

Mother Citizens or Women Victims?

Modern Korean Society
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Workers versus Working Girls

- Katherine came as a trainee, fled her factory and got another job in Factory town, living in Korea for the next nine years
 - Would like to be able to come as an immigrant
 - Was “illegal” but was able to claim her labor rights
- Rachel was a documented worker on an entertainer visa who was assigned to Basetown
 - Her employer sent her home three months before her contract ended—and so she got stiffed of some of her salary that is paid at the completion of the contract
- How come the undocumented worker got her rights and the legal one was stiffed?

Women migrant workers in Factories

- **Women worked in factories with others of many ethnicities and both genders**
 - **Women's work tended to be gendered**
 - **Women benefited from the factory system**
 - **As women accumulated time in the factories they acquired skills that made them more competitive**
 - **In the factory system seniority and experience is valued**
 - **The skill and experience women acquired gave them a kind of job security even in the absence of a legal contract**
 - **Employers often preferred experienced, long-term undocumented workers with good Korean to legal “guest workers” under the Employment Permit System (EPS)**
 - **-60% of the factory workers were undocumented**
 - **The co-ethnic community provides mutual help for the workers and stability for the employer**

Male migrant workers in factories

- Many male Korean workers developed affective ties with migrant workers with whom they worked side-by-side
 - This spirit indirectly benefited the women migrants who also become “our company people”
 - Their co-ethnic male colleague could protect them and promote their cause
 - Although exploitation also existed, small factory owners often began as workers and had good bonds with their workers

Entertainers in Base Town

- Filipinas were the majority of entertainers
 - Less than 10% were from South Korean or from the Soviet Union
- Clubs were mostly run by female Koreans and catered to GI customers
 - Work is “emotional labor”—intimacy, fun, comfort
 - Some bars had “bar fines” in which a customer could take a girl out for the whole night, or VIP rooms
- Most had written contracts with a minimum wage, but in fact income depended on their ability to get customers to buy hostesses “juice” and drinks for themselves, and few got days off
 - Brokers that got them their jobs and assigned them to their clubs withheld girls’ base pay until the end of their contract
 - Girls had to rely on tips and commissions to pay for living expenses (commissions could be docked if they didn’t sell enough drinks)
 - Girls had to develop regulars (“boyfriends”) who would buy drinks and take them out, and sometimes these blossomed into romances

Paternalistic relations in clubs

- Proprietors were called “mommy” or “daddy” while entertainers were called “girls” regardless of age
 - Girls sometimes called “juicy girls” or “drinkie girls”
 - Proprietors had control over women’s mobility and intimate lives and could fine them for infractions (like leaving the house without permission)
- Some proprietors were mean and controlling, while others bonded and sympathized with the girls
 - Periodic physical exams for VD, and some “mommies” recalled undergoing them when they themselves had been hostesses in the past
 - Even sympathetic proprietors treated the “girls” like children
- In hostess work the benefits of experience were cancelled out by the disadvantages of age
 - Contractors rotated girls among clubs

Isolation of base town girls

- **No vibrant ethnic community comparable to Factory Town**
 - Working conditions confined girls to the clubs and didn't allow them to get out and make contacts
 - Catholic church is the center of Filipino ethnic communities in Korea, but because of the nature of their work those entertainers who were Catholic were reluctant to attend Mass
- Nature of the work put the entertainers in competition with each other for customers, drinks and dates
- Running away to a factory was difficult because usually those who came to do factory work did it through kinship ties, and entertainers lacked those ties
 - Runaways, thus, generally did so to live with their boyfriends hoping for marriage—a hope that sometimes worked out and sometimes didn't

Civil society mobilization

- Civil society groups have mobilized in Korea by these groups are generally gendered
- While migrant workers got some legal protection in the mid-1990s, they were hindered in activating these rights
 - Employers are more powerful
 - Workers often lacked ability in Korean language
 - The precarious legal status of workers made them reticent
- NGOs advocated for workers
 - Argued for their dignity as “breadwinners”—workers, minjung—meaning their activism was derived from indigenous Korean labor activism
 - Faith-based groups (both evangelical and Catholic) were the heart of community life for migrants in Factory Town

Changes in migrant workers' rights

- **1994 Labor Standards Act**
 - Workers compensation for injuries
 - 1995 expansion to industrial trainees
 - 1997 severance pay regardless of legal status
- **2003 Industrial Trainee system replaced by Employment Permit System**
 - Rights to health insurance, workers' compensation, severance pay, minimum wages, and rights of association
- **New issues**
 - Freedom for migrant workers to choose their employer (since EPS bound them to a specific employer)
 - Legalization of undocumented workers (24% of migrant workforce) and halt of immigration crackdowns

Discursive strategies

- **Emphasis on migrants' contribution to Korean society through work**
- **Emphasis on migrants' sacrifice for the sake of their families**
 - **Simch'ōng myth as basis for understanding migrants**
 - Simch'ōng's mother died in childbirth and her father goes blind
 - The father, Sim Hyōn, is told by a Buddhist monk that he can regain his sight for an offering 300 bags of rice to Buddha
 - Simch'ōng offers herself as a sacrificial victim to fisherman for 300 sacks of rice, and is thrown into the sea to propitiate a god, but the Dragon King saves her in a lotus blossom, and she becomes his empress
 - In some versions Sim Hyōn is swindled out of the rice by a seductress
 - As empress she sponsors a banquet at which her father shows up and regains his sight for joy
 - **Skit at Protestant Church—Filipina woman sacrifices herself for her family**

Simch'ōngga
1976 Pyōlsin kut



The Basetown NGO

- **Sisterhood Center the only NGO**
 - Entertainment workers treated as victims of sexual trafficking, but did not get the sympathy and benefit of being considered “breadwinners”
 - “no one has voluntarily entered the country for the purpose of prostitution” p138
 - Help for entertainers thus folded into anti-prostitution efforts
 - This discourse comes partly from US anti-trafficking discourse, but Korea also has its indigenous anti-trafficking discourse
 - Legacy of “comfort women” and South Korean camp town hostesses
 - Goal to “rescue” women from the sex industry
 - This is a social work model of “harm reduction” rather than a labor model of demanding rights and good working conditions (although hostesses thought of themselves as workers and breadwinners)
 - Mobilizing for rights would require a high level of collective action that working conditions hindered

Gendering the worker-citizen

- “For migrant factory workers, South Korean civil society mobilized on their behalf for the expansion of social and labor rights without attention to their gender-specific needs as women. For migrant hostesses, although feminist NGOs advocated for more protective measures for victims of trafficking, without the involvement of other migrant advocacy groups or trade unions, this effort rendered the women invisible as migrant workers who might want to keep and improve their jobs and weakened their standing as the subjects of rights and citizenship claims in South Korea.”
 - Choo, *Decentering Citizenship* chapter 6 conclusion p 142

Weakness of Human Rights Advocacy

- The UN and transnational advocacy networks take a human rights approach to difficulties of female migrants
 - Discourse of victimization and trafficking demands the state acknowledge women's vulnerability despite lack of citizenship
- Choo found that the majority of her Filipina informants did not claim these rights even if they were aware of them
 - While some do benefit from this kind of advocacy, there are downsides to claiming victimhood
 - Discourses of human rights and victimhood intersect with other discourses based on women's standing within heteronormative families and as subjects of upward mobility

Traditional feminist advocacy

- **Human rights discourse focusing on violence against women**
 - Migrant wives and camp town entertainers are classified together in this discourse as potential victims of violence for whom they hold the state accountable
- **Commonalities**
 - Both club owners and husbands sometimes withhold women's passports and control women's interpersonal relations
 - Both migrant wives and entertainers could be subject to deception and fraud
 - Migrant wives may be misinformed as to mothers-in-law and family prosperity
 - Entertainers can be misinformed about the nature of club work, and working conditions regarding pay, etc.
 - Both migrant wives and entertainers brought in by agencies or brokers that have not been well-regulated by the South Korean state

Difficulties of Trafficking Discourse

- Based on ideal-type dichotomies that don't recognize the complexity of women's desires
 - Model of heteronormative marriages based on "pure love" (sunsuhan sarang) contrasted with marriage for other reasons (upward mobility?)
 - Yet this model does not even describe traditional Korean marriage, much less the complexity of international marriage
 - Economic stability *and* love, or economic support as proof of love
- For some using these discourses the only proper solution is to stop international marriage and entertainer visas altogether
- Important protective measures were won from the state, however
 - Multilingual hotline, counseling, shelters
- Discourses of victimhood did not envision migrants as members of Korean society, but as subjects lacking agency in need of protection, and as boundary markers between "we" and "they"

Marriage Migrants' Views

- For marriage migrants, keeping their marriage together meant success as a woman and proof that their marriages were not “fake”
- Cross-border marriages are real marriages, and therefore the women don't consider themselves commodities or victims of trafficking
- Legitimizing their marriages is a strategy to give them a place within Korean society
 - Women might valorize romantic love in their marriage
 - Unification Church and Catholic Church both emphasize the sanctity of marriage
- Discourse of motherhood is a powerful way for them to claim rights—“I won't go home to the Philippines. This is my children's house.”
 - Margery Wolf's theory of the uterine family posits that women informally reinforce their power in the family through their children in patriarchal societies
 - As mothers of Korean citizens, marriage migrants claim a place in society even apart from their husbands, say some—they are contributing to the reproduction of the nation

Limitations of Motherhood Discourse

- **Limits women's paths to citizenship and excludes women who are not mothers**
 - **Case of Judith Hernandez who naturalized and ran for the National Assembly**
 - **Criticized because she had married a Bangladeshi after her Korean husband died, and because her Korean children were being raised in the Philippines**

Migrant Hostesses

- Some dismiss hostesses claim to human rights based on an assessment of their moral worth
 - “They were prostitutes before they came here” (a claim that Choo found to be generally false)
 - “What kind of women does that? They come from broken homes.”
- Hostesses segregated in a special social space
 - Camp towns are special isolated entertainment districts
 - Hostesses are outside the institution of marriage as well
- For some the discourse of victimization and trafficking expresses reality
 - The moral clarity of NGO workers, however, often is met with ambivalence by the hostesses
 - Hostesses did not see going out on a “bar fine” as equivalent to prostitution, but as a space of romance where women received gifts and protection from their boyfriends p156
 - Accepting a definition as victim would force them to renounce the space of romance
 - Marriage with a GI was possible and perceived as a better solution

Migrant Children's Human Rights Act

- **First introduced in National Assembly in 2014**
 - Would extend education, health, and personhood to undocumented migrant children, and postpone deportation of parents until child's compulsory education is completed
- Korea signed the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child that says all children should get benefits, but other laws limit benefits to citizen children
- Proposal generated backlash, as opponents feared it would open the door to uncontrolled migration
 - As of 2019 the law had not been passed and estimates were that there were some 20,000 undocumented children in Korea
 - (for comparison DACA recipients number more than 800,000)

Margins of Citizenship

- Apart from legal definitions of citizenship, “citizenship” rights are contested based on
- Legal and policy regime created three categories
 - Temporary migrant workers (Employment Permit System)
 - Multicultural Families (for migrants married to Korean citizens)
 - Antitrafficking for hostesses
- State attempts to control migrants came into conflict with economic opportunities, vibrant immigrant communities, and NGO activism
 - This created marginal spaces where undocumented and relatively long-term migrants could exist despite having no legal ability to establish permanent residence

Mediation by South Korean Activists

- Migrant workers and migrant women treated as separate categories by activists even though workers married to Koreans were an integral part of the migrant community
 - Religious NGOs unconsciously restricted equal and full membership through paternalistic, hierarchical structures that placed migrants in a lower, child-like category
 - Married migrants subject to multicultural assimilation
 - Workers treated as workers rather than potential citizens

Paradox

- High degree of activism among both Koreans and migrants to improve migrant rights with some success
- Nevertheless, migrants are still greatly constrained