince

Relationship to Changing Social Stratification

- Notice that plots for successful working class men are absent
 - Male leads are now all rich, good-looking, third-generation *chaebŏl*
 - Men tend not to watch dramas any more except for historical dramas
- Relationship to social stratification
 - Good twin/bad twin conflict is class conflict—class revenge drama in which goodness is rewarded, but the role of hard work as a game changer is muted
 - Ambivalent about whether moral goodness is a question of birth, or upbringing (whether wealth equals goodness, or poverty creates moral worth)
 - Cinderella plot conceives of the (female) working class as morally deserving, while changeling plot sees poverty as a something to be escaped
 - In both only the morally undeserving are left in poverty, while poverty's existence is recognized
 - Upward mobility, in the end, is not really possible through one's own efforts—thus implicitly recognizing the rigidity of contemporary South Korean social stratification

“Spoon discourse”

- Derived from the English idiom “born with a silver spoon in one’s mouth”
- In Korea used to express the idea that one’s success in life depends entirely on being born into a wealthy family
 - Gold spoon children (kŭm sujŏ) children of the wealthy
 - Might live in Kangnam (the best school district)
 - Might benefit from expensive tutoring and cram school
 - Might be able to afford college without working
 - Might have contacts to get a good job
 - Parents might have speculated in real estate and can provide a nice apartment at the time of marriage
 - If have a *p’yebaek* can get enough money for an expensive honeymoon
 - Dirt spoon children (hŭk sujŏ) those born without wealth

2016 Poem

- 부모의 능력과 재력을 배경으로 어떤 고생도
- 또는 노력도 하지않아도 되는 사람
- 반대로, 드라마 주인공처럼
- 온갖 역경과 고난은 다 헤쳐나가야 하는데
- 집에서는 지원은커녕 물려줄 것은 빛뿐 인 사람
- 우리는 이런 사람들을 뭐라고 부를까요?
- 네 '금수저', 그리고 '흙수저'라고 부르죠
- 물론 이 글을 읽고 계신 분들 중
- 위 단어들의 의미를 모르는 분은
- 거의 없을 거라 생각합니다
- Becoming a person based on parents' ability and wealth
- Regardless of hardship or effort
- On the contrary, a person like a drama heroine
- Having to swim against all kinds of adversity and hardship
- Receiving nothing but debts from your family
- What do we call such persons?
- You're a gold spoon or dirt spoon
- Off course among those reading this
- I think there are almost none who
- Don't know the meaning of the above words

Some second thoughts

- In the anthropological work I am aware of, women have always talked about their social position in terms of having made a good or bad marriage (*Abelmann, Melodramas of Mobility*)
 - “I couldn’t choose, could I?” (older woman with an arranged marriage)
 - But, “she changed her horoscope” 팔자를 고쳤다 (she remarried)
 - On not leaving a bad marriage: “sometimes I feel stupid, and sometimes I feel heroic” (어떤 때 못한 사람 같다고 생각하고 어떤 때 대단한 사람으로 느끼다.)
- Is Jin-kyung Lee seeing the “feminization of drama” or a change in attitudes toward social stratification over all?

Gender and Social Mobility

- Gendered industrialization
 - Young, single factory workers controlled on the shop floor, but sometimes rebelled
 - Housewives (later stage of life course)
 - Unpaid domestic labor (cooking, cleaning, raising children)
 - Emotional and reproductive labor
 - Family status reproduction (gift exchange, social gatherings, proper consumption, making sure kids get tutoring)
 - These analyses neglect the important role of housewives in family wealth accumulation
 - Urban housewives commonly manage the family budget
 - Difference between working and middle class is possession of property (especially real estate), so housewives' ability to contribute to family wealth through investment is important

Gender, Class, and Informal Economic Activity

- Image of "man the provider, woman the reproducer" strong, but in fact, in working and middle class families, women contribute income through informal labor:
 - Working class—domestic work (파출부), street vending, piecework at home, making dolls and sweaters, preparing vegetables and dried fish
 - Middle class—teaching or white collar work OK, accounting or teaching music at home, selling life insurance on the side
 - But also money lending (kye), real estate investment, renting out property
 - Accumulate money through the "key money" system (chǒnse)—pay large sum in advance in exchange for low or no rent, and get your money back at the end of the chǒnse period (1-3 years)
 - Chǒnse runs 40-60% of the sale value of an apartment (landlord takes money and reinvests it)
 - Smart housewives accumulate savings by moving to bigger and bigger apartments with more and more chǒnse payments until they reach the point where they can buy (need 80-90% of the purchase price because bank loans not available)
- **Lifestyle and location of residences become class markers**
 - Luxurious high-rise apartments in fashionable neighborhood are the epitome of the good life

Timing Critical

- Up until 1980s there were critical housing shortages in the cities, with many families doubling up in houses, or renting a single room
 - Many poor families lived in squatter settlements (p'anja ch'on, tal tongne)
- Beginning in 1972 Korean Housing Corporation began building high rise units, but shortages of capital (that prioritized HCI industrialization) made this inadequate
- Private developers also brought in
 - Speculators made money by finding out which areas were going to be opened for development (and buying before any others found out)
 - Chaebŏl construction companies built apartments for middle and upper classes
 - Buyers had to pay in advance before construction (so companies borrowed little money)
 - Companies sold apartments for twice their construction costs
 - Buyers relied on appreciating prices that allowed early buyers to sell at a profit and invest in higher and higher priced apartments (or in numerous apartments for rental and/or to provide for their children when they married)

Youido and Kangnam as Investments

- Land could not be developed until opened by the government for urban development
 - If you knew beforehand an area would be opened up, you could make a killing with an early investment
- Yŏŭido
 - Site of National Assembly, KBS, MBC , Korea Stock Exchange, Yŏŭido Full Gospel Church
 - Has South Korea's highest skyscrapers
 - High class high rise apartments from the 1970s
- Kangnam (Gangnam)
 - High speed highway to Pusan starts here
 - Laid out in grid pattern with wide streets
 - High rise apartments now the most expensive in Korea
 - Eighth school district is considered the best in Seoul

Expansion of Seoul (Kangnam 1963)



How to Invest?

- Housing lotteries
 - Buy a lottery ticket to gain right to buy an apartment
 - 1/3 of winners flipped their apartment immediately
 - Apartment cost 10-20 times average salary, so accumulation of capital by other means important
- Housewives' role
 - Gather information, attend apartment lotteries, invest as part of her management of household finances
 - Her investment income sometimes was more than her husband's salary, and in those days was not taxed much
 - Some bought multiple homes using kye, borrowed money from relatives, frequently changed apartments

Pokpuin 福婦人

- Pukpuin is a term that appeared in the 1970s (derived from *poktŏkbang*—real estate office—and *puin*—housewife)
 - Shrewd entrepreneur? Wicked speculator?
 - Image—well dressed woman driving a luxury car with several checkbooks in her purse going from housing lottery to housing lottery
 - Newspaper image (compare with *toenjangnyŏ*) of deviant (t'alsŏnja), shallow, and materialistic rather than a “wise mother, good wife” (*hyŏnmo, yangch'ŏ*)
 - “Hyŏndaep'an pulgasari” (Pulgasari of the current place—pulgasari is a legendary monster that feeds on metal, cf. *Sin Sangok* movie made in North Korea)
 - In popular discourse “inappropriate investment behavior and association with unrelated men” would lead to dissipation and moral ruin
 - Notice rampant chaebŏl speculation and government connivance get off the hook

Myungji Yang's Conclusion

- Women's participation in investment and capital accumulation was critical for building a middle class lifestyle
- Yet women's activities as investors and entrepreneurs were met with harsh criticism
- Men's equivalent activities went uncriticized
 - For example, housewives kye (revolving credit clubs) have often been remarked on in the news media, but businessmen's much larger kye go unremarked
- In the middle class marriage market now, the boy's family is supposed to provide an apartment (or at least enough chŏnse to rent one)