UC Berkeley
Berkeley Undergraduate Journal

Title

Building Your Resume to be the Ultimate Bride: South Korean Women's Contradictory Identity in a Hyper-Instrumentalized Society

Permalink

https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6kj8n5hf

Journal

Berkeley Undergraduate Journal, 27(2)

Author

Roh, Yunhee

Publication Date

2014

DOI

10.5070/B3272024076

BUILDING YOUR RÉSUMÉ TO BE THE ULTIMATE BRIDE

South Korean Women's Contradictory Identity in a Hyper-Instrumentalized Society

By Yunhee Roh

Rapid modernization in South Korea, the product of industrialization and democratization in the 1970s and 1980s, has helped Korean women to gain higher socio-economic statuses. However, the daughters of the 1970s and 1980s generation who either went to one of the top universities have professional careers, or both still pursue marriage as their ultimate life goal. My research question asks: why do upper middle class South Korean women, who are aware of the "second shift" and other forms of marital inequality, still actively resort to marriage as their completion of life achievement despite opportunities for self-actualization through careers? Drawing from twenty-nine in-depth interviews of South Korean women born in the 1980s and 1990s, I argue that in the construction of South Korean modernity, a compressed process within the 1970s and 1980s, South Korea is currently a hyper-instrumentalized society where women are actively modernizing themselves to be traditional. As South Korean women interact with a fast-paced political economy, marriage incorporates a process of résumé building through higher education and the job market. My findings reveal that South Korean marriage is even regarded as a career in itself. As a result, we must reconsider the role of ideals such as self-actualization, which are typically assumed in narratives of modernization. By contextualizing the South Korean women in a larger history, we must also consider the desire for entering a successful marriage as part of the changing sociology that drives them to pursue higher education and prominent job opportunities.

I.   Introduction

Why does the institution of marriage remain so durable in South Korea compared to other developed countries? South Korea has higher marriage rates than Japan and Taiwan, and marriage rates have declined in Western nations overall.[1] In fact, the classical modernization theory once presupposed that throughout the modernization process, the family as a social institution and ideology would fundamentally decline due to the emergence of various social entities that would take over the family's social functions, such as economic production and education. School, for example, replaces the family's educational function. However, in South Korea, a supposedly modern society, marriage remains a prominent social fixture. Despite the fact that modernization is expected to diversify marital forms, it is still common to see newlyweds function along traditional expectations of marriage. The bride and groom meet, are approved by society, marry, give birth to a child, and hence solidify the successful completion of the standard family unit.

Drawing from twenty-nine in-depth interviews with young South Korean women who reside in either South Korea or the U.S., I conclude that marriage remains an influential cultural institution that, in some ways, has been strengthened through its transformations and commodification within South Korean modernity (e.g. through Hyper-rationality). South Korean modernization is known for the explosive and complex nature of its societal transformations. This is a critical dimension that sets the case of South Korea apart from Western societies, where the conceptualizations of modernity have led to a decline of the family as a social institution. Therefore, I situate my research question in a broader context of *compressed modernity*, which refers to a modernization process in a very compressed period of time. Compressed modernity is helpful in explaining familism in South Korea that codifies marriage as a cultural norm, rather than an individual choice. Understanding South Korea's compressed period of modernization in the 1970s and 1980s sets the background of how marriage in this society became commodified and indistinguishable from a job.

In this paper, I will first examine the women-friendly outcomes of South Korea's industrialization and democratization in comparison to social shifts in Western society. I will explain the inevitability of the propagated hyper-instrumentalization in the marital patterns of South Korean women. I will identify South Korean women's contradictory identity, constructed by the replacement of the ideals of modern self-actualization through higher education and professional jobs with a widespread preoccupation with the ultimate life goal—marriage. In other words, South Korean marriage is a final career destination, with personal development, appearance, education, and an actual job as the elements on the résumé building toward achieving that career achievement. Then I will explore why marriage and career become one combined realm in South Korean women's lives instead of two distinct spheres. I will analyze the anxieties and tensions that young South Korean women struggle with in the context of a time-pressed and globalized economy in South Korea to explain why marriage became a matter-of-fact and an ultimate life-goal to professional south Korean women. The course of a South Korean woman's life will be illustrated and analyzed, mainly through the in-depth interviews, by looking at the individuals' background, family relations, and perspectives on marital and career choices. This research ultimately contributes to an alternative understanding of modernity by illustrating how South Korean women are actively negotiating the rapid shift of South Korea's socioeconomic and sociopolitical structures.

---

1   Tsuya, Noriko O. and Larry L. Bumpass, eds. *Marriage, work, and family life in comparative perspective: Japan, South Korea, and the United States.* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2004)

II.   Literature Review

A.   *The outcomes of compressed modernity for "modern" South Korean women*

Although it would have been informative to start with the Korean indigenous modernization starting from Chosŏn dynasty (1392–1910), I will trace "contemporary ideas, practices, and institutions to a concrete period of time" to extrapolate the inevitability of dynamics of Korean growth. This is to follow the basis of *Han Unbound*, written by John Lie who positioned his writing as to "disagree with explanations of south Korean development that stress the legacies of traditional Korea or even that of Japanese colonialism."[2] Between 1960 and 1980, the average annual GNP growth rate in South Korea was 7 percent. It is a significant number, considering the middle-income countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America achieved only a 3.8 percent annual growth during the same period.[3] It was called the "miracle on the Han River" when South Korea, beginning in the early 1960s, implemented its export-oriented government industrialization policy under the authoritarian regime. Consequently, South Korea welcomed rapid industrialization with technological advancement, and rapid urbanization. In addition, South Korea celebrated its incredible rise in education and living standards. Their successful hosting of the 1988 Summer Olympics is a representative example that shows South Korea's dramatic growth. Most importantly, the structural change toward modernity in South Korea, driven by the industrialization and democratization of the 1970s and 1980s, has helped South Korean women to gain a higher socio-economic status.

Many works of literature argue that the behavior of the female labor supply has important implications for marriage and family issues including fertility, the distribution of family earnings, and male-female wage differentials. The modernization theory suggests looking at the gender equity, explained with the increased female labor and greater education, as well as decreased fertility rates in correlation with increased modernity. This view shares the human capital hypothesis that women with higher education are more likely to be active in the labor market. In other words, the education of women positively correlates to the likelihood of participating in the labor force.

Based on the human capital and modernization theory, both a woman's educational level and her family's economic status determine her labor force participation in Seoul, South Korea. Women with middle school education or higher tend to participate more in the labor market than those with no education or lower than a middle school education.[4] According to the OECD Better Life index, nearly 64 percent of people aged fifteen to sixty-four in Korea have paid jobs, slightly below the OECD employment average of 66 percent. Some 75 percent of men are in paid work, compared to the 53 percent of women, suggesting that women encounter more difficulties than their male counterparts in balancing work and family life. It is similar to the concept that Arlie Hochschild coined as the "second shift."[5] She examined the challenging dual responsibility facing married American women. She took into account the social changes in American economics, cultural expectations, and gender norms. Along with the shift in the American economy, more

---

2 Lie, John. *Han Unbound: The Political Economy of South Korea* (Stanford University Press, 2000). 175-179

3 World Bank, *World Development Indicator*, 1982

4 Cho, Uhn and Hagen Koo, "Economic Development and Women's Work in a Newly Industrializing Country: the Case of Korea," *Development and Change*, 14 (1983): 515-531; Sunghee Nam. "Determinants of Female Labor Force Participation: A Study of Seoul, South Korea, 1970-1980," *Sociological Forum* 6.4 (1991).

5 Hochschild, Arlie, *The Second Shift: Working Families and the Revolution at Home*, 2012 [1989]

families consist of two employed adults in order to maintain or improve upon the standard of living of their parents. As for cultural expectations, more women went to college than before, which indicated their desire for equal participation in the labor market. Furthermore, the women's movement of the 1970s challenged cultural assumptions about domestic gender roles, though it did not completely eradicate them.

Interestingly, young South Korean women in the job market are well aware of the struggles and gender ideologies that they may encounter once they are married. However, South Korean female employees are not the only ones who are mindful of the second shift. In fact, South Korean employers also acknowledge women's struggles in balancing the household and work. However, regardless of this knowledge, they unfairly disadvantage young women at the age of marriage, supposedly after 25, who are, at the same time, applying for jobs because of this double responsibility that the married career woman may have. I will discuss this cultural impediment further in the next section, though it is significant to note in this section the disparity between American and Korean literature regarding women's struggle to balance marriage and work. This difference in literature clearly suggests the need to explore the South Korean woman's life *before* becoming someone's wife, rather than the already well-known difficulty of being employed *after* the marriage. Therefore, solely utilizing Hochschild's framework would be insufficient in understanding the structural shift in South Korean society. South Korean women seem to experience a contradictory identity beyond the issues of the second shift, as reflected through their perspectives on marriage and careers.

A concrete example is *ch'wichip*, a rapidly reemerged societal trend of women regarding marriage as a way of finding a job.[6] Under the persistent emphasis on women to get married instead of finding a job, *ch'wichip* does not seem to be new. However now *ch'wichip* appears more in the conversations of women from a higher social class. *Ch'wichip* is a gendered hybrid word for a woman's "employment" [*ch'wiŏp*] and "marriage" [*sijip*]. In the Korean language, there are two different terms for "marriage" depending on the subject's gender. Men call marriage *changga*, while women call it *sijip*. From the illustration of my 29 respondents, *ch'wichip* can either refer to marriages in which 1) women, from the start, have no intention of getting a job and rely solely on putting themselves on the marriage market, or 2) women simply quit their jobs after marriage. The first category, as described by South Korean women, involves systematically preparing for marriage, while the other category implies situations where it is difficult beyond financial sense for the unemployed South Korean women to survive as single women. The systematic preparation for marriage entails reconstruction of your face and body through plastic surgery and attending the specific school (e.g. Ewha Womans University) or majoring in so-called feminine studies (e.g. fashion design or early childhood education). Yoojin Chang,[7] a thirty three-year-old who currently works as a senior consultant at an international management consulting firm portraits the recent image of ch'wichip in South Korea.

> *Ch'wichip* should include those women who drop out from the job market due to their marriage. There are some women, especially among younger generation, who strive for a job, but fail to—then get married. At the same time there are other women who strive for marriage, from the beginning. Those girls actually start seeking cosmetic surgery from their freshmen year…

---

6 Park, Jeong Yun and Kim, Yae Ree, The Effects of Parent-Child Relationship and Psychological Separation Perception on Marriage Attitudes of Single Males and Females. *Journal of the Korean Home Economics Association,* 48.4 (2010): 13-24

7 All names used in this paper are pseudonyms.

For South Korean women, marriage and a job are interchangeable, so they believe that they can choose marriage if they don't get a job. As the meaning of *ch'wichip* also extends to South Korean women who quit their jobs after marriage, the distinction between marriage and career is blurred. To put it differently, it is no longer a debate between marriage and career, but a merging of two distinct realms of a South Korean woman's life.

This phenomenon is rather puzzling because the modernization theory argues that the activities of the female labor force increase as their education and levels of economic activity increase.[8] In other words, as the economy expands, women have easier and better access to jobs and, therefore, are encouraged to become more submerged in the job market. The modernization theory further suggests that economic development is undeniably associated with female labor force participation, made possible through changes in Korea's professional structure and increase in educational opportunities. Post-materialist Ronald Inglehart argues that once a society has launched industrialization, many related changes, including diminishing gender roles, are likely to appear.[9] However, this statement does not seem to entirely apply to South Korea because even after industrialization and democratization, traditional gender values are still dominant. The younger generations of South Korean women born in the 1980s and 1990s, whose parents experienced Korea's rapid structural shift, are still expected to replace higher education and a prominent job with marriage. What is even more bewildering is that young South Korean women are voluntarily seeking marriage, despite the inequalities facing married women, including the previously mentioned disadvantage in the job market. They are even perpetuating ideals of this gender inequality when raising their own daughters, which may maintain marital inequalities as mere social norms. Yoojin Chang reflects on the risk of raising daughters in this matter when she says:

> I even hear from my close friends [who are married] that they will have their daughters become a ballerina and just a pretty little girl…well, but they [their daughters] at least should have some scholarship and culture—so that they can understand what others would say to them—so they need to go to college. Then marriage.

Yoojin Chang remains single because she "loves her work so much then she lost her 'timing' to get married." However, most of her friends with whom she attended the same college, Ewha Womans University, are married. She was describing to me her friends' lives and their prospects for their daughters. After hearing how they wish to raise their daughters to be pretty ballerinas because of the South Korean marital perspective, I asked about these women's consideration for the self-esteem of their daughters. Yoojin Chang said:

> [Laughs] no self-esteem. As much as they have to raise their daughters like that [just a pretty little ballerina], the society that they had been facing with was like that. I sympathize with them, though I don't totally agree with them. Because otherwise you cannot get married…

8   Heckman, James, *Female Labor Supply: Theory and Estimation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980); Standing, Guy, *Labour Force Participation and Development* (Geneva: International Labour Office, 1981); Bauer, John and Young-soo Shin. "Female Labor Force Participation and wages in the Republic of Korea." *Population Association of America*, (East-West Population Institute, 1987); Nam Sunghee. "Determinants of Female Labor Force Participation: A Study of Seoul, South Korea, 1970-1980." *Sociological Forum* 6.4 (1991).

9   Ronald Inglehart, *Modernization and Postmodernization: Cultural, Economic, and Political Change in 43 Societies* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1997)

The gender roles of a South Korean marriage are reinforced by the traditional ideal of "wise mother, good wife" (hyŏnmo yangch'ŏ). The modernization theorist could ask if, then it is a cultural lag, as "modern" culture could take time to catch up with South Korean's institutional and technological development. The traditional gender ideology of "wise mother, good wife" has shown a surprising resilience in adopting itself to the tribulations of modern Korean history. South Korean women's efforts to pursue self-identity and individuality through social activities or professions, simultaneously with family life, have been suffocated by the demands of gender roles, which rules women's primary functions as housekeeper and childcare giver. Both functions limit women's place to the family context. Throughout the South Korean dramatic historical shift along with a nationalistic devotion as well as globalization, the role of family for individuals as the source of emotional satisfaction has been reinforced. Therefore, maintaining family in this sense requires women to make larger sacrifices.

South Korean women are actively responding to the (compressed) modernity, which was achieved through rapid industrialization and democratization. South Korean women are "modernizing" themselves to be "traditional". In light of this, my question asks why South Korean women continue to pursue marriage as an ultimate life goal despite its disadvantage in the Korean job market. Why do they not choose to be single or pursue other lifestyles such as cohabitation, or living together without a legal marriage, even though their higher educational and professional career can afford these alternatives? Why do they even strive for higher education and a professional career, when it will be fundamentally difficult to maintain after their marriage? Why do they develop a contradictory identity by refashioning traditional gender ideology to the modern self?

B.   *Morphing of marriage and career*

I have already explored the limits of the modernization theory in explaining the impact of various marital aspects on women's increased social acceptance and participation in the job market, but there has been enriching academic works of American literature on women's struggles between marriage and work. Hochschild is an author of one such work of literature, as she situated her research within the context of the achievements of the ongoing women's movement in the U.S. The women's movement has made progress in securing legal protection against discrimination and increasing access to higher education, higher-ranking jobs, and political positions. Similarly, South Korea experienced—along with civil activism and a trend toward participatory democracy after the end of multiple military dictatorships—the shift toward gender equity. The Korean government had, as of 2007, established or rewritten numerous far-reaching laws regarding gendered roles in politics in order to rectify gender inequality. Along with the emergence of a more gender-equal government, in 2012, South Korean women entered college more than men did by 5.7 percent.[10] However, the female labor force participation rate was only 49.9 percent, while the male labor force participation rate was 73.3 percent. In other words, Korean males participate in the labor market 23.4 percent more than females. If there is substantial institutional support in South Korea and, consequently, more women are entering college more than men, then where did all of these elite women go? What other impediments are in play that are nullifying the institutional support to South Korean women?

---

10   South Korean women entered college with 74.3 percent of ratio while South Korean men did with 68.6 percent of ratio.

In order to understand this lack of connection between institutional development and cultural impediment, I apply the concept of compressed modernity, first coined by South Korean sociologist Chang Kyung-sup to describe the explosive and complex nature of South Korea's societal transformations and to distinguish the Western comprehension of modernization. Based on the multi-method approach using a contextual analysis of compressed modernity and in-depth interviews with twenty-nine South Korean women residing in either South Korea or the United States, this paper concludes that young South Korean women actively instrumentalize marriage and careers in order to reassure their place and sense of belonging in conventional society; they choose not to opt out from normative social integration. *Ch'wichip*, defined earlier,[11] demonstrates the proliferated commodification of intimate relationship in South Korea, as it reflects women who consider marriage as a job. This study reveals that young South Korean women who voluntarily participate in *ch'wichip* to reproduce the social structure of marriage as a career seems to appear more among those in the higher social class. I argue that South Korean women experience contradictory identities in that even though they now pursue higher education and the professional job market, their relations with their family, friends, and society do not let them follow their value-rationality. Value-rationality is a Weberian term that people make a decision based on values such as honesty, love, and friendship, rather than by a means-ends calculus. The generation born in the 1980s and 1990s, living in the legacy of industrialization and democratization of the 1970s and 1980s, have never been asked to sacrifice higher education or professional career just because they are females. Instead, they have been incessantly pushed to be successful in many aspects of their life, not only in academics but also in their career and marriage. This is why for the South Korean women, experiencing the "second shift" and other marital inequalities are merely natural obstacles that they need to go through and bear with. The higher education as well as prominent job is required as a process of building their "résumé" to achieve a successful marriage, as a "job". This act of instrumentalizing the social institutions that they encounter and even commodifying their bodies is being reinforced throughout their socialization in relation to family, friends, and society as a whole.

III. Method

This paper is mainly based on in-depth interviews, assisted with a screening survey. As many scholars have noted, an in-depth interview enables one to obtain basic and occasionally deep levels of meaning from the details supplied by the subjects.[12] In order to optimize the merits of an in-depth interview, I interviewed the subjects after they submitted their responses to a screening survey through a website called "Survey Monkey." The goal of the screening survey was to select the pool of respondents who represented South Korean women with a relatively higher financial and educational background between the ages of nineteen to twenty-nine. This screening survey also aimed to preface the conversation that would take place during the in-depth interview, which would result in a more comfortable rapport.

---

11   See page 6 of this paper.

12   Weiss, Robert. *Learning from Strangers: The Art and Method of Qualitative Interview Studies*. (New York: Free Press, 1995); Hermanowicz, Joseph C. "The Great Interview: 25 Strategies for Studying People in Bed." *Qualitative Sociology* 25.4 (2002): 479-499; Newman, Katherine S. "Qualitative Research on the Frontlines of Controversy." *Sociological Methods and Research* 31.2 (2002):123-130; Yanow, Dvora and Peregrine Schwartz-Shea. "Reforming Institutional Review Board Policy: Issues in Implementation and Field Research." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 41 (2008): 483-494

After the CPHS approval in April 2013, I conducted in-depth interviews in Seoul, South Korea from the end of May 2013 to July 2013. I used my own Facebook page as well as my high school network to initially recruit the respondents. This is because I attended a highly selective private high school in South Korea where the majority of its students ultimately enter some of the most prestigious universities, both in Korea and overseas including Ivy leagues. Once I returned to Berkeley, California, I continued to conduct in-depth interviews to compare the responses from residents of South Korea and residents of the United States; in this way, I hoped to identify clearer points among the responses. From October 2013 to December 2013, in addition to posting my advertisement on various sites online, I especially made use of the Facebook KUNA group page to publicize the purpose of my research and to recruit research participants in the U.S. KUNA refers to the Korean Networking Association of Berkeley that mainly consists of UC Berkeley Korean undergraduate international students who also actively connect with other international students, including graduate students and alumni. In contrast, KASA is the Korean American Student Association that mainly consists of undergraduate Korean Americans. I chose not to connect with KASA members because, for the purpose of my research, I was only interested in South Korean international students who were born and raised in South Korea until they left for America for higher education. Solely interviewing the South Korean international students allows a more valid comparison with the South Korea residents who share a similar high financial and educational background.

When I was seeking research participants in the U.S., I also presented my work at the Seoul National University Gender Studies Forum and the UC Berkeley Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship. This was to build ethos and trust with whoever approached me, so that they would feel safer to contact me and be more intrigued by the research due to the high credibility of both institutions.

Potential interview candidates contacted me via Facebook message and I replied with a formal email that included the Survey Monkey link for the screening survey before officially setting up an interview appointment. Based on their survey responses, I selected the interviewees. The interviews took place either in person at a café or via Skype. In Seoul, I conducted all of the interviews at a café except for a few times when I visited their office, if the respondents work, to move to nearby café. In Berkeley, I conducted most of the interviews at a café, unless the respondent did not live close by, in which case I interviewed them via Skype. The screening survey was written in English, simply to minimize the need to translate the responses afterwards; the survey requested basic demographic information such as name, age, sex, marital status, and parents' educational and financial background. I read the consent form to the respondent before beginning the interview, which I conducted in Korean or Konglish (a blend of Korean and English). I transcribed the interview data in Korean and selectively translated some parts in English for the purpose of writing.

I modeled my interview questionnaires after Ann Swidler's *Talk of Love*, Hochschild's *The Second Shift*, and Mary Blair-Loy's *Career Patterns of Executive Women in Finance*, although I acknowledged the limitations of drawing Western literature to examine South Korean society. I drew upon these specific works of literature because, first, all of their main research methodology consisted of in-depth interviews on the topic of love or the topic of marriage and career in order to examine the reasoning behind the research results. For example, Hochschild draws factual information, such as who does what in the home for how long, into her in-depth interviews to construct her direction of research, and then constantly notes the emotions and gestures of the respondents throughout the interview, resulting in more comprehensive interview data and, thus, better analysis. Through the profound processes of her case studies, Hochschild illustrates the

importance of gender ideologies in explaining women's ongoing subordination at home. Secondly, all of the authors' open-ended questions are useful examples to learn how to construct my own questionnaires on the topic of marriage and career. All three of them have certain illustrative characteristics that allow the interviewees to walk through the respondents' life stories. This method allows the interviewer to trace a respondent's past, which he or she would not manage to achieve through mere participant observation.

Lastly, I came up with three tiers for the interview structure: first, I asked about their relationships with their parents, who experienced the industrialization and democratization of the 1970s and the 1980s, in order to examine parental influence on the respondents' marital perspectives and career choices. The questions include topics of conversation and activities they shared with their parents. The discussion was expanded to their relations with the family in general as well. I then saw how feminist values, such as gender equality, have been taken into account in the daily lives of the younger Korean female generation, in regards to their career goals and marital views. Finally, I asked how they view the meaning of marriage within the discussion of *ch'wichip.* Despite having prepared a questionnaire guide, I did not choose to employ the fixed-question-open-response interviewing style because this approach often discourages respondents from developing lengthy, detailed responses.[13] This is why I did not strictly follow the interview schedule and instead allowed the respondents to tell their stories to their own liking. By doing so, I was able to collect concrete data rather than generalized data. Nevertheless, I consistently probed the respondents to ensure that the interview was within the topic of their background, family, and their thoughts and experiences around the issues surrounding marriage and career.

IV.   Data Analysis and Discussion

A.   *Deeply rooted Korean patriarchy: from mother to daughter*

Some may argue that it's well-known fact that South Korean patriarchal social relations are deeply rooted in its culture, but why reveal the pattern of marriage again. In fact, many scholars like Seungsook Moon argued that the state-led Korean nation building, in its androcentric nature, masks the marginalization of women. Among many historical remarks, the Tan'gun myth is a story of South Korean nation building from the eleventh century that has gained particular interest as a form of resistance to the Japanese colonial period. In the myth, Seungsook Moon says, "the woman is depicted merely as the bearer of the heir, thereby suggesting that women's only contribution to the creation of the Korean nation was the provision of a proto-nationalist womb."

However, some upper-class Korean women appear to have accepted this deeply rooted patriarchal ideology without many internal conflicts. Following the tradition of the "new sociology of masculinity",[14] I draw the analogy of the Gramscian idea of hegemony in this discussion. Anthony Chen well explained the discourse of hegemony in the discussion of gender that "hegemony is associated with the taken-for-granted conceptions about the 'nature' of men

---

13   See his book, page 13. Weiss, Robert. *Learning from Strangers: The Art and Method of Qualitative Interview Studies.* (New York: Free Press, 1995)

14   Carrigan, Tim, Bob Connell, and John Lee. "Toward a new sociology of masculinity." Theory and society 14, no. 5 (1985): 551-604.

and women, of masculinity and femininity."[15] I argue that the deeply rooted patriarchy in the South Korean society, complicated with Confucianism has not bothered too much for some South Korean women. Accepting the gender-biased marital norms allows these South Korean women to gain respect in society and thus, achieve power and filial piety.[16]

For the purposes of my research, I wish to exclude in my discussion those among the South Korean mothers of the generation of young women who were born in the 1980s and 1990s who did not experience the "gender struggle" in South Korea. This gender struggle applies specifically to the women who strived for higher education and a professional career but were discouraged from society simply because they were female. Some women in South Korea have not experienced this active gender struggle, which would be the counterparts of my interviewees' mothers. For example, these counterparts of my interviewees smoothly entered into college without any gendered nagging from their parents. They effortlessly pursued professional careers or postgraduate degrees, even after marriage. These are the women who had enough financial, cultural, and social support from their parents, friends, and even their husbands. They did not have to be resentful of their parents, husbands, or the patriarchy as apparatus per se, because of the frustration in pursuing self-actualization through education and a career. Therefore, for them, a romanticized marriage—as Disney would say, "living happily ever after"—with their husband, kids and extended family did not necessarily generate gender tension.

This paper is looking into the daughters of the generation who had experienced that gender struggle. I focus on this particular group because even though the mothers' generation had gone through extensive gender struggles, their daughters are still resorting to the very institution of marriage that prevented their mothers from pursuing anything other than serving as a mother and wife in their early ages. Marriage is something that the mothers just had to follow. Also, achieving self-actualization in ways other than marriage was not allowed by society. These mothers have a lot to say, not only about the social construction per se, but also about their structurally abusive relationships with their husbands' families. Haemin Kang, a twenty-seven-year-old junior analyst at a multinational electronics company, well illustrated this typical group of mothers and the relationship with their daughters, my in-depth interview respondents.

Actually I'm not just talking about the fact that she quit [her job after the marriage], it's just mom's status in the whole process. For example, if dad says something, she obeys. If her mother-in-law says something, she obeys, and even gives up her religion, political views, beliefs, and ethics…My family had such a patriarchal environment. It hurts my pride that she just went along quietly. Mom says these things sometimes. She talks about how she gave up things and made compromises. Then I tell her how I really want to go back ten years and fight with dad for her. I ask why she gave up so many things without any respect for herself. But mom, [pause] says that she used to argue with dad because she thought like me before. Now she regrets that because conforming makes the household a lot more peaceful, and if she had submitted to the situation sooner, there wouldn't have been a reason for us to dislike dad, and so she regrets it. When my mom- who's in her 50s, going on to her 60s- said that, I became really angry. Why, [pause] does my mom tell me to conform, even now?[17]

Younger South Korean women, who have mothers like Haemin's, have observed their mothers' gender struggles within the context of the Korean patriarchy. However, it seems that

---

15 Chen, Anthony S. "Lives at the Center of the Periphery, Lives at the Periphery of the Center Chinese American Masculinities and Bargaining with Hegemony." Gender & Society 13, no. 5 (1999): 584-607.

16 Kim, Myung-hye. "Transformation of Family Ideology in Upper-Middle-Class Families in Urban South Korea". *Ethnology* 32.1 (1993): 69-85

17 Haemin Kang, interview by author, Tape recording, Seoul, South Korea, June 2014, transcript and translation

the daughters of those who had extensive gender struggles under the social context of the rapid structural shift still prefer to sustain their status quo through marriage, by regarding it as the ultimate life goal or a job. They strive for marriage as if they compete for a job or internship like a mere part of the process of résumé building. *Ch'wichip,* which I introduced earlier, is a symbol for how the distinction between marriage and career has become blurred and the two have combined as one entity.

This trend of regarding marriage as a job occurs because 1) it is very difficult to get a job for a woman in South Korea, and 2) marriage is a so natural and normal to the point where no one casts a doubt on it.

B.   Cultural impediment on marriage

South Korean women feel highly anxious about marriage; daily interactions with family, friends, and society as a whole only reinforce this anxiety. Due to the influence of parents, which constantly manifests in interactions with friends, South Korean women are afraid of being the last "single" person. I believe that this anxiety towards marriage is a fear of being left out from conventional social integration. In other words, South Korean women feel more pressured to be in a relationship or to get married as soon as possible if people around them are already doing so. Minju Lim, a twenty-eight-year-old consultant answered, "Now we have a different topic. These days, it's not about career, life, or anything like that…I am in the age to marry and so [parents] talk about [marriage] more."[18] Parents are not the only factors that surround these women with the narratives of marriage but the friends reinforce the idea of inevitability to get married, too. Jina Chae, a twenty-one-year-old college student said, "Listen, whenever I meet up with my friends, we only talk about boyfriends or…just basically about guys." She even gave me the rationale of talking about guys all the times with her friends that "it's important—I heard that even when you get older but still remain single, you stop meeting your friends who already have either a fiancé or husband."[19] Yoojin Chang further demonstrated that how South Korean women are convinced to getting married as a natural practice:

> Nowadays…there had been [marriage] pressure but since I had an older sister…I guess it's less than others; but when I was in my twenties, my parents talked about marriage rather strongly. In my parents' age, they are chatting about the marriage of their children…because it's the age to get married. So they [my parents] want to talk about [the marriage of their daughters] too. Even though their friends do not specifically ask, they say, "what does your daughter do?" I figure that this one question is very stressful to my parents. It's all the same things with other women my age…

South Korean women are in a situation where their friends, family and even people in general are all talking about marriage. The naturalization of marriage has been built up as the Foucauldian idea of "governmentality" that power is not necessarily harmful, nor is it synonymous with domination—it is simply an unavoidable intrinsic component of all of our relations. By participating in the South Korean social relations within the context of the competitive job market and close interaction with community members, individuals are encouraged to internalize marriage as a social norm. Foucault in a 1984 interview with Bernauer and Rasmuse said that:

---

18   Minju Lim, interview by author, Tape recording, Seoul, South Korea, June 2014, transcript and translation
19   Jina Chae, interview by author, Tape recording, Berkeley, CA, transcript and translation

> When one thinks of 'power,' people think immediately of a political structure, a government, a dominant social class, the master facing the slave, and so on. This is not at all what I think when I speak of 'relationships of power.' I mean that in human relations, whatever they are—whether it be a question of communicating verbally, as we are doing right now, or a question of a love relationship; an institutional or economic relationship—power is always present: I mean the relationship in which one wishes to direct the behavior of another. (Bernauer and Rasmussen 1988:11)

As a result, Korean women follow the "rule of self-management" by actively striving for marriage, which then reinforces the idea of marriage as a norm. As mentioned before, marriage as an ideology and power continues to be propagated through daily interactions. Anxiety towards marriage is systematically reproduced, especially through one's friends. Once a woman gets married, she creates a new social group surrounding her husband's network. This new social group and its implications are especially powerful in Korean society, compared to in other societies, because one's age plays a significant role in Korea. Everyone is more apt to build a close-knit community and to spend their leisure time with friends of their own age, compared to those in a society like America where individuals can casually call each other "you," regardless of the difference in age. This would never occur in Korean culture, in which salutation changes depending on the speaker's age and yields to a hierarchical cultural exchange. Korean women also take extra caution to not invite a single woman among married friends. In other words, being single places her into a state of miserable solitude. However, it is not just non-singles who are actively separating themselves from their single counterparts—singles perpetuate this practice as well. They voluntarily choose to be alone out of respect and courtesy for the couples. Youngji Lee, a twenty-four years old college student demonstrated this practice of "Let single be only with single, and let couple be only with couple."

> [W]hat? That would be very rude. You should not invite your friends over when you are having lunch with your boyfriend. Especially in the school cafeteria, or nearby café—or whatever nearby lunch place. That's so cruel. It's almost like you are showing off that you have a boyfriend to your friends.[20]

From the in-depth interviews with twenty-nine South Korean women born in the 1980s and the 1990s residing in either Korea or the U.S., I summarize the elements of their marriage anxiety as a result of 1) vigilant family environment, 2) strong intra-familial intimacy, 3) general value of social conformity, and 4) pressure to get married as soon as possible. These elements of marriage anxiety explain the reification of dating culture in South Korea that eventually forms marriage. I will further explain the dating culture, represented with artificial arrangements in the later section.

C.   *The strong density and intimacy of the South Korean family*

What does it mean when the primary source of anxiety is one's family, then friends, and ultimately by society as a whole? Why is marriage of such high importance within the family in South Korea? Does the family in South Korea have substantial influence on an individual's decision-making? In South Korea, an individual's marriage is a family issue, as two families are essentially

---

20   Youngji Lee, interview by author, Tape recording, Seoul, South Korea, June 2014, transcript and translation

becoming one. Brandt noted that because marriage derived much of its binding force from the contractual nature of the agreement between two families and from the authority of family heads to enforce the contract, marriage choice is less a matter of affection and love than a guarded prerogative for parents.[21] South Korean parents are heavily involved in their daughter's personal life, especially in her marriage. In fact, strong familism is evident throughout South Korean history of building a modern nation-state.[22]

As Chang Kyung-sup argues, it was possible to sustain family as a social institution throughout modernization because in Korea, several decades of structural shift, characterized by "social dislocation and political turmoil since the mid-19th century," have compelled South Koreans to "cling to their families as the only reliable source of support and protection."[23] In other words, South Korean familism is fundamentally rooted in their national history and personal biography, which is significantly different from Western modernization.[24] Furthermore, South Koreans live with their parents until they are married. Thus, they have denser and more frequent interactions with their parents, who are constantly speaking of marriage to them.

This family density is enhanced for the younger generation of South Korean women, due to technological advancement. With the emergence of social media like Facebook or a smartphone messenger app like Kakaotalk,[25] parents are even more involved in their children's lives in more ubiquitous ways than before. Kyungmin Bang, a twenty-one-year-old college student said, "I chat with my dad almost every day on Facebook […] He is on Facebook just so he can keep in touch with me easily."[26] She is studying abroad and apparently thanks to modern technology like smartphone and thus easier access to social media like Facebook, the physical distance is no longer an actual distance for her parents to stay in touch with their daughter.

Additionally, South Korean parents are highly involved in their children's education. "Gangnam mother"[27] is an example that shows how overeager South Korean parents are heavily concerned with higher education for their children. Some scholars like Young-kyun Yang find the origin of the South Korean obsession with education from the Chosŏn dynasty,[28] when passing the civil service examination was the most important and imperative goal for the *yangban* class.[29] He wrote that it's because "passing the civil service examination would ensure not only the

---

21 Brandt, Vincent. *A Korean Village: Between Farm and Sea.* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971)

22 Moon, Seungsook. "Begetting the Nation: The Androcentric Discourse of National History and Tradition in South Korea." (*Dangerous Women: Gender and Korean Nationalism*, 1998): 33-66; Shin, Jiwon. Decolonization: Perspectives from Now and Then. (New York: Routledge, 2003); Lew, Walter K. and Kim, Yung Hee. "Under the Mandate of Nationalism: Development of Feminist Enterprises in Modern Korea, 1860-1910," *Journal of Women's History* 7.4 (1995): 120-36; Hwang, Kyung Moon. "Country or State? Reconceptualizaing Kukka in the Korean Enlightenment Period, 1896-1910," *Korean Studies* 24 (2000): 1-24

23 Chang, Kyung-Sup. "The state and families in South Korea's compressed fertility transition: A time for policy reversal?." *Journal of Population and Social Security (Population)* (2003)

24 Choi, Chungmoo. Nationalism and Construction of Gender in Korea. *Dangerous Women: Gender and Korean Nationalism.* (New York: Routledge, 1998); Moon, Seungsook. "Begetting the Nation: The Androcentric Discourse of National History and Tradition in South Korea." (*Dangerous Women: Gender and Korean Nationalism*, 1998); Chang, Kyung-sup. "South Korean Society in the IMF Era: Compressed Capitalist Development and Social Sustainability Crisis." Masina, Pietro P., ed., *Rethinking Development in East Asia: From Illusory Miracle to Economic Crisis*, (London: Curzon, 2002): 189-222

25 Kakaotalk is a Korean free mobile messenger application for smartphone with various features including free text and free call. Thanks to its useful functions, almost every South Koreans who have smartphones use Kakaotalk.

26 Kyoungmin Bang, interview by author, Tape recording, Berkeley CA, transcript and translation

27 Gangnam Mother is a slang that is probably equivalent to "Soccer Mom" in American culture.

28 Yang, Young-kyun. Education and Family in Korean Society. *The Review of Korean Studies.* 14.1 (2011): 57-87

29 Yangban is the elite ruling class in the Chosŏn society.

individual's future, but elevate the status of the family as well." However, it does not explain how South Koreans' strong educational pursuit has been spread to that of women. In the next section, I will turn to the topic of "education fever" within the context of contemporary South Korea, specifically regarding the increased anxiety about one's career and appearance.

In sum, along with the technological advancement and strong desire in higher education, augmented with neoliberal values, the historically dense and intimate family is reinforced in contemporary South Korean society.

D.   Success anxiety: career and appearance

According to the OECD Better Life Index Report,[30] South Koreans work 2,090 hours a year, more than the OECD average of 1,776 hours. Eighty percent of adults aged 25–64 have earned the equivalent of a high-school degree, higher than the OECD average of 74 percent. South Korea is a top-performing country in terms of its educational system. What is the origin of diligence and education that encourage South Korean women to seek for other elements than career such as appearance to make them successful?

Although some may argue that since Chosŏn dynasty the children's education has continued to be an important concern for the family starting, it is still misleading to consider that Chosŏn-Confucian ethos has straightly passed down to the contemporary South Korean work ethic. John Lie argued that Confucianism's impact on South Korean education and diligence is ambiguous:

> Although Confucianism existed for centuries in Korea, it was only in the post-Liberation period that the U.S. military government and the Rhee regime institutionalized mass education. Furthermore, as late as 1960, the Filipino and Thai literacy rates were equal to that of South Korea. […] Yet the Philippines and Thailand were neither influenced by Confucianism nor went on to experience the kind of development South Korea did. […] Furthermore, working hours have been long in other Asian countries without Confucianism or development. Although hard work is necessary, it hardly constitutes a sufficient condition for development.[31]

Though it is still unclear to find an origin of the South Korean "education fever" [kyoyuk yôlgi], flourished into the 1990s and beyond[32] and diligence, it is an evident description that the contemporary South Koreans, regardless of their gender, encounter the heated competition of good grades, good schools, and good jobs. I believe that a large number of working hours and higher education degrees create a suitable setting for a society to implement more instrumental rationality. The idea of efficiency to perform education and work led for South Korean women to seek for commodified partner matching. I will explain it with their issues of success anxiety that pushes forward this mechanism.

The anxiety comes in many forms; the first being the anxiety of finding success in a career. Unlike the previous generation, young South Korean women born in the 1980s and 1990s have

---

30   According to OECD Better Life Index Report, out of 24,167 user indexes collected between May 2011 and May 2013. User feedback is not necessarily representative for the population at large.

31   Lie, John. *Han Unbound*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998: 178

32   Seth, Michael J. *Education Fever*. (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002); Yang, Young-kyun. Education and Family in Korean Society. The Review of Korean Studies. 14.1 (2011): 57-87

never been asked to sacrifice their higher education and prominent job just because they are female. Instead, they were incessantly pushed to be successful, academically and professionally. For example, twenty-eight-year-old Minju Lim recalls, "I think I had something…an internal idea that I should fulfill [my parents'] expectations. Not that I suffered from this." The meritocracy of South Korean society is naturalized to be Korean women's desire to be successful in every aspect of life. Twenty-one-year-old Jina Chae expresses a similar sentiment: "When I was in middle school, my routine was just to go to school, go to *hagwon* [cram school], go back home."

Hagwon is a representative example of "education fever" in South Korea. As academic competition increased, parents sought broader and more diverse methods to prepare their children for survival and triumph in such rigorous times. This further expanded the private education market, which is symbolized with the emergence of *hagwon*. Due to the economic growth of the country, more families are mentally and financially equipped to make an investment in their children's education. Furthermore, globalization is likewise a factor, as overseas resources can now be mobilized towards the increasingly competitive education system.

Education fever can also be attributed to why South Korea is one of the three highest-ranked countries for youth suicide rates among the thirty OECD countries, with its toll of suicides more than doubling in the last decade.[33] This demand for academic success, which is expected to lead to professional success, is institutionalized into one's everyday life and becomes a habitual trait. Eventually, one even start to believe that academic success is a virtue that must be followed, regardless of any other circumstances. Faltering and trailing behind during the process of building one's résumé is regarded as a "stupid" mistake. A twenty-six-year-old Kayoung Choi, who is currently taking a year off from her college to work at an American start-up company, answered on my question what she does whenever she visits Korea, "of course, who would visit Korea [during vacation] just to play? Even for the short period of time, it's important to utilize every single minute. . Maybe you could complete an internship!"[34]

The values of meritocracy and neoliberal idea of "success" are passed down to the respondents' education from their parents' education, because their mothers are either typical "Gangnam mothers" or they simply feel pressured from the Korea's competitive atmosphere, where one is expected to follow the social trend. In fact, the idea of "Gangnam mother" is reinforced with the formation of a "mothers' community" [hakpumo]. South Korean mothers have little choice but to be "gangnam mothers," otherwise they would be excluded [wangtta] from this social group. Being a non-Gangnam mother is essentially lethal because without this community of mothers, who are concerned with their children's school and *hagwon*, they have few other friends or neighbors, with who they can spend time; not to mention they risk losing a practical network with various resources that could aid their children's education. Thus, opting out from being a "Gangnam mother" and isolating oneself from this opportunity can be devastating. In sum, education fever is reinforced through numerous ways, including South Korean political economy in a global context, the competitive culture, and social conformity. South Korean conformity in this sense is manufactured with the close-packed social relations among South Korean mothers who encounter threat of losing their friends and neighbors who share the tips for *hagwon* and school and thus their child becoming less competitive during the search for a future career.

This success anxiety includes not only one's career but also her appearance. When you visit South Korea, there are countless advertisements about plastic surgery. In fact, there are

---

33   Society at a Glance 2009: OECD Social indicator
34   Kayoung Choi, interview by author, Tape recording, Berkeley, CA, transcript and translation

even a couple of trendy words to refer to plastic surgery, and double eyelid surgery became very common. Korean women's appearance becomes the embodiment of their identity. Sometimes, if they forget to wear make-up, they act as though they are not even present at school. Twenty-four-year-old Jeongmin Lee commented, "Sometimes I wonder why we can't be like American students who just go to school without much pressure to look pretty at all times. You know I spend more than an hour to get ready for school...wearing heels, putting on make-up, and so on."[35] The embodiment of their appearance as their identity is well-represented by a Korean slang term, *sseng-ul*, meaning "a bare face." Twenty-five-year-old Eunmi Shin explained, "When you have just a bare face [sseng-ul], you just pretend to be a non-existing person. You go to the library by yourself, you eat lunch by yourself, just like you never actually went to school that day!"[36]

In sum, South Korean women are subject to a tremendous amount of pressure to be successful in every aspect of their lives, such as their careers and appearances. This is precisely where instrumentalization is constructed because it makes decision-making, particularly on marriage partner so easy and convenient. Twenty-three-year-old Youngji Lee demonstrates the intrumentalization of South Korean education, as well as the life of a Korean youth in general:

> "I can deal with being busy...the most difficult thing in my college life is that I don't know why I have to study this. In college, I do the same thing that I did in my high school—endless memorization, which would disappear right after the exam . . .I think it's useless. Even when I am taking an exam, I study for it, not because I truly care about this matter and I truly have some intellectual curiosity, but because it's an exam… because I have to get a good grade . . . That's the most difficult thing. Then even before I figure out what truly motivates me in my life, we are thrown into the real world where we need to find a job. In fact, even during the college years, we constantly need to consider a career. People start doing internships and volunteering from their freshmen year. If you miss your chance—no, more like, if you blink your eyes, you are already way behind the others. I just don't know what makes me happy in my life and I don't know what I want to do."

As seen in Youngji Lee's comments, South Korean women experience contradictory identities in that even though they now pursue higher education in addition to a professional career, their relations with their family, friends, and society as a whole do not allow them to follow the ideal of value-rationality.

E.   *Artificial romantic arrangement: mit'ing and sogaet'ing*

The utilization of a maximized means-ends calculus in South Korean relationships is evident in the practice of artificial arrangement. Artificial romantic arrangement has existed for quite some time—by the 1980s, arranged marriages were still dominant, despite the increase of marriages through free choice.[37] There are multiple terms for this artificial arrangement: matsŏn, sogaet'ing, and mit'ing. However, *matsŏn* premises marriage, unlike *sogaet'ing* and *mit'ing*,

---

35   Jeongmin Lee, interview by author, Tape recording, Seoul, South Korea, June 2014, transcript and translation
36   Eunmi Shin, interview by author, Tape recording, Seoul, South Korea, July 2014, transcript and translation
37   The Changing Family Functions and Role Relations in Korea 1988

Mit'ing: a group blind date with no strings attached, lots of alcoholic beverages, and general hilarity. Usually the domain of university students to socialize, network, and engage in alcoholic activities.

Sogaet'ing: more private blind date with considerably less alcohol, where you meet someone through a chain of mutual acquaintances with the understanding that you are both single and looking.

As the purpose of this research is to explore South Korean women's journeys *preceding* marriage instead of the well-known difficulty of having a career *following* marriage, I will examine two types of pre-nuptial arrangements.

South Korean people arrange numerous blind dates, as early as immediately after high school graduation.[38] Arranging blind dates to find romantic partners is much more efficient in a similar way as buying a lunch box instead of making it on your own. The two types of blind dates—mit'ing and sogaet'ing—show the handy building of finding a partner or friends in general. Mit'ing and sogaet'ing originated from a trendy university culture, which emerged when many South Korean students simply did not have an opportunity to naturally meet somebody and build a relationship. Not to mention, due to the relative stern nature of the previous generation, there are still a lot of high schools and middle schools that ban dating. As one respondent mentioned, she "had to talk with her teacher after being caught holding her secret boyfriend's hand." Many of the reasons behind such strict rules that South Korean students hear from their schools, parents, and society is that studying is of utmost importance at their age. If they are accepted into a good college, they can then meet a great husband or wife.

In my research, I am only focusing on sogaet'ing because it embodies a more direct intention to seek a partner for a supposedly "romantic" relationship. Sogaet'ing is formulated in very standardized way. It is organized through a mutual friend who functions as a mediator to suggest an arrangement between two single people. One notifies friends that he or she is interested in a sogaet'ing. Then the friends provide the information of various "suitors" that they believe he or she might find interesting. The same process takes place for the suitors, and if there is a connection, both people contact each other, mainly via Kakaotalk, a previously mentioned messenger app. If they are still interested in each other after a few picture and text exchanges, they plan to meet. It is likely that they secretly inspected each other's Facebook profiles to grasp a better idea of their potential partners' personalities and interests.

In Korea, a romantic relationship usually begins when the man calls "after" [*aep'ut'ŏ*], which basically means to ask the woman out on a date for a second time. This past summer in Seoul, I wanted to conduct participant observation and actually experience a sogaet'ing firsthand, but did not have the opportunity to do so. People in my personal network refused to arrange a sogaet'ing for me because I did not truly intend to enter a romantic relationship. It was a matter of their own credibility, which would be threatened by setting up a fake sogaet'ing at the expense of a male friend's time and dignity. In fact, they even felt offended that I requested for a sogaet'ing because it is more like a survival issue for them. A story of Sohee Lim, a twenty-five-year-old law school student demonstrates how *sogaet'ing* has been so much perpetuated in the South Korean women's life. "I don't completely like the idea of doing *sogaet'ing* [blind dates] but I have to do it…and now I feel like I'm a champion of *sogaet'ing* [laugh]." Asking for sogaet'ing, arranging

---

38   Joo, Hyunduk and Jang, KeungYoung. Korean College Students' Evaluation of Self, Partner, and Preferred Types in Love Relationships Using MALPS (2006)

it for a friend, and participating sogaet'ing become a daily investment to ensure one's marriage because "there' are simply no chances other than *sogaet'ing* to make a boyfriend or somebody for the romantic relationship…"[39]

Because of the industriousness of the South Korean neoliberal ideology, Korean women simply do not have enough leisure time to date. The invasion of successful career anxiety into their private lives also impedes the natural development of a romantic relationship. Yena Kong, a graduate student at one of the SKY universities,[40] explained the impossibility of being in a relationship while working.

> Especially after you graduate from college, the only plausible way to find a man
> is through *sogaet'ing*. Because once you enter the real world, you cannot be in a
> relationship. For example, I am currently at graduate school and all professors know
> everything, including small details of your love stories…because we all share the office.
> If somebody says something [about your past relationships], it gets very uncomfortable.
> It's the same at work, too. There is more risk to break up with your co-worker than
> with your classmates. I mean, if you are in college, you don't ever meet your ex again.
> At most, it's just accidental encounters on campus. But work is different. It's a matter
> of your survival because they're paying you, so you cannot freely quit your work. You
> already prepared and competed so hard against others to get in, so how could you
> simply drop out from your work because of an ex? Also if the ex happens to be your
> supervisor, you have no choice but to quit. In order to prevent all of these things, you
> try to meet somebody outside of your work, outside of your graduate school, and so on.
> Well, then what's left? Only *sogaet'ing*—it's the best way to find a partner.[41]

It becomes a general rule for South Korean women to meet somebody through an artificially arranged relationship, *sogaet'ing* because there seems to be no better alternative to meet a partner. The inevitability to commodify relationships and join *sogaet'ing* accelerates the tendency to consider marriage as a job, or *ch'wichip* by the South Korean belief that having a successful marriage reflects family honors as well as the individual's ultimate life goal. This belief is being reinforced throughout their interactions with family, friends, and society.

V.   Conclusion

I have taken the subject of South Korean women's ongoing pressures to get married—a subject that is often overlooked or naturalized a mere part of a cultural tradition—and situated it into the broader context of compressed modernity. The discussion of marital patterns in South Korea, especially in regards to the middle class, must consider the power of older and culturally-rooted family pressures, the challenges facing well-educated Korean women in the labor market, and the "rational" methods for finding marriage partners in a time-pressed, globalized economy.

---

39   Sohee Lim, interview by author, Tape recording, Seoul, South Korea, July 2014, transcript and translation
40   Similarly to IVY leagues, there are so-called SKY universities in South Korea. S stands for Seoul National University; K stands for Korea University; Y stands for Yonsei University. South Koreans sometimes include Ewha Women's university and one or two more universities when it comes to talking about prestigious universities in general.
41   Yena Kong, interview by author, Tape recording, Seoul, South Korea, June 2014, transcript and translation

I have contrasted marriage and the opportunities for self-actualization. Ideally, in a successful marriage, there would be opportunities for self-actualization. Many of my respondents have high hopes but low expectations for the potential of satisfaction from marriage. I explain how wives and mothers are placed under a kind of pressure that unjustly *pushes* them out of the corporate world, and how families and one's sense of duty and desire to belong in society *pulls* young women toward marriage. This struggle illustrates the trend of regarding marriage as a job—that all surrounding social institutions and even the female body becomes an integral part of a woman's résumé-building process toward her future as a wife and mother. Thus, education and careers are not a prioritized form of self-actualization.

South Korean women actively resort to marriage as their ultimate life goal because they instrumentalize marriage just like they instrumentalize their career. I refer to this practice as hyper-instrumentalization, in that even self-actualization in South Korea becomes an instrument to measure one's success. However, this is a different process from Western modernization, which explains that individuals follow instrumental rationality more than value rationality. In other words, more and more individuals make decisions, not based on values such as honesty, religious beliefs, friendship, or love, but based on a means-ends calculus. The South Korean means-ends calculus is different from that of Western societies because of its rapid and complex nature of modernization. This nature comprised of industrialization on the economic hand and democratization on the social hand, exploded in South Korea for only two decades. Chang wrote, "behind such transformations, however, is a society, which has shown the unique tendency of perpetually reinforcing a family-centered social order."[42] In addition to the dense family apparatus of South Korea, its competitive atmosphere drives young women to be successful in every aspect of their lives, including their careers and appearances. Their struggle to be flawless in all aspects is demonstrated through their strong desire to pursue higher education. Profession also becomes instrumentalized into the résumé-building process towards the ultimate "job"—marriage.

In fact, the by-product of South Korean practice of hyper-instrumentalization seems to be also observed in other Asian countries that have commonly developed rapid growth into modern states. For example, the urban elite women, who remain single, are called as "Leftover women" in China or "Gold Miss" in South Korea. They have strong solidarity within each group, as they stay isolated from non-Leftover women and non-Gold Miss women. Especially after examining the marriage business model of contemporary South Korea, I have become interested in understanding more groups like Leftover women and Gold Miss. It is an interesting trend considering how rural bachelors in South Korea can resolve the difficulty of getting married by importing women from other Asian countries such as Vietnam, while the urban elite women in South Korea self-claim "Gold Miss" without resolving a difficult marriage situation. Therefore, I wish to continue my research on the remaining subjects of a fast-paced and explosive modernity, particularly about individuals' adaptive strategies, taking variant pathways from the traditional formulation of family through marriage. Hence, I can understand what leads to the sustainability of relationships between individuals and their power dynamics, as well as the mechanism of modern family.

---

42   Chang, Kyung-sup. "South Korean Society in the IMF Era: Compressed Capitalist Development and Social Sustainability Crisis." Masina, Pietro P., ed., *Rethinking Development in East Asia: From Illusory Miracle to Economic Crisis*, (London: Curzon, 2002): 189-222

Bibliography

Abelmann, Nancy. 2002. "Women, Mobility, and Desire: Narrating Class and Gender in South Korea". Under Construction: The Gendering of Modernity, Class and Consumption in the Republic of Korea. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Blaire-Loy, Mary. 1999. "Career Patterns of Executive Women in Finance: an Optional Matching Analysis." American Journal of Sociology 104 (5): 1346-1397

Bauer, John and Young-Soo Shin. 1987. "Female Labor Force Participation and Wages in the Republic of Korea." Population Association of America, East-West Population Institute.

Bernauer, James William and David M. Rasmussen, eds. 1988. The Final Foucault. MIT Press.

Brandt, Vincent. 1971. A Korean Village: Between Farm and Sea. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. 1993. "The Difference-Deferral of a Colonial Modernity: Public Debates on Domesticity in British Bengal." History Workshop Journal 36 (1): 1-34

Chang, Kyung-Sup. 1999. Compressed Modernity and Its Discontents: South Korean Society in Transition. Economy and Society 28 (1): 30-55

Cho Han, Hae Jung. 1988. Women and Men of Korea. Seoul, South Korea: Munhak and Gisung. 2000. "You Are Entrapped in an Imaginary Well: the Formation of Subjectivity Within Compressed Development – a Feminist Critique of Modernity and Korean Culture." Inter-Asia Cultural Studies, 1(1): 49-69

Cho, Uhn and Hagen Koo. 1983. "Economic Development and Women's Work in a Newly Industrializing Country: the Case of Korea." Development and Change 14:515-531

Choi, Chungmoo. 1998. Nationalism and Construction of Gender in Korea. Dangerous Women: Gender and Korean Nationalism. New York: Routledge.

Park, Eugene Y. Between Dreams and Reality. Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2007

Gramsci, Antonio. 1971. Selections from Prison Notebooks. New York: International.

Hanscom, Christopher P., Walter K. Lew, and Youngju Ryu, eds. 2013. Imperatives of Culture: Selected Essays on Korean History, Literature, and Society from the Japanese Colonial Era. University of Hawai'i Press.

Heckman, James. 1980. Female Labor Supply: Theory and Estimation. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Hermanowicz, Joseph C. 2002. "The Great Interview: 25 Strategies for Studying People in Bed." Qualitative Sociology 25 (4): 479-499

Hochschild, Arlie. 2012[1989]. The Second Shift: Working Families and the Revolution at Home.

Hwang, Kyung Moon. 2000. "Country or State? Reconceptualizaing Kukka in the Korean Enlightenment Period, 1896-1910," Korean Studies 24:1-24. Beyond Birth. Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2005

Kendall, Laurel. 1985). Ritual silks and kowtow money: The bride as daughter-in-law in Korean wedding rituals. Ethnology Pittsburgh 24 (4): 253-267.

Kim, Elaine. 1998. "Men's Talk: A Korean American View of South Korean Constructions of Women, Gender, and Masculinity." Dangerous Women: Gender and Korean Nationalism. New York: Routledge.

Kim, Myung-hye. 1993. "Transformation of Family Ideology in Upper-Middle-Class Families in Urban South Korea". Ethnology, 32 (1): 69-85

Kim, Seung-kyung, and Kyounghee Kim. 2011. "Gender mainstreaming and the institutionalization of the women's movement in South Korea." Women's Studies International Forum. Vol. 34. No. 5. Pergamon.

Koo, Hagen. 1984. "The Political Economy of Income Distribution in South Korea: The Impact of The State's Industrialization Politics." World Development 12: 1029-1037

Koo, Hagen. 1993. State and Society in Contemporary Korea. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press

Kong, Se-Kwon, Ae-Jeo Cho, and Jin-Suk Kim. 1988. The Changing Family Functions and Role Relations in Korea (in Korean). Seoul: Korea Institute for Health and Social Affairs.

Kwon, Tae-Hwan and Young-Jin Park. 1993. The Types of Households and Families in Korea (in Korean). Seoul: National Statistical Office.

Lesthaeghe, Ron and Chris Wilson. 1986. "Modes of Production, Secularization, and the Pace of the Fertility Decline in Western Euroe, 1870-1930." In the Decline in Fertility in Europe. Ed. Ansley J. Coale and Susan C. Watkins, 261-292. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Lew, Walter K. and Kim, Yung Hee. 1995. "Under the Mandate of Nationalism: Development of Feminist Enterprises in Modern Korea, 1860-1910," Journal of Women's History 7(4):120-36

Lie, John. Han Unbound. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998.

Moon, Seungsook. 2005. Militarized modernity and gendered citizenship in South Korea. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. 1998. "Begetting the Nation: The Androcentric Discourse of National History and Tradition in South Korea." Dangerous Women: Gender and Korean Nationalism, 33-66

Nam, Sunghee. 1991. "Determinants of Female Labor Force Participation: A Study of Seoul, South Korea, 1970-1980". Sociological Forum 6 (4)

Newman, Katherine S. 2002. "Qualitative Research on the Frontlines of Controversy." Sociological Methods and Research 31(2):123-130

Park, Jeong Yun and Kim, Yae Ree. 2010. The Effects of Parent-Child Relationship and Psychological Separation Perception on Marriage Attitudes of Single Males and Females. Journal of the Korean Home Economics Association 48(4), 13-24

Seth, Michael J. Education Fever. (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002).

Shin, Jiwon. 2003. Decolonization: Perspectives from Now and Then. New York: Routledge.

Swidler, Ann. 2001. Talk of Love: How Culture Matters. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Song, Jesook. 2006. "Family Breakdown and Invisible Homeless Women: Neoliberal Governance During the Asian Debt Crisis in South Korea, 1997-2001." East Asia Cultures Critiques 14(1), 37-65

Standing, Guy. 1981. "Labour Force Participation and Development" Geneva: International Labour Office.

Tsuya, Noriko O., and Larry L. Bumpass, eds. 2004. Marriage, work, and family life in comparative perspective: Japan, South Korea, and the United States. University of Hawai'I Press.

Weiss, Robert. 1995. Learning from Strangers: The Art and Method of Qualitative Interview Studies. New York: Free Press.

Wells, Ken. 1999. "The Price of Legitimacy: Women and the Kunuhoe Movement, 1927-1931" Harvard East Asian Monographs, p.191-220

Yanow, Dvora and Peregrine Schwartz-Shea. 2008. "Reforming Institutional Review Board Policy: Issues in Implementation and Field Research." PS: Political Science & Politics 41:483-494