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SERVING TO SECURE “GLOBAL KOREA”
GENDER, MOBILITY, AND FLIGHT ATTENDANT LABOR MIGRANTS

BY

ALEX JONG-SEOK LEE

DISSERTATION

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Doctoral Committee:

Associate Professor Ellen Moodie, Chair
Professor Alejandro Lugo
Associate Professor Junaid Rana
Assistant Professor Jeffrey T. Martin
Associate Professor JB Kwon, Webster University

Professor Nancy Abelmann (deceased), Former Chair

ABSTRACT

This dissertation is an ethnography of mobility and modernity in contemporary South Korea (the Republic of Korea) following neoliberal restructuring precipitated by the Asian Financial Crisis (1997). It focuses on how comparative “service,” “security,” and “safety” fashioned “Global Korea”: an ongoing state-sponsored project aimed at promoting the economic, political, and cultural maturation of South Korea from a once notoriously inhospitable, “backward” country (*hujin ’guk*) to a now welcoming, “advanced country” (*sŏnjin ’guk*). Through physical embodiments of the culturally-specific idiom of “superior” service (*sŏbisŭ*), I argue that aspiring, current, and former Korean flight attendants have driven the production and maintenance of this national project.

More broadly, as a driver of this national project, this occupation has emerged out of the country’s own aspirational flights from an earlier history of authoritarian rule, labor violence, and xenophobia. Against the backdrop of the Korean state’s aggressive neoliberal restructuring, globalization efforts, and current “Hell Chosun” (*Helchosŏn*) economy, a group of largely academically and/or class disadvantaged young women have been able secure individualized modes of pleasure, self-fulfillment, and class advancement via what I deem “service mobilities.” Service mobilities refers to the participation of mostly women in a traditionally devalued but growing sector of the global labor market, the “pink collar” economy centered around “feminine” care labor. Korean female flight attendants share labor skills resembling those of other foreign labor migrants (chiefly from the “Global South”), who perform care work deemed less desirable. Yet, Korean female flight attendants elude the stigmatizing, classed, and racialized

category of “labor migrant.” Moreover, within the context of South Korea’s unique history of rapid modernization, the flight attendant occupation also commands considerable social prestige.

Based on ethnographic and archival research on aspiring, current, and former Korean flight attendants, this dissertation asks how these unique care laborers negotiate a metaphorical and literal series of sustained border crossings and inspections between Korean flight attendants’ contingent status as lowly care-laboring migrants, on the one hand, and ostensibly glamorous, globetrotting elites, on the other. This study contends the following: first, the flight attendant occupation in South Korea represents new politics of pleasure and pain in contemporary East Asia. Second, Korean female flight attendants’ enactments of soft, sanitized, and glamorous (*hwaryōhada*) service help to purify South Korea’s less savory past. In so doing, Korean flight attendants reconstitute the historical role of female laborers as burden bearers and caretakers of the Korean state.

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LANGUAGE AND ROMANIZATION

Excluding well-known historical figures (e.g., Park Chung-hee), all Korean words follow the conventions of the McCune-Reischauer system of romanization. At times, however, I adhere to other conventions like the Korean local system (e.g., Gwanghwamun instead of Kwanghwamun), the personal preferences of interlocutors (e.g., how they spelled their own names in English), or familiar English versions of famous figures (e.g., Syngman Rhee instead of Rhee Syngman).

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

*November 17, 2014, Plane School Study Space, Sinchon, Seoul, South Korea*¹

I thought I knew what to expect, but I was wrong. The other core five female members—all aspiring flight attendants for non-South Korea-based foreign airlines (*oeguk hanggongsa*)—always made it look so easy. Common within these two to three-hour “study sessions” was an hour dedicated to an intense interview roll-playing activity, all in the foreign language of necessity, English. What happened was a single member volunteered to be an “interviewee.” The set-up of the room usually included one or two long folding tables that could be positioned either as a single large table or an “L-shape” formation with one person, the interviewee, in the center of the room. Intense as the process was, these were simple roll-playing interview exercises for a job that essentially was air transport service personnel. How hard could it be? I thought. But everyone kept staring. Slowly, the visceral feelings of vulnerability and uncertainty made me reconsider what, in retrospect, might have been my own subtle sense of academic class snobbery.

We were in one of the hundreds of non-descript high-rise buildings in Sinchon-dong, Seoul, a “college-town” neighborhood of one of South Korea’s premiere universities, Yonsei.² Together, we were in a rental study space/study cafe called “Plane School,” many of which had emerged in the early 2000s to meet South Korea’s incredible demand for privatized education.³ Whether it

¹ To protect the identity of my interlocutors, except for city and country names (Seoul, South Korea), the names and locations of study cafes have been changed.

² Although markedly more urban and densely populated than more familiar images of tranquil and compact college town areas of the U.S., Sinchon shared the reputation of being a center of student-centered nightlife.

³ Plane School is a pseudonym. In stark contrast to countries renowned for their welfare benefits, Sweden and Finland, whose governments pay 97 percent of the costs of education,

was Plane School or any one of the other dozen private study space rental franchises in the city, the interior spaces and billing system were comparable. Patrons could rent a small room, usually one with a medium to large plastic foldable table and several chairs. Oftentimes, rooms were equipped with Wi-Fi-enhanced computers, a plastic chalk board, and other audio/visual needs. Upon entering the space, patrons paid a small fee, usually 2,000 to 5,000 won (1.86-4.65 USD) per hour, to use the study space.⁴ As an added courtesy, many places offered complimentary drinks like coffee, tea, or soft drinks in the front desk area. Patrons varied in occupational background and age. During my fieldwork, however, the majority were young women and men in their twenties to early thirties who had graduated from college. Most were preparing for interviews and tests ranging from general office positions to South Korea's competitive civil servant exam.⁵

During my mock interview, one of the members, Bora, a twenty-three-year old Korean woman who had attended high school in Adelaide, Australia took the lead.⁶ "Why do you want to become a flight attendant?" she asked with a discernable Australian accent.⁷ I thought I had this

South Korea paid only 62.8 percent in 2014. The private sector in South Korea paid 37.2 percent of the funding for education institutes, the highest of all OECD countries and more than double the OECD average of 16.1 percent (Yoon 2014).

⁴ Exchange rate figures are current as of April 19, 2018.

⁵ Official statistics are difficult to obtain. But after speaking with study space workers and other aspiring flight attendant interlocutors, I learned that most patrons were, in fact, aspiring flight attendants. My frequenting these spaces supported this view. On any given day, I observed dozens of young Korean women rehearsing prepared airline interview questions in their respective rooms and other general waiting spaces.

⁶ Unless, specified, all names are pseudonyms. Country names are real but their cities have been changed to protect the identity of interlocutors.

⁷ Quotes derived from these study sessions were never recorded. Ultimately, I received Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for all recorded interviews with every member. Additionally, I clearly stated that materials from study sessions might be used as data. None of the members expressed concerns about this, however. Hence, the quotes included are from detailed fieldnotes I took after study sessions and from memory.

covered. Over the past few weeks since I first met this group, I had observed the stock answers to anticipated airline interview questions. While some members shined (generally those who had spent their formidable years as early study abroad students), most struggled. The reason tended to center around English language ability. This time it was my turn. To Bora's question, I answered, "I want to become a flight attendant because I feel that I am naturally suited for the job. I love to serve people and make them feel comfortable, whoever they are. Also, I love to travel, meet new people, and experience new things." This was an almost exact replication of the answer I had been hearing for weeks among the five core female members.

Somewhat unnaturally, I tried to maintain a positive impression by holding a smile the entire time. I also mustered as much "perkiness" as I could—again, as I had witnessed among the other female members. Somehow, I could not help if my emotional displays appeared "real" or not. The former, as the other members would highlight time and again, was a death blow when it came being hired by an airline. Ironically, for all of them, appearing not to care and being careful not to seem too serious was very serious business. "Are you more of a leader or a follower?" Bora shot back. Although usually possessing a breezy demeanor, this was a Bora at her most scathing. For a role play, I thought, every woman judging the interviewee (me, in this case) was playing the part of the ruthless interviewer. "Well, it really depends on the situation, but I can definitely follow when I need to help others and be of assistance," I replied. This was me repeating canned answers I had heard before. Slowly, I felt like I was floundering. I had gone into this exercise "for fun." But I was no match for them. What they were cultivating was something even I had underestimated.

After another series of questions lasting approximately ten minutes, Bora and the rest of the members gave me their feedback. "Alex, you move your hands too much," Bora stated.

Eunjung, another member who was twenty-six years old nodded in agreement. “Also, you didn’t give us all enough eye contact when you answered.” Eunjung remarked. Suji, an older thirty-something member of the group chimed in next. “Yeah, Alex, if this were for real I’m afraid you really would have to practice much more. You didn’t have enough energy, so that would be a big handicap.” “Really?” I answered. “I thought I was being happy and cheerful? I really was trying,” I said. “We could *see* you were trying,” Sori, a twenty-four-year old member replied. “But I’m afraid it wasn’t natural. You really have to relax more. The interviewers would notice that for sure.” “Ah, you mean my smile?” I asked, suddenly self-conscious. “I didn’t want to say it, but yes,” Bora added. Assuredly, she clarified that, if this were a real situation, I would need to improve how I projected my answers (“with more confidence!”), including the timbre of my voice (“peppier and up!”) and my overall demeanor (“receptive but relaxed”). Behind every micro emotion I displayed was the same dead-serious feedback. It had to be “natural.”

Admittedly, I was more affected by this criticism than I originally had anticipated. Why should I care, I originally thought? I’m not trying to become a flight attendant. Yet these were the experts of their field. Many had been cultivating these skills—English language fluency, customer service-related speaking, passenger roles plays, and regimented face and body maintenance—for months, if not years. Most importantly, the practice of these skills, I reminded myself, occurred before any of them even was hired. Only afterward would they learn ostensibly “easier” skills related to the occupation like security, safety, and the mechanics of an airplane (see Chapter 3). For now, none of these latter skills mattered. Service was everything. I, on the other hand, was an amateur.⁸ Despite the seeming informality of these ad-hoc training sessions, the mood during

⁸ The more I witnessed their devotion to mastering these subtle yet invisible skills, I came to realize the classed-nature of my critique. Had I grown up as an average young woman under

mock-interviews always was serious. But there were exceptions, particularly after a very long and drawn out study session. These moments most clearly revealed to me the extent of the underlining emotions suppressed by my interlocutors, and in turn, the invisible psychological (and physical) skilled labor being performed.

For example, Eunjung, who always was more outspoken than the other members, often demonstrated this tendency. It occurred around the same time I had been pretending to take interview questions as an aspiring flight attendant. Bora asked another question, “Why do you want to become a flight attendant?” Eunjung responded, “I want to become a flight attendant because I just love serving! I work at a guesthouse for foreign tourists, so I get to meet people from around the world. I love making these connections, learning new cultures, and teaching people about Korean culture!” she replied. I could see the strain in Eunjung’s aggressive smile. In contrast to her usually acerbic personality, this display of cheerfulness was so exaggerated that it felt grating. No one in the group told her to tone down her pep, however. This level of animation, I later learned, was considered completely normal (if not desirable).

Bora continued, “Are you more of a leader or a follower?” “I think I’m definitely more of a follower. I can lead, but since I know how important it is to maintain harmony with co-workers, I’m always happy to stay calm and... Aaaak! Shit, I lost it!” Eunjung burst out. In a mix of Korean (her native language) and British-accented English, she expressed further candor.⁹ “Fuck, it’s so

similar conditions in a South Korea continually characterized by unfavorable opportunities for steady and desirable employment, the flight attendant might have appeared appealing, as well.

⁹ Curiously, Eunjung, due to her “working-class” status, had never studied or lived abroad in “the West,” save for occasional visits to nearby Japan. Among my interlocutors, however, she spoke nearly flawless British-accented English. As I got to know her, I asked how she had mastered English despite her inability to travel, study abroad, or even attend a regular four-year university (she attended a two-year technical school) like so many other aspiring flight attendants, such as Bora. In a show of dedication to her language study (although not general academics, which she

hard to smile like that! Fuck, fuck!” Adopting her usual caring but quasi-condescending tone, Bora added, “Eunjung, it’s not that hard.¹⁰ You just have to do it. Look at me, see? Like this.” Bora smiled widely. Bora’s smile appeared slightly more natural (i.e., seemingly more practiced and less forced) but not noticeably different than that of Eunjung’s. In a curious show of deference, Eunjung welcomed Bora’s feedback.¹¹ Comparing smiles, Eunjung asked, “Like this?” Bora replied, “Yeah, that’s better. But a little *more* natural.” Eunjung followed Bora’s orders and continued. “A leader or a follower? I think I’m definitely more of a follower. I can lead, but since I know how important it is to maintain harmony with passengers and my co-workers, I’m always happy to stay calm and helpful with my colleagues, superiors, and passengers.” Eunjung’s smile dropped. “That fucking better?” she added impudently. “Yeah, except the last part,” Bora said with a smirk. “Ah, you mean the fuck part?” Eunjung asked knowingly. “Yeah, that part,” Bora replied.

Most of the labor exerted in this scene actively was crafted to be invisible. The product was an affective gesture that added to the ambience of a “good service” experience. In the case of my aspiring, current, and former flight attendant interlocutors, that experience largely was situated in the public yet domesticated space of the airplane cabin. Most passengers flying commercial airlines with flight attendant servers would never see how this “product” was made,

ridiculed as a pointless place for “snobby nerds!”), Eunjung said she had learned English by watching British television and self-study.

¹⁰ Bora was conspicuous about her family’s wealth and her own personal accomplishments. At the time, the latter included her being able to attend multiple flight attendant training institutes (*hagwons*).

¹¹ Eunjung and Bora were close friends despite Eunjung being two years older than Bora. In the context of South Korea where older age generally equals enhanced authority, Eunjung’s “submissiveness” to Bora spoke not only to their friendship but, I suspect, Eunjung’s intense desire for any help in becoming a flight attendant.

particularly the pains through which some like Eunjung went in producing it. For the study members of Plane School, this pain was an unpleasant necessity towards their goal of becoming a flight attendant. Most “middle-class” women I met growing up in the U.S. never considered becoming a flight attendant as a viable career option. Indeed, most friends and colleagues I talked to before I conducted research considered the occupation wholly unattractive due to its endless travel, serving, and dealing with passengers. But for young Korean women (and increasingly men) I met in South Korea, becoming a flight attendant harkened back to an earlier image of sought after gendered labor. Especially for most Korean women, the imagined possibilities of the occupation (literal and figurative) nearly were unrivaled.

These aspirations operated within a field of conscious and unconscious juxtapositions, however. Most aspiring, current, and former Korean flight attendants I met eschewed any comparison with other care and service-oriented jobs that “traveled,” namely gendered “migrant labor.” For example, as a study abroad undergraduate student in Rome, Italy, I conducted a proto-ethnography on the lives of the city’s sizeable Filipina/o domestic worker community (Lee 2002). Over the course of a semester, I got to know many of the young, mostly twenty-something female Filipinas working as live-in maids and care workers. One of the women, I met, Patricia, a twenty-three-year old, described having moved to Rome for similar dreams of travel. The Filipina/o community in Rome was tightknit (sometimes gossipy) and employers could be obtrusive. Moreover, Patricia’s work undoubtedly was hard (sometimes unimaginably so). Nonetheless, Patricia told me she still preferred working in Rome instead of in the Philippines. As the daughter of a large family with many siblings, Patricia said her life in Rome was the first time she could live independently from home. She continued, what better city to live away from home than the “Eternal” one where world-famous sites and people from around the world were

plentiful, “high-class” fashion and culture were the norm, and a community of co-nationals already had established itself?¹² The narratives I heard in Rome from Patricia and her friends spoke of everyday aspirations, desires, and pleasures—a way for the speakers to performatively re-cast their own roles and assert their own possibilities in agentic moments (Moodie 2002: 219)—within more familiar stories of domestic labor migrant “oppression.” Racism, classism, and xenophobia in Rome (particularly against Filipina/os who routinely were associated with lower-class, undesirably foreign status) undoubtedly played a part in Patricia’s labor migration story. But as she explained to me that fall of 2002, this was only one story.

Following Junaid Rana, this dissertation contends that how labor migrants (economic, political, and otherwise) make their way to a destination (i.e. modes of their passage) matter (2003: 84). Yet this also includes going beyond the obvious logistics of a person’s travel (via a plane or ship, legally or illegally, etc.) to different frames of mind—a “certain consciousness and practice of social capital” that, at their core, speak to a critique of “the limitations of labor chasing capital across the globe that is also a vital element to a discourse of worker rights and entitlements” (ibid). Most of the aspiring, current, and former flight attendant interlocutors at the heart of this dissertation described the juxtaposition of their occupation with that of labor migrants to be puzzling at best, offensive at worse.¹³ Instead, they expressed ambivalence about

¹² Collectively, Filipina/o labor migrants, particularly domestic workers, represent nearly half of the total population of labor migrants around the world.

¹³ Throughout my field research, I heard aspiring flight attendants, including non-Korean ones, using the terms “flight attendant,” “cabin crew,” and “stewardess” interchangeably. Despite feminist debates over the usage of stewardess in the United States, most South Koreans (plus non-Americans) I met considered the term unproblematic. Moreover, the Korean word for this occupation, *sŭngmuwŏn*, does not distinguish between flight attendant, cabin crew, or stewardess.

appearing overly instrumental in their performance of service work as a means towards economic advancement.¹⁴ Most softened the appearance of such crude economic calculations by stating loftier goals within the language of self-fulfillment, experience, and dreams.¹⁵ As Patricia made evident, however, these dreams were not unique. For example, Martin Manalansan argues that most “normalizing” labor migration literature commonly discounts a labor migrant’s capacity to experience and enjoy other elements of migration, namely sexuality, desires, sexual identities, and practices because of a labor migrant’s “working class” status (e.g., being a transnational breadwinner whose primary motivation for movement was based on purposes of biological and heterosexual reproduction) (2006: 225).

Presented against this familiar figure of feminized labor migration, how might we understand the complex but related position of Korean female flight attendants? How might we understand this question within the context of a postcolonial country like South Korea some scholars still refer to as “third world” (Chen 2010) and “sub-imperial” (Kim 2016; Kim 2010) in its mimicry of U.S. transnational neoliberalism and imperial desires (Kim and Joh 2016: xvi)? This dissertation attempts to answer these questions. It is an ethnography of mobility, modernity, and Korean female flight attendant labor migrants in the context of post-Asian Financial Crisis

¹⁴ In a few instances, I recall flight attendant interlocutors both in South Korea and in Dubai referring to labor migrants (*iju nodongja*, or “immigrant worker,” in the local context) pejoratively as “ants.” In the current Korean imagination *iju nodongja* conjures the image of a male migrant worker from South or Southeast Asia. Ants, in this case, connote a laborer at the whim of dire economic conditions, unable to enjoy more cosmopolitan pursuits like leisure and travel.

¹⁵ To be fair, a select few interlocutors I had developed better relationships with quietly accepted the former view while most acquaintances usually subscribed to the latter (at least, in my presence).

(known locally as the “IMF Crisis”) South Korea.¹⁶ Specifically, it focuses on how comparative notions of service, security, and safety helped to fashion “Global Korea”: an ongoing state-sponsored project aimed at promoting the economic, political, and cultural maturation of South Korea from a once notoriously inhospitable, “backward” country (*hujin’guk*) to now welcoming, “advanced” country (*sŏnjin’guk*) (Kim 2011).¹⁷

Not merely a point of departure in Korean foreign policy but also the key site of Korean national identity construction, Global Korea represents an interpretive framework for discussions of South Korea’s national identity and global position. As Jojin John contends, Global Korea aimed for South Korea to achieve advanced country (*sŏnjin’guk*) status “not only in the economic field but in all domains of Korean life, including diplomatic practices” (2015: 51). Thus, the globalization of Korean foreign policy has meant meeting the demand to “catch up” with the diplomatic standards of *sŏnjin’guk*. In foregrounding the complex subjectivities of Korean flight

¹⁶ V. Spike Peterson offers a useful working definition for “women,” “gender,” and their relationship: “‘Women’ is typically a reference to embodied people—agents, role-players and victims of social (inter)action—who are ‘sexed’ as female... ‘Gender’ is conventionally a reference not to biological (sex) difference but to the socially constructed dichotomy of (culturally specific) masculinity and femininity that is naturalized (depoliticized) by its appropriation of ‘biological’ sex difference. (1996:870). I also am sensitive to the richness of queer theory (Butler 1990), especially groundbreaking transgenderism research. I subscribe to the view that ideas around femininity (as well as masculinity) cannot be reduced to the normative idea that gender and sexuality are “naturally marked on certain bodies and their effects” (Halberstam 1998: 1). Hence, I cannot assume to “know” the personalized gendered and sexualized identities of all my interlocutors. From my participant observation and interviews, however, I did not get the impression that any of my interlocutors presented themselves as anything other than the normative, cisgender identities of Korean “woman” (and “man”) ascribed to them—at least publicly. What gender and sexual identity(ies) my interlocutors subscribed to privately I only can speculate.

¹⁷ Defining culture remains contested. But current anthropological working definitions maintain the discipline’s concern for a culture concept that is “relativistic” not “absolutistic”; “plural” not “singular” (Stocking 1966: 868).

attendants as a kind of labor migrant, this dissertation attempts to unravel the meanings of their uncertain status. Different articulations of these meanings, as I argue throughout this dissertation, both hinge on and fortify a larger hegemonic aspiration of the Korean state: projecting to the world the latter's advanced country (*sŏnjin'guk*) status through the production of an ideal global Korean subject, one secure in its "beauty" and service to country. This dissertation argues that through physical embodiments of the culturally-specific idiom of "superior" service (*sŏbisŭ*) aspiring, current, and former Korean flight attendants have driven the production and maintenance of this national project. I focus on how "serving to serve" so-called Global Korea has influenced the subjectivities of these unique Korean laborers, as well as the broader implications of and underlining logics behind the role of hospitality within South Korea's modern development ambitions.

Although I did not know it at the time, my mini-ethnography during the fall of 2002 centered on a group well-established in the labor migration literature. Filipina domestic workers, first highlighted in the pioneering work of sociologist Rhacel Salazar Parreñas (2001), are the archetype for transnational female labor migrants. They continue to be represented as members of a "care drain" from the "Third World" to the "First World" (Hochschild 2004).¹⁸ Despite frequently possessing "professional" skills (typically possessing advanced degrees in their country of origin, at least in the case of Filipinas), most female labor migrants are unable ever to work abroad in their chosen fields again. This is a phenomenon that disproportionately affects women. Lalaie Ameeriar (2017) describes it as becoming "downwardly global." Moreover, this

¹⁸ Speranta Dumitru criticizes Hochschild for not considering the labor of Global South women to the Global North as a form of "brain drain," going as far as to accuse the latter of "methodological sexism" (2014). Despite the stiffness of Dumitru's analytic accusation, she raises meaningful doubts about the biologizing association of care with "unskilled" and "naturally" feminine qualities as opposed to those of valuable and cultivable skills.

migrating figure typically performs low-wage, “feminized” labor—referenced within a constellation of interchangeable terms like “domestic,” “emotional,” “affective,” “immaterial,” and/or “intimate”—while coming from the so-called Global South. In turn, this figure usually is represented as hailing from a “nation of servants” or as laboring workers, as opposed to being seen as cosmopolitan travelers (Johnson and Werbner 2010).

Scholars (Parennas 2011; Mahdavi 2011; Brennan 2004; Hairong 2008) have argued against oversimplifying, moralistic representations and understandings of class-disenfranchised labor migrant women. Parennas explains when describing her subjects, “sexually trafficked” migrant “hostesses” in Japan whose nationalities include Filipinas, Eastern Europeans, Colombians and even Korean (“sex working”) women: “How do we account for these severe structural constraints that hamper the autonomy of migrant hostesses, while also not disregarding their agency?” (2011: 4) Using the notion of “indentured mobility,” Parennas describes Filipina hostesses’ labor migration as inhabiting a paradoxical “middle zone between human trafficking and labor migration” or occupying a place of “simultaneous progress and subjugation” (Parennas 2011: 7) As such, she writes how the binary categories scholars currently have for thinking about the migration of Filipina hostesses as “either free subject (migrant) or enslaved subject (trafficked person)” fail to capture the complex dynamics of coercion and choice that embody the labor migration experiences of mobile people (ibid).

Notwithstanding meaningful distinctions between flight attendants and female labor migrants (e.g., squarely defined labor migrants inhabiting a more precarious economic and political position), I ask: why is the (Korean) flight attendant occupation (whose “migrating” labor still centers on forms of commodified care and other invisible and devalued modes of security and safety) almost never included in the established literature on (Global South) labor

migrants?¹⁹ What analytical or political meanings might materialize from making this conceptual juxtaposition?²⁰ This dissertation seeks to unpack these questions, starting with this introductory chapter. It is organized as follows: first, I discuss the broader context of South Korea's gendered and androcentric modernity. Next, I highlight the role of the 1997 Asian Financial ("IMF") Crisis coupled with the Korean state's endorsement of *seggyehwa* (globalization) in fueling these transitions. Afterwards, I frame the rise of the service sector (and its accompanying reliance on feminized care labor) within this history—a result of shifts in relations of global labor,

¹⁹ In his study on Daewoo factory plant protestors after neoliberal restructuring, JB Kwon (2005), articulates an important terminological distinction he makes between "laborers" and "workers." Both labor and work connote similar things, primarily the "doing of something and of something done" (2005: 26). "Labor," in the English language, signifies bodily toil (and, oftentimes, pain) through "manual labor" whereas "work" arguably connotes something broader, applicable to demeaning, as well as valuable activity (ibid). Yet, as Kwon notes, both have particular cultural resonances. In the case of the male factory workers who were laid-off in his study, Kwon writes how they experienced this event less as a loss of paid employment than as feeling "severed" from their "normal life," their cultural and bodily production of space into place and the social-cultural processes of emplacement. This was a cultural practice of habitation expressed most intimately through their laboring bodies (Kwon 2005: 26, 98). The mostly female interlocutors I met articulated a similar affective force when describing the meaning of trying to become, being, or having been a flight attendant. Frequently dwelling on the intense physicality required for the job (the constant need to discipline the body through exercise, rest, or surgery), these women also displayed a sensitivity to being associated too closely with the stigmatized category of *nodongja*, preferring more class neutral terms like *sŭngmuwŏn* (flight attendant) or sometimes even *chŏnmun'ga* (professional). Moreover, the prospect of not becoming or no longer being a flight attendant for most of my interlocutors elicited strong emotions, including shock to joy—but rarely indifference. For them, not unlike the factory men featured in Kwon's study, "a job [was] not simply a space to earn a wage" (2005: vii). Consequently, I refer to my interlocutors as laborers instead of workers throughout this dissertation. Likewise, I refer to working as a flight attendant as an occupation rather than (just) a job.

²⁰ A preliminary response might be that we need to consider migration and the mobilities they engender relationally. This means recognizing that there never is any absolute immobility, including the seeming "placeness" of physical structures that ontogenetic approaches (e.g., biological approaches that discuss constant physical change like the regeneration of skin cells) compellingly challenge. Instead, there are only "mobilities which we mistake for immobility," modes of processual flow and—as Lugo (2008) aptly reminds—obstructions or "inspections" that challenge any notion of fixed and static forms of time, space, or identity.

production and consumption (i.e., post-Fordism) since the 1970s. This included a move towards specialization, market deregulation, flexible workers, and the mobilization of emotional faculties for economic gain (Matthews 2016). Following this, I include a description of South Korea's current "hellish" labor economy, which has helped stimulate the growing popularity of the flight attendant occupation. Finally, I conclude by describing my methodology and a synopsis of my dissertation chapters.

GENDERED MODERNITY

Feminist scholars of South Korea argue that analyzing the postcolonial challenges Korean women face should not be "ghettoized" as ancillary studies of country-specific or area studies analyzes. Instead, as Elaine H. Kim and Chungmoo Choi (1997) assert, women, including other groups most socially marginalized, have been central to South Korea's development. Specifically, women's historically-rooted struggles should be understood as inextricably connected to problems of the capitalistic world system and the (neo)colonial hegemony that underpins it (1997: 2). This is particularly true for the modern history of South Korea. Despite diverse depictions and claims surrounding its modern history since the early twentieth century, most Koreanists appear to agree that South Korea has undergone rapid and oftentimes violent political, economic, and social change within a short period of time—what many describe as "compressed modernity." For example, South Korea famously transformed from one of the poorest countries in the world to one of its richest (Harkness 2010: 1).

A short outline of South Korea's history in the last century provides a compelling overview of the kind of change most other "advanced" countries—chiefly those in the West (the

U.S., Europe, and Australia)—experienced over a period of multiple generations.²¹ After South Korea’s “liberation” from Japanese colonial rule (1910-1945) by the U.S. in 1945, the Korean peninsula was partitioned into two politically distinct regions: then Soviet Union and China-supported communist North and (U.S.-supported capitalist) South.²² This distinction was born out of Cold War logics that would have profound implications for both countries (Shin 2006, Cumings 1997). South Korea’s first president, Syngman Rhee (1948-1960), was inaugurated in 1948 along with the formal establishment of the Republic of Korea. Soon after, the Korea War, arguably the first global “hot” battle of the Cold War, consumed the Korean peninsula from 1950 to 1953. Despite there never having been a formal peace treaty signed between North Korea and South Korea, a cease-fire signaled an end of formal fighting. Yet a hostile war over ideological supremacy (“red” communist North Korea and “U.S. puppet” capitalist South Korea) would continue throughout the latter country’s period of accelerated industrialization and economic development. Park Chung-hee’s military coup d’etat against the Rhee government signaled the transition from one authoritarian regime to another. Park’s dictatorial rule lasted from 1963 to

²¹ Defining “the West” (not unlike defining “the East”) is problematic. In their book, *Occidentalism, The West in the Eyes of its Enemies*, Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit write how the notion of the West is as analytically slippery and elusive as describing “the modern.” In the context of Asia, using the example of Japan during World War II, they describe how the West (and Westernization) were known for their vagueness. “Japanese intellectuals had strong feelings about what they were against, but had some difficulty defining exactly what that was. Westernization, one opined, was like a disease that had infected the Japanese spirit” (2005: 2). On the other hand, this rhetorical contrast, depending on shifting political economic factors, also has placed the West in a favorable light. Historically, this has meant that the West often has been intimately linked with ideas of modernity and progress, particularly in contrast to an “unadvanced” or “backward” Asia (Abelmann and Lie 1995: 54; Kelsky 2001: 4).

²² Worth noting are sporadic challenges to Japanese colonial rule that emerged throughout this period until independence, such as the famous March 1 movement in 1919, which contemporary Koreans commemorate as the early beginnings of South Korea’s later formal democratization.

1979, finally ending after he was assassinated by his own security detail. The period of his rule was marked by pronounced brutality (human rights violations, labor unrest, etc.) but also (as many Koreans highlight) unprecedented economic growth attributable to proto-globalizing export-oriented policies. This included the migration of skilled and unskilled migrant workers to Germany as male miners and female nurses, male soldiers to Vietnam, and male construction workers in West Asia.²³ Domestically, state efforts centered on light and heavy industries like textiles and later steel (Koo 2001).



Figure 1: Rounding up presumed dissidents during the 1980 Gwangju Uprising²⁴

²³ In line with scholars critical of the Eurocentric undertones of the “Middle East” label, however, (in English, at least) I use the term “West Asia.” During my preliminary field research, many scholars and residents of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) informed me that Dubai was part of “the Gulf,” and thus culturally, politically, and historically distinct from other destinations in the region, such as Egypt. Nearly every Korean labor migrant I met in Dubai, however, did not make this distinction and simply used the Korean term, *Chungdong* (literal translation: “the Middle East”) to refer to Dubai’s geographic location.

²⁴ The juxtaposition in the background of the then-“Korean Air Lines” logo (later bought by present-day Korean Air) behind this violent scene is compelling—the freedom and romance of

By the time Jun Doo-hwan claimed power in 1980, democratization movements against exploitative authoritarian regimes were recurrent. The culmination of this was the brutal suppression of an anti-authoritarian uprising known as the Gwangju Uprising/Massacre in 1980 that witnessed the killing of hundreds of civilian protesters by government troops. 1987 marked formal democratization of South Korea and ushered in two more administrations (Roh Tae-woo from 1988 to 1993 and Kim Young-sam from 1993 to 1998). Although still possessing ties to the older authoritarian regimes, these new governments signaled South Korea's increasingly liberalized political, social, and economic climate. South Korea's hosting of the 1988 Olympic Games so close to Roh's inauguration also was one of the first visible symbols to the world of the former "poverty-ridden" country's debut as an advanced country (*sŏnjin'guk*). An equally significant event would occur during the middle part of Kim's presidency in 1996 with South Korea's entrance into the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), nicknamed the "rich countries' club," which further boosted the once war-torn country's advanced country (*sŏnjin'guk*) status.

Despite such fortuitous events, including the Kim (1993-1998) regime's highly optimistic forecast of globalization (*segryehwa*), South Korea was rocked by the economic devastation of the Asian Financial (or "IMF") Crisis shortly after. Following Kim (1993-1998), Kim Dae-jung (1998-2003) became president. Significantly, his election signaled the first time an oppositional figure with solid antiestablishment credentials became elected as South Korea's leader. As noted before, however, even Kim later adopted and fully endorsed neoliberal economic policies that

literal and figurative flight seemingly taunting the more violent realities of people place-bound and imprisoned (Libcom n.d.).

undermined South Korea's welfare system, thus intensifying the divide between rich and poor. Roh Moo-hyun (2003-2008), another anti-establishment leader, conservative Lee Myung-bak (2008-2013), and impeached conservative Park Geun-hye (the daughter of assassinated authoritarian Park Chung-hee) (2013-2017) rounded out the line of presidents during the early 2000s. Today, left-leaning Roh (2003-2008) protégé, Moon Jae-in serves as South Korea's current president. After the stunning fall of Park in 2017 (nationwide anti-president protests were among the largest in South Korea's history), Moon's special election indexed on-going changes that have colored South Korea's brief but turbulent post-war modern history.

Against this backdrop, the impact of feminist movements in South Korea since the early 1990s, including feminist insights on how to approach this varied and complex history, cannot be understated. For example, Laura Kendall (2002), Nancy Abelman (2003), and Laura Nelson (2000), maintain that any understanding of modern South Korea must foreground gender and class in its analysis while also addressing and problematizing facile notions of Korean female agency. To accomplish this, they suggest that analysts highlight Korean women's multiplex experiences, thoughts, and feelings. This focus is appropriate since most women arguably are (and historically have been) a group most vulnerable to the gendered and classed politics that have characterized Korean modern history. Kendall (2002) and Abelman (2003) further describe Korean women as everyday people trying to "get a grip" on the "vertigo" of radical social change that has defined modern South Korea.²⁵ Both scholars suggest that what women say matters because the latter have experienced (arguably more deeply than men) the effects of

²⁵ Abelman further adds historical complexity to this portrayal. She notes how in the context of Korea's colonial to postcolonial transformation, status systems denoting both class and gender became highly divergent and unstable. Women's identifications and dis-identifications often became confused or in flux while gender sign systems also became highly flexible (2003: 201).

South Korea's dramatic transformations—a country that continually understands itself primarily within patriarchal frameworks. These frameworks uphold institutions that curb the life opportunities of women (albeit not uniformly) through “heteronormative familism” (the renewed valorization of the ideology of ‘family as nation’)” (Song quoted in Cho 2011: 4), “traditional” gender roles that delineate life opportunities between supposed private and public spheres, as well as social pressures that equate women's intrinsic value principally with the power of their physical rather than mental labor.²⁶

Haejoang Cho (2002) offers another means of understanding women's experiences throughout Korean history. Her theory of generational distinction charts differences among women who grew up during South Korea's modern history: first, those who were born shortly after the Korean War (like herself) who knew of South Korea only as poverty-stricken; later the following generation who grew up during the 1970s under authoritarian rule; and finally, the next generation who grew up during the 1980s and 1990s who were among the first to witness the country's greater relative affluence, stronger concern for individuality, and preoccupation with conspicuous consumption. Cho describes the post-Korean war generation as caring largely about issues of individual and family survival. She describes the second as decidedly more militant and concerned with leftist movements that targeted the authoritarian state, particularly as it exercised its iron grip over labor. In contrast, Cho characterizes the final group (the generation of women who came of age in the 1990s just before the economic devastation wrought by the 1997 IMF Crisis) as politically unconscious and shallow. Implicitly, the interlocutors of this study would be included in this negative assessment. Despite the inflexibility of Cho's

²⁶ Despite sensationalized reports (particularly in the West), South Korea maintains its status as one of the “plastic surgery capitals of the world.”

framework, however, her theory of a generational shift from a more militant, gender-conscious to more individualistic, consumer and body-oriented woman still illustrates the distinctiveness and diversity of modern Korean women. In her book, *The Melodrama of Mobility* (2003), Abelman complements Cho's view by providing a subtler analysis of female agency. Specifically, she focuses on the talk or cluster of words that structure the lives of eight, middle-aged women. Citing Raymond Williams' concept of "structure of feeling" (1973), Abelman describes being less interested in the "historical explanation and analysis" of change than in the "particular kind of reaction to the fact of change" as constitutive of the life of that change. Echoing other scholarship on the performative potential of words and meanings (Austin 1962; Butler 1997) not only to reflect but also shape reality, Abelman writes, "words are productive... they contribute to the making of social identities and social worlds, class, and most fundamentally, of rapid social transformation (2003: 14).

As such, gender and class continue to function as important interpretive filters for contemporary South Koreans to "get a grip" amidst their country's (melo)dramatic changes. For example, in highlighting the effects of a Daewoo plant closure and the protests that followed in the wake of the IMF Crisis, JB Kwon describes how the participation of male laborer's wives "simultaneously unsettled entrenched notions of 'traditional' gender relations and yet reproduced patriarchal norms" (2009: 24). Although self-conscious agents, their practices of protest were complicit in reproducing images of women as caretakers of "enfeebled" men deserving of work back in the factory and to their homes (ibid). In a related study, Jesook Song (2009) writes how during the IMF crisis it was mostly recently laid-off "white-collar" (ostensibly middle-class men) who were deemed the most "worthy" of welfare from a new neoliberalized South Korean state. In contrast, during the crisis, women tended to be the first to be laid off from their jobs, an idea

rooted in normative ideas of heteronormative familism and its concomitant ideas of men as breadwinners and women as nurturing figures in the background. As Song (2009) argues, that Korean women routinely were laid off before men during the crisis indicated the extent to which labor performed by women already was devalued, a “natural” demotion that signaled the women’s eventual return to the nuclear family fold. What is more, disobeying this gendered script, Song and other scholars suggest, would signal a further societal crisis that threatened the social fabric of a South Korean society already confronting relentless political, social, and economic change.

BACKGROUND: POST-IMF CRISIS AND THE NEOLIBERAL TURN IN SOUTH KOREA

To understand the strong appeal in South Korea of an occupation consistently ranked in the U.S. as “the worst job” (among the top ten in 2013, 2014, and 2015 according to *Newsweek*), “the worst job *in travel*” (according to a “Careercast” survey, beating out airline pilots, air traffic controllers, and even bus drivers), and the most physically demanding (ranked among the top ten out of a 2017 *Business Insider* poll), a brief overview of South Korea’s recent economic history since 1997, specifically, and the traumatic aftermath of the IMF Crisis is needed.²⁷

An immense literature details the creation of the “the neoliberal welfare state” (Song 2009) as a response to the traumatic events of the Asian Debt Crisis (1997–2001). Locally, in South Korea, the moment is referred to as the *ai-em-epu sat'ae* (“IMF Crisis”), *sat'ae* here serving as a polysemic word conjuring images of a “war-like” condition threatening national

²⁷ Gagnon 2015.

sovereignty, social integrity, and individual livelihood (Song 2009 quoted in Kwon 2005).²⁸

Multiple conditions combined to create such a calamity, including falling demand for Korean semiconductors in the 1990s, the precarity of the Japanese economy in the region (Radelet and Sachs 2000), and the declining ability of the South Korean state to “discipline capital” during the 1990s, including an adequate response to a loss of export markets and profitability after the late 1980s. Although first declaring that the Korean economy was experiencing only a “temporary liquidity squeeze” rather than a “solvency crisis,” then-Federal Reserve vice chairman Stanley Fischer declared that the country was suffering from a systemic “breakdown of economic relations,” one so complete that only radical economic restructuring could restore prosperity (Crotty and Lee 2009). What followed in the wake of what was perceived as a localized currency and financial crisis in Thailand was a \$57 billion bailout package to South Korea on December 3, 1997 (Joo and Kwak 2001: 36).

Seemingly overnight, the once “miracle economy” had gone from the world’s 11th largest economy to the recipient of the largest bailout in IMF history. Not surprisingly, the event signaled national shame after decades of “miracle” growth (Kwon 2005: 12). Many Koreans widely viewed the so-called IMF Crisis as the worst crisis since the Korean War (1950-1953) (ibid). Worse, however, was what followed. The IMF imposed strict conditions for the bailout, chiefly massive layoffs ostensibly to aid the beleaguered economy. As some scholars have noted, however, the IMF mandates went “well beyond standard IMF programs, calling for structural and institutional reform, even though they [were] not needed to resolve the current crisis” (Wade

²⁸ IMF, instead of its broader identification outside South Korea, particularly in the U.S., as the Asian Debt Crisis, also suggests a kind of Korean anti-Americanism at the time (but less apparent today) that framed help from the U.S.’ financial institutions less as a blessing than a condescending act of domination (Risse 2001: 89).

and Veneroso quoted in Kwon 2005: 11-12). From a broader geopolitical vantage point, as Kwon provocatively indicates, the IMF reforms foreclosed South Korea's original engine for unprecedented postwar growth, the developmental state model by rendering the IMF Crisis "the inevitable outcome of the irrationality of the so-called Confucian, or more pejoratively crony, capitalism" (Kang quoted in Kwon 2005: 12). Foreshadowing the neoliberal and global turn South Korea would take into the present, economists took this diagnostic of the "failings" of crony capitalist developmental state governance as justification to have the state "do less where markets work and focus only on improving the climate for enterprise and competition, opening the economy to global markets" (Kim 2000: 3).

As the crisis continued, unemployment soared (fourfold the rate), the GDP plummeted (by 6.7 percent), banks closed, urban poverty nearly tripled, suicide rates spiked, and almost a quarter of the population fell into poverty (Harvey 2005). Indeed, this is a phenomenon that has intensified in the wake of the Global Financial Crisis of 2007. It also contributed to larger societal disquiet over public welfare, employment, and standards of living I address in the following section. As of 2017, suicide has been the fourth most common cause of death in South Korea with forty people committing suicide every day. Among OECD countries, South Korea has the highest suicide rate (Singh 2017). Scholars attribute such a high rate to several factors, including profound social changes aroused by intense economic growth, an unsustainable work culture, and record levels of chronic stress. During the IMF Crisis, in contrast to mass media reports that spotlighted the layoffs of middle-aged male breadwinner, the crisis hit women particularly hard. Women were the first to be laid off. As one Presidential Commission for Women's Affairs bureaucrat put it, "Even male breadwinners have lost their jobs, why bother with the question of women, who depend upon men or families?" (Song 2009: xvi). This was

also a time that coincided with the administration of Kim Young-sam (1993-1998), the first elected civilian presidents after decades of authoritarian military rulers or “authoritarian-oligarchic capitalism” in the country (Gills 2000). Despite such fortuitous events, including the Kim regime’s highly optimistic instruction of globalization (*seggyehwa*) as a new economic, political, and social policy to secure South Korea’s “competitiveness” around the world, South Korea was rocked by economic devastation shortly after. Kim’s anti-protectionist commitment matched the IMF’s stipulations for accelerated trade liberalization and foreign investment and further labor market flexibility. Combined, these policies signaled South Korea’s increasing integration with and dependency on the global capitalist system.

Consequently, the IMF Crisis had a profound economic, social, and psychological effect on how the South Korean state, as well as diverse members of the country’s civil society, responded (Song 2010). This neoliberal effect necessitated the spatial expansion and social deepening of economic liberal definitions of “social purpose and possessively individualist patterns of actions and politics” where the structure and language of social relations became progressively characterized by the commodity logic of capital while capitalist norms and practices infiltrated the gestures of everyday life (Gill 1995: 399). It is a period many scholars note as the beginnings of the neoliberal turn in South Korea—a material and ideological effect—that continues to influence the everyday lives of all Koreans today.

SEGYEHWA GLOBALIZATION, SOFT POWER, AND A MORE SERVICE-ORIENTED GLOBAL KOREA

Coupled with this economic reorganization in response to the IMF-Crisis was what Samuel S. Kim describes as “*seggyehwa* (globalization) diplomacy,” ushered in by its founder

President Kim Young-sam (1993-1998). The objective of *segyehwa* was to project a new national identity and role of South Korea as a “world-class advanced nation” that indexed a transition from an era of stubborn nationalism to an era of “universal globalism” (2000: 265-273). President Kim’s successor, President Kim Dae-jung in his inauguration speech (1988) echoed this pledge. For the latter, the new millennium meant an era of informationization where “intangible knowledge and information will be the driving power for economic development.” Hence, the globalization of Korean culture and Korean diplomacy “[would] center around the economy and culture,” Kim noted (Kim 2000: 258). This was in stark contrast to South Korea’s earlier history of isolation amid bigger foreign powers, an approach that earned the former the nickname of the “hermit kingdom.”

This theme of a people and culture stubbornly stuck, spatially and spiritually, within the “shock” of Western imperialist progress (couched in the neutral language of “change”) has persisted until the 2000s. Aware of this image—one that approached foreign encroachment as inhospitable at best and hostile at worst—the South Korean state responded in turn. In addition to promoting the names of *chaeböls* like Samsung to the world, the Korean government assisted in the aggressive promotion of “Brand Korea,” a joint brand between the state and various private sector agencies (e.g., *chaeböls*) across products and sectors (Kuwahara 2014: 2, 20). The accompanying national campaign, Global Korea, coincided with this development. Global Korea originally emerged as a foreign policy initiative of former right-wing, pro-business president, Lee Myung-bak (2008-2013) (Hermanns 2013).²⁹ First articulated in his inaugural address,

²⁹ Within this dissertation, I define Global Korea as an assemblage of institutions, ideas, images, and people (including Brand Korea). Specifically, Global Korea produced ideas of global Koreanness (namely its superior, advanced country (*sōnjin'guk*) status in the world) that emerged in tandem with *segyehwa* (globalization) policies that followed the IMF Crisis (Joo 2012: 5).

Global Korea's aims rested on the idea of South Korea as a responsible and contributing member of the international community committed to "global diplomacy" and "the global movement for peace and development," based on "universal principles of democracy and market economics" (Hermanns 2013: 22-23). On the eve of South Korea hosting the first major international diplomatic event hosted by South Korea, the 2010 Seoul G20 Summit, then-President Lee declared that, under the auspices of Global Korea, "Korea will come into global focus... [and] will become a genuinely advanced nation" (John 2015: 38). Critics of the policy have viewed Global Korea as the product of an elitist and state-led reappraisal of South Korea's national interests and national security. Hence, more than anything, Global Korea rested its aims on securing the foundations for sustained economic growth (Kalinowski and Cho in John 2015: 39).

Today, however, this once particular policy prescription has spread as ubiquitous national slogan (John 2015) throughout South Korea and its people. Specifically, "global" (*kŭllobŏl*) has become a synonym for advanced country (*sŏnjin'guk*), both contemporary keywords (Williams 1976) whose combined usage binds certain ways of seeing (and *not* seeing) cultures and societies in the world (Williams quoted in Eldridge and Eldridge 1994). The conflation of global with advanced country (*sŏnjin'guk*) status, as I argue in this dissertation, also represents the latest South Korean state soft power strategy. The originator of the concept, Joseph S. Nye, describes soft power as "the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments" (Nye 2004: x). Accordingly, soft power arises from how attractive one country (oftentimes geopolitically weaker) finds the culture, political ideals, and policies of another (oftentimes geopolitically stronger) country (ibid). At its heart, soft power represents a nonmilitary international relations strategy aimed at achieving strategic imperatives (Lee 2011: 11). These strategic imperatives vary. But, primarily, they engage in "competitive politics of

attraction, legitimacy, and credibility” (ibid). In this way, soft power helps to express seeming compatibility with the values and interests of *other* nations’ values and interests to achieve a nation’s desired objectives.

In the case of South Korea, these desired objectives have centered on translating prior economic clout into global political power (Kalinowski and Cho 2009: 223), or in the least, becoming a regional “middle power” in Northeast Asia (Shim and Flamm 2013). Existing cultural stereotypes, namely gendered ones like South Korea’s history of authoritarian masculine militarism and severe isolationism were deemed unexportable en masse. Consequently, it became increasingly important for a new form of Korean identity that could be marketed to the world, particularly through intellectual property associated to individuals and specific brands not associated with large companies (Walsh quoted in Kuwahara 2014: 20). Garnering outside investments and capital required better strategies for attracting foreigners, including tourists for budding leisure economies and migrants for existing industrial and infrastructure building. Culture industries in South Korea, exemplified by the so-called “Korean Wave” (*Hallyu*), helped to successfully recast the country and its people in a more positive light, one that actively engaged with the world by branding Global Korea as cool and modern. The South Korean state actively played a part in supporting this emerging industry: using diplomatic resources and networks, fostering social solidarity behind the concept of promoting Korean culture internationally, matching the education system to the needs of select industries, promoting innovation and creativity in production, and subsidizing companies (especially *chaebols*) involved in this sector (Kuwahara 2014: 17-18).

For Nye (2004) soft power draws its strength from not having to rely on the modus operandi of “hard power”: the overt threat of violence (Kurlantzic 2008: 6). Instead, soft power

is a “charm offensive” that focuses on the “attractiveness of a nation’s brand, of its values and ideals and norms” (ibid). Other hospitality campaigns, most noticeably in the hosting of international mega-events like the Olympics (which South Korea first hosted in 1988 and again in 2018) and economic summits (the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Summit held in 2005) also symbolize public diplomacy among states possessing different political systems and different stages of economic development, demonstrating existing soft power capabilities and their further enhancement (Grix and Lee 2013; Grix, Brannagan, and Houlihan 2015). Through this framing, forms of hospitality (“cultural” and those commodified) take on the role of mediating forms of soft power. Hence, foregrounding hospitality (embodied through service) helps us rescale the analytic focus on forms of mediated exchange (i.e., ideas, material objects, people) beyond the realm of the nation state and state-level diplomacy. In this way, I argue that hospitality via service epitomizes the apotheosis of everyday diplomacy. As such, the former plays a vital role in the forging and mediating of relationships between various “others,” locally and transnationally (Henig 2016). Service, when it is state-sanctioned (as it is in the case of most high-end in-flight airplane service), undergirds soft power strategies like Global Korea. These techniques attempt to create and manage an increasingly differentiated and stratified global market. Because the objectives behind any soft market campaign continually are at the whim of historical, political, and economic forces, the meaning of Global Korea (despite the best efforts of its “top-down” state and corporate enforcers) always is vulnerable to alternative (potentially revolutionary) understandings. Accordingly, securing these meanings (in the case of Global Korea, the idea of South Korea as a trendsetting, tolerant, and ultimately capital investment-friendly country) demands labor—one that traffics in the economy of ever-shifting global desire

and attraction. These desires and forms of attraction also reside within the same subjects who would enact them as Korean female flight attendants.

THE GROWTH OF THE SERVICE SECTOR IN THE GLOBAL CAPITALIST ECONOMY AND ADVANCED (*SŎNJIN'GUK*) KOREA

Drawing on the performance studies work of her mentor Erving Goffmann (1956), Arlie Hochschild (1983) coined the concept of “emotional labor.” In addition to the physical and mental labor of their work, she writes, flight attendants perform labor that “requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others—in this case, the sense of being cared for in a convivial and safe place” (1983: 7). For Hochschild, however, the effects of this labor on those who must employ it ultimately have a negative valence because it calls for a “coordination of mind and feeling... sometimes draw[ing] on a source of self that we [in the West] honor as deep and integral to our individuality (ibid). Hochschild describes what she means by citing a parallel example from Karl Marx on the “human cost” and “alienating” effects of a nineteenth-century wallpaper factory child who becomes an “instrument of labor” (1979: 7-8). She goes on to describe the alienating effects of emotional labor on the contemporary flight attendant in similarly stark terms:

Beneath the difference between physical and emotional labor there lies a similarity in the possible cost of doing the work: the worker can become estranged or alienated from an aspect of self—either the body or the margins of the soul—that is used to do the work. The factory boy’s arm functioned like a piece of machinery used to produce wallpaper. His employer, regarding that arm as an instrument, claimed control over its speed and

motions. In this situation, what was the relation between the boy's arm and his mind? Was his arm in any meaningful sense his own? This is an old issue, but as the comparison with airline attendants suggests, it is still very much alive. If we can become alienated from goods in a goods-producing society, we can become alienated from service in a service-producing society. This is what C. Wright Mills, one of our keenest social observers, meant when he wrote in 1956, "We need to characterize American society of the mid-twentieth century in more psychological terms, for now the problems that concern us must border on the psychiatric." When she came off the job, what relation had the flight attendant to the "artificial elation" she had induced on the job? In what sense was it her own elation on the job? The company lays claim not simply to her physical motions—how she handles food trays—but to her emotional actions and the way they show in the ease of a smile... The final commodity is not a certain number of smiles to be counted like rolls of wallpaper. For the flight attendant, the smiles are a part of her work, a part that requires her to coordinate self and feeling so that the work seems to be effortless. To show that the enjoyment takes effort is to do the job poorly. Similarly, part of the job is to disguise fatigue and irritation, for otherwise the labor would show in an unseemly way, and the product—passenger contentment—would be damaged. Because it is easier to disguise fatigue and irritation if they can be banished altogether, at least for brief periods, this feat calls for emotional labor (ibid).

Hochschild makes the case that this comparison (between the child factory worker and female flight attendant) is apt. Even at the time of her writing (the early 1980s), fewer jobs were in the Fordist economic form associated most with industrialization, or that of the industrial

production line worker who produced material things. Today, the Post-Fordist, economic form has emerged. What has resulted is the “capacity to deal with people rather than with things” (Hochschild 1983: 9). The growth of the service sector has followed suit to position immaterial labor as a dominant form of labor in the global capitalist economy (Hardt 1999: 90).³⁰ Here, Hardt’s usage of immaterial labor could include what I deem care labor, an umbrella term that also includes forms of affective and emotional labor (e.g., the impulse to smile and elicit good moods or happiness in a customer).³¹ According to Hardt, although immaterial labor never has been entirely outside of capital production, the processes of economic post-industrialization since the 1970s has positioned the former in a role that is not only directly productive of capital but “at the very pinnacle of the hierarchy of laboring forms.” Rather than replacing the materiality of industrial production (i.e., manufacturing), this shift to immaterial labor within a growing service sector has made the line between production and services increasingly blurred (ibid).³²

³⁰ Timothy Mitchell (2010) argues that the idea of the economy—“as the totality of the relations of production, distribution and consumption of goods and services within a given country or region”—is a social invention arising from a mid-twentieth century crisis of economic representation. For him, its seeming coherence provided a new way for the nation-state to reimagine and represent itself discursively between the 1930s and 1950s as “something natural, bounded, and subject to political management” (1998: 90). In a similar vein, Mitchell also is critical of the idea of “the state,” calling for its understanding “through its elusive, porous boundaries,” one whose routines and practices regulate social identity more than merely constituting it (Mitchell quoted in Rana 2003: 129-130).

³¹ “Affect” in this regard references “how bodies are able to forge new connections and new alliances, to forge new pleasures and new ways of being productive... or “the capacity or power of bodies to affect other bodies and be affected by other bodies” (Brown, Lim, and Browne 2007: 54-55). Following John Cho, unlike emotions, affects refer less to formal or institutional channels (like the discursive conventions of identifiable “feelings”) than the politics of everyday sociality achieved through bodies, emotions/feelings, and performances (2011: 74).

³² Hardt (1999) describes the service industry as covering a broad range of activities from health care, education, and finance, to transportation, entertainment, and advertising. Most of these jobs are characterized by their high mobility and flexibility. He describes them as playing a central role in knowledge, information, communication, and affect. Worth noting, however, is how he

Against this view, Hochschild's pessimistic reading of the growth of the global service sector (as progressively estranging and repressive), and the immaterial labor it relies on, deserves reconsideration. From a broader perspective, so much of the "high-skilled" service industry the South Korean state has invested in—namely strong capital investment in globally recognized technology and informatic conglomerates (*chaebŏls*) like Samsung—has translated into 13.8 percent of the country's entire economy.³³ At a smaller scale, "alienating" occupations like those of flight attendants also have offered unexpected national and personal returns within the "lower-end" of the emerging service sector. Scholars like Kathleen M. Barry (2007) also argue that, as a service occupation, the flight attendant historically was coveted; it was a symbolic and sometimes literal (albeit unofficial) ambassador for country and company.³⁴ For many Korean women, specifically, the occupation and its provision of "services and the manipulation of [social and emotional] information as the heart of economic production" (Hardt 1999: 90) offer an uncommonly attractive incentive to join the usually denigrated service economy. In contrast to a Korean labor market which maintains considerable gender gaps (across sectors) in labor force participation, employment, and wages (Kim, Lee, and Shin 2016), the flight attendant occupation remains enticing for the rarity of its benefits. It represents an uncommonly female-

generally describes a higher valued end of the service sector, namely finance and information technologies. This dissertation focuses on a "lower," less defined level within his spectrum: in-flight passenger service.

³³ *Dong-A Ilbo* 2016.

³⁴ These associations oftentimes have translated into reality. Many Korean flight attendants have married men of considerable power (e.g., athletes, politicians, and curiously, comedians).

dominated occupation, high pay, good health and welfare benefits, free travel, and substantial (although contingent) social prestige throughout Asia.³⁵

That young women seemingly were motivated (as argued by Hochschild) to manufacture the “alienating” labor of forced emotions also was not lost on my interlocutors. Many of them matter-of-factly responded that they knew the occupation was difficult. In this respect, they explained that it was “just a job.” However difficult the conditions, they paled in comparison to the “hellish” reality of work life in contemporary South Korea, most insisted. At the same time, the flight attendant occupation also represented much more than a job. It was the pinnacle within a service sector most of my interlocutors *already* had been inhabiting or were economically pressured eventually to work within. This meant a likely future of low-paying, part-time, temporary menial labor dealing with people in the customer service-oriented work, such as coffee shops, bars, restaurants, guest houses, or hotels. Many expressed some interest in a “steady” job working in an office for a company but had been rejected up until our meeting. Others despised the idea of working in an office to begin with. For them, the “single serving” nature of the flight attendant occupation (i.e., having to deal with a customer, and oftentimes even co-workers and bosses because of rotating flights, only once) was one of the strongest

³⁵ Compared to 74.7 percent of men, 52.7 percent of working-aged Korean women (aged 15 and older) participated in the Korean workforce. However, in addition to facing difficulties getting a job, many women are less likely than men (3.2 versus 3.8) to seek employment. Some of this is due to societal expectations for women to follow more normative trajectories (e.g., working but later having a child and prioritizing child-rearing). But other structural factors play a part, including the failure of women to enter traditionally valorized fields like the law (only 19.4 percent), medicine (23.9 percent), and the academy (23 percent). This is despite women surpassing men in terms of university entrance (a 7 percent point gap as of 2013). Experts attribute this gap in the trajectory of women’s careers to institutional preferences for men in leadership positions and broad pay gaps wherein women make 36.6 percent less than men. For example, the World Economic Forum placed South Korea at 115 out of 145 countries ranked in terms of economic participation and opportunity due to wide pay gaps (Draudt 2016).

incentives of becoming a flight attendant over more “stable” jobs “stuck” in an office.³⁶ “Only once and never again,” many would tell me.

³⁶ The narrator of Chuck Palahniuk’s *Fight Club* comments on this unique temporal condition of commercial travel: “The charm of traveling is everywhere I go, tiny life. I go to the hotel, tiny soap, tiny shampoos, single-serving butter, tiny mouthwash and a single-use toothbrush... Hotel time, restaurant food. Everywhere I go, I make tiny friendships with the... single-serving-friend[s]...beside me from Logan to Krissy to Willow Run [airports]” (1996: 28, 31).



Figure 2: Recent Korean Airlines advertisement³⁷

³⁷ In 2007, Korean Airlines launched an ad campaign, “Excellence in Flight,” that represented a dramatic reversal of its earlier parochial image. The campaign was ushered in by a three-month, \$19 million campaign. Emily Cho, the mastermind of the new campaign, explained how Korean Air wanted to shift its focus to attracting more “international traveler from around the world” by “showcasing “Korean Air’s true advantage in service and facilities in the ads as well as a refreshed image of a sophisticated, modern, creative airline” (Karantzavelou 2007).

The elevated position of the flight attendant occupation among many South Koreans might be explained by other external factors, as well. For instance, that the figure of the flight attendant—the quintessentially middle-class, mobile (both literal and metaphorical) overseas laborer—discursively was removed and implicitly elevated above the classed and racialized category of labor migrant suggested something more significant: a resemblance to a larger discourse of *sŏnjin’guk* (advanced country). First arising during the South Korean state’s authoritarian, developmental regime in the 1970s, *sŏnjin’guk* spoke to an aspiration for and confidence in the country’s modernizing ambitions. Understood as an “escape” from South Korea’s earlier designation as an aid-receiving, poverty-ridden *hujin’guk* (“backward” country)—a designation most Koreans still apply to Southeast and South Asian countries like the Philippines and India—*sŏnjin’guk* also projected a vision of a desirable national future. This sentiment is evident in the concepts earliest appearances, here in the 1970s:

Sŏnjin’guk is perceived in Koreans’ minds as “countries such as the U.S. and Western European countries, which are wealthy economically and advanced not only in culture, science, and technology but also in thought and behavior” (*Chosun Ilbo* newspaper in Kim 2011).

In this way, Korean flight attendant’s distancing from the label of labor migrant—one readily associated with *hujin’guk*—seemed to mirror, but also affirm, a broader national longing of South Korea, a country whose modernity story is intimately tied to Western (chiefly U.S.) economic and political involvement, particularly a liberal “American dream” that grants upward

social mobility and cosmopolitan membership.³⁸ Arguably, Korean flight attendants' literal ease in crossing customarily uninviting borders along markers of class, race, and nationality also personified and produced the South Korean state's own yearnings for easy cross-border movement.

Buttressing this national aspiration was Lee's Global Korea policy, which strategically aimed to position South Korea as an influential "middle power" country between "great powers" and "small powers" in the international system (John 2014: 326). Hence, this relatively elevated national status from once-undesirable to now "model minority nation state in the global capitalist context" (Lee 2010) has been maintained not only through an identification with Western countries deemed culturally superior but also an active maintenance of distinction making—a sort of geopolitical "intra-ethnic othering" (Abelmann 2009; Pyke and Dang 2003)—through which Koreans distinguish themselves from other assumed Asian backward country (*hujin 'guk*) others (e.g., India, the Philippines, and North Korea). As I argue in this dissertation, Korean flight attendants have driven the production and maintenance of this national project through their material (physical) and immaterial (spiritual) embodiments of the culturally-specific idiom of "superior service."³⁹

WORK LIFE IN SOUTH KOREA AS "HELL CHOSUN"

³⁸ Jaschik 2010.

³⁹ Here, Korean hospitality (exemplified in locally-specific understandings of "superior" service) should be seen less as a signal of a culturally essentialized practice (i.e., Confucianism) of South than as constitutive of the Korean state's attempts at creating and managing an increasingly differentiated and stratified global market.

If the 1980s until the mid-1990s were “a decade of prosperity that saw the emergence of a full-blown consumer culture [and]... a time of intense national pride,” then the 2000s into the present should have signaled a continuation of the trend (Kendall 1996: 15). Yet the IMF Crisis ushered in a new twenty-first century Korean neologism, “Hell Chosun” (*Helchosŏn*). Coined in the mid-2000s by Koreans in their twenties, Hell Chosun (*Helchosŏn*) combines the words, hell and Chosun.⁴⁰ This new linguistic expression depicts contemporary South Korea as a living hell, one only supposed elites (namely college graduates of elite universities or those already possessing enormous financial wealth) can survive within. Following this sentiment, *everyone else* can expect a life of enduring economic hardship and social alienation. This feeling is relatively new. The period prior to the IMF crisis, during and after South Korea’s biggest industrialization drive (late 1960s-early 1990s), enabled the development of a robust middle class and thriving consumer culture (in spite of sporadic periods of violent political unrest and uncertainty) (Nelson 2000). More to the point, the expectation of lifetime employment and a middle-class lifestyle were becoming commonplace.⁴¹

In contrast, for today’s young Korean workforce, the discourse of Hell Chosun (*Helchosŏn*) represents a poignant parody to vent their anger, cynicism, and frustration in the context of never-ending competition, deepening social instability, and shrinking employment

⁴⁰ The Chosun dynasty was the final and longest-lasting imperial dynasty of a then-united Korea (1392-1910).

⁴¹ For example, prior to the IMF Crisis in 1990, 75 percent of South Korean households could be considered middle class—here defined by the OECD as the segment earning 50 percent to 150 percent of the median equivalized disposable income (taking into account household size). In 2000, the rate was 70.1 percent and later 65.2 percent in 2010. Over a decade after the Crisis, middle class families accounted for 67.1 percent although university education rates per families rose, suggesting a gradual erasure of this state-defined economic class, as well as the strong probability that formerly middle-class families have declined to so-called low-income status.

possibilities (Kim, et al. 2016). Increasingly, this young labor force views themselves as the “Sampo Generation” (*samp'osedae*), another accompanying neologism to that of Hell Chosun that means “to give up three things,” a reference to three qualities deemed essential to traditional Korean adulthood: courtship, marriage and childbirth.⁴² Much of this malaise can be attributed to earlier IMF-induced post-Crisis reforms outlined earlier. These reforms included a relentless shift from full-time employment to part-time employment, flexibility of the labor market, record lows in employment satisfaction, and a particularly deleterious effect on unemployment (11.3 percent in 2017, among the OECD’s highest) for young people (twenty-five to twenty-nine years old), including those who graduated from elite universities.

Sujung Kim (2017) articulates the stakes behind this youth labor market reality, as well as the nuances and complexities of identificatory class markers in contemporary South Korea. Focusing on lower middle-and working-class Korean study abroad students in U.S. public community college, Kim describes a group of young Koreans not entirely different—save for being slightly younger—from that of the multiply-located middle-class and occasionally working-class aspiring flight attendant interlocutors in this study. Like the latter, as members of a group stigmatized as “less profitable in the neoliberal profit accumulation regime” by nature of their seemingly lackluster academic backgrounds (enrollment in third-tier colleges and universities or failure to attend a four-year institution) and lack of marketable skills, the former sought to “escape” a South Korea that demonized them (Kim 2017). This group—collectively deemed “losers” (*ruja*) by Korean society—nevertheless, held onto their cosmopolitan dreams of

⁴² Adding insult to injury, another term has emerged, “Opo Generation” (*op'osedae*)—“O” referencing the number five—which adds homeownership and a social life to the Sampo (three things) list of things that must be “relinquished.”

travel and upward social mobility. Their escape from South Korea to study in the U.S. (albeit at a third-tier community college), however, represented a means to “recover their neoliberal normalcy as proper neoliberal subjects” either among other transnational Koreans or back in South Korea (Kim 2017). The current and former flight attendants of my study, in contrast, expressed less anxieties about their moral status within Korean society since, in their view, they already had “made it.” Aspiring flight attendants (especially those who had devoted months to years in vain to being hired by an airline), on the other hand, expressed an almost identical sense of anxiety (sometimes shame) over their uncertain social locations and occupational futures.⁴³ Ultimately, for all groups, the stakes of these desires felt highly personal. With education as one of the most important indicators to assess young adults’ moral value as social members in South Korea (Abelmann, et al. 2009), college ranking (chiefly within South Korea’s top three universities, known colloquially as “SKY”) also has become equated with “brand capital” or a student’s competency in a radically liberalized global market (Kim 2017).⁴⁴

⁴³ Despite the reality of the community college students in Kim’s study representing one of the “lower/est” ends of the study abroad spectrum, they still study and live in the U.S. Symbolic capital associated with different forms of educational and life experience abroad vary, as many scholars have explored (Chun and Han 2015). But any extended experience in the West, especially the U.S., I argue, maintains considerable practical and symbolic value as a local and global sign for cosmopolitanism and upward mobility (Park and Abelmann 2004). As such, from a certain perspective, the aspiring flight attendants in my study, many of whom never had traveled abroad, had limited English ability—a highly coveted, even fetishized (Im 2008), skill, in *any* industry in South Korea—and attended second to third-tier universities in the country, could be considered even more vulnerable than the *ruja* subjects of Kim’s ethnography.

⁴⁴ “SKY” refers to the three universities considered the best in South Korea: Seoul National University, Korea University, and Yonsei University. For most Koreans, education is what Samuel Gerald Collins describes as “both the sine qua non index of class and the primary vehicle for class mobility” (Abelmann 2003: 635). Among the highest of other advanced (OECD) countries, as of 2015, Koreans spent over \$18 trillion won (\$20 billion) or around 20 percent of their household income to pay for after-school private academies.

Against these odds, most young adults (including those who more squarely conform to the notion of middle-class status) have little hope of finding employment outside of lower-tier, non-permanent sectors like service work alongside high school graduates and migrant workers from economically less-developed countries. In line with administrations before her, former (now-impeached) President Park Geun-hye (like her predecessor Lee Myung-bak) declared further acceleration of economic deregulation and market liberalization. This underscored the South Korean state's continued assault on laborer's employment status in favor of profit accumulation. Korean citizens, especially young workers, in this equation became a zero sum means of ensuring national profits. Those who were antithetical to this project, chiefly graduates from lower-ranking post-secondary institutions, were deemed "pernicious" to the domestic Korean landscape; they would "destroy" economic progress while fomenting social unrest. Hence, they had to be expelled—if not literally, then metaphorically. Regarding the former, as illustrated in a 2011 policy report titled "The Policy Study for the Development of the Global Educational Vision Until 2010," both the Lee and Park administrations consistently devised policies that discursively framed economically unviable, and therefore exportable, youth workers as "economic ambassadors abroad," especially to non-Asian countries (ibid).

Here, the notion of "specs" (*sŭp'ekk'ŭ*) or (job) specifications in South Korea remain paramount. These specifications include elite academic credentials, work and/or study experiences abroad, and (American-accented) English language fluency. So pervasive is this preoccupation with possessing the "correct" specs, Cho (2015) has deemed today's young working force the "spec generation." Resume-building activities as one of the sole means of gaining social recognition (and equally important, warding off social ostracism) in contemporary South Korea is exacerbated in a competitive job market that continues to foreclose opportunities

for gainful employment. Increasingly, this has become true even for a traditionally secure Korean class: elite SKY university graduates. Although economic backgrounds and family wealth varied between working-class to middle-class (and rarely, “upper” middle-class), most of my interlocutors claimed to have attended either second or third-tier universities (or sometimes only two-year technical colleges). Beyond conventional economic labels, arguably these symbolic factors around educational rank continue to operate as the most important markers of class, distinction, and self-worth among most contemporary Koreans.

Concurrent with this discourse of encouraging young workers deemed toxic to the Korean state’s globalizing ambitions to seek work abroad (particularly in West Asia) was the state’s active attempts at securing cheaper and more vulnerable labor migrant workers to fulfill low-sector, low-paying domestic jobs *in* South Korea. Accompanying this shift in policy was the development of moralizing language and ideologies to cope with demographic changes sparked by the sudden influx of mostly male labor migrants and female “marriage migrants” from Southeast Asia. As EuyRyung Jun (2011) argues, an increased emphasis by the state and civil society on philanthropic activities to care for vulnerable foreign populations through “multicultural” (*tamunhwa*) programs stressed intercultural understanding. These activities, Jun maintains, sought to save the moral integrity of South Korea’s historic and ongoing emigration. It also deflected attention from the IMF Crisis’ legacy of a two-tiered labor workforce between regular and irregular workers (*pijŏnggyu kŭlloja*). Despite current President Moon’s vow to root out irregular work in the country, unemployment continues to stand at 6.5 million (or 32 percent of the entire labor force as of June 2016).⁴⁵

⁴⁵ The 2007-2008 Global Financial Crisis did not affect South Korea as negatively as did the IMF Crisis. But the former still accentuated existing social inequalities in South Korea (Ock 2017).

Today, even full employment promises seemingly little in Hell Chosun, however. For example, within the OECD, in 2016, South Korean's worked the second longest hours (behind only Mexico) and earned a real wage, adjusted for inflation of only 75 percent of the OECD average. Additionally, Korean workers still confront stubborn and sometimes severe workplace hierarchies. Verbal abuse, sexual harassment, and sexual assault still are not uncommon.⁴⁶ Unsurprisingly, with such low expectations of satisfactory working conditions in South Korea, virtually any other occupation outside of South Korea might appear appealing. But the flight attendant job in South Korea (although regularly derided in the West as menial or ornamental service work, a perception resting on a disparaging image of service and transportation labor more generally) was not just any other job. In the context of South Korea, for many women, becoming a flight attendant possessed an almost mythical status.

FIELDWORK METHODOLOGY

Summary

My official fieldwork was a total of eighteen months from March 12, 2014 until August 15, 2015. Most of my fieldwork was conducted in Seoul, South Korea with intermittent trips to outer provinces of Seoul (e.g. Gyeonggi and Cheongchun Province) and Jeju Island. For the purposes of observing flight attendant recruitment drives for Emirates Airlines, I also visited Hong Kong, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, and Chicago, U.S.A. Before my official fieldwork, I also conducted preliminary fieldwork research for three months during the summer of 2012 in the UAE. Primarily, I was in Dubai but I also visited (once for each location) nearby Abu Dhabi and

⁴⁶ Colloquially, this concept is known as *gapjil*: “gap” connoting a superior and “jil” meaning behavior. The rising influence of the #MeToo movement in South Korea may signal possible changes, but the future remains uncertain.

Sharjah. There I conducted semi-structured interviews and participant observation with three current (female) and two (one female and one male) former Korean Emirates Airlines flight attendants. In addition, I interviewed several other Korean and non-Korean Dubai-based non-flight attendant airline industry workers, foreign workers, and Dubai residents for a total of ten interviews. In Dubai, I met most of my interlocutors at Protestant and Catholic churches that catered to the Korean community or through introductions at a Korean guesthouse I was staying at. Although Korean migration to the region has an earlier sedimented history, most of my young interlocutors were unaware of this precedent.

In South Korea, after obtaining approval from the IRB at UIUC, I gained access to and conducted observations of different Korean flight attendant spaces, such as study group sessions (*sūt'ōdi moim*) for aspiring flight attendants, private flight attendant training institutes/academies, airports (Kimpo Airport and Incheon International Airport), coffee shops, clubs, and social events around Seoul. In addition, I kept up to date with the latest online communities and popular websites frequented by the flight attendant community. In total, I conducted seventy interviews (sixty during my official fieldwork and ten during my preliminary fieldwork) with aspiring, current, and former flight attendants, including the female leader of one of South Korea's only flight attendant unions, as well as a few pursers (i.e., senior flight attendants). I also interviewed two male airline pilots (while befriending one I maintain contact with today), a female Incheon international airport ground staff member, one male flight attendant training institute/academy manager, other workers in the service industry (fast food, coffeeshops, etc.), local academics, and Korean activists. I was able to conduct one focus group interview with newly-hired female flight attendants for Emirates Airlines and two focus group interviews with former female flight attendants who had worked for domestic and international airlines during the 1960s to 1970s see

Chapter 6). Finally, I conducted archival research at local libraries (the National Assembly Library, Seoul National University Main Library, and Seoul Metropolitan Library), museums (Seoul Museum of History, National Museum of Contemporary History, and Jeju Aerospace Museum), and through films, television, newspapers, and popular publications (including a popular genre of self-help flight attendant manuals and memoirs).

I largely employed qualitative methods, including structured and semi-structured interviews (questionnaires), participant observation, field notes, direct and indirect observations, focus groups, and archival research (newspapers, libraries, Korean language and English language dissertations) (Bernard 2006). Each interview lasted approximately one to three hours and consisted of a condensed life history (including age, place of birth and background, family dynamics, educational and work experience), political affiliations, travel experiences, and life aspirations. Finally, I also applied for (and immediately failed) an Emirates flight attendant position during an open-call job fair for aspiring flight attendants hosted in Hong Kong (see Chapter 2).

During my fieldwork in South Korea, I secured two research affiliations with SNU, first with its Language Education Institute (under the direction of Professor Sangjun Jeong) and later with the Institute of Cultural Studies (under the direction of Professor Hyang Jin Jeong and the assistance of Jonghyun Park). In May 2015, I presented my preliminary findings to other Korean anthropologists at the latter's regular brownbag speaking series. Moreover, I was able to secure a female Korean nursing undergraduate student at an elite university, Maria Lee, as my paid research assistant. With her help, I was able to locate archival sources and potential interlocutors, as well make accurate translations of my interview scripts, focus groups surveys, and other Korean-language related materials. At the time, Maria was a young woman preparing to become

(but now is working as) a nurse. This is an occupation that shares a history with (see Chapter 2) and many of the work qualities of the flight attendant occupation. However, nursing possesses considerably less societal glamour than that of the latter. In this respect, Ms. Lee also shared important insights about both occupations.

Gaining Access

Originally, my dissertation project centered on the work experiences of Korean overseas male workers in the Dubai-based construction industry but also included middle to high-level managerial staff in other industries like finance and real estate. Although initially attempting to compare the gendered and classed experiences of both male and female (primarily flight attendant) Korean overseas workers in the area, I ultimately decided to focus on the latter.⁴⁷ Prior to and immediately upon my arrival in Dubai, I had heard from some Korean friends and colleagues that there were many Korean, mostly female, flight attendants in the area. In retrospect, initially, I probably had bought into the occupation's stereotypical image (especially in Asia) of glamour and mystique.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ My thanks to Professor Khachig Tölölyan for first suggesting I “just focus on the flight attendants” during the 2012 Social Science Research Council “New Approaches to Transnationalism and Migratory Circulation” workshop. In addition, my colleague, Dohye Kim was instrumental in connecting me with several key interlocutors (non-flight attendants) in Dubai. Likewise, my father was incredibly helpful in personally arranging my stay at one of the few Korean guesthouses in Dubai at the time. Save for one Korean business colleague he knew working in Abu Dhabi, he had no connections to the region. Through personal research and contacts, he was able to find suitable accommodations for me that also provided me with vital access to the diasporic and foreign working Korean community in Dubai.

⁴⁸ Many of my “businessmen” relatives, including my father, were frequent international travelers. Oftentimes, they would make this supposed contrast. Almost always, they would note how much “better” Asian airlines’ service was, not only in terms of in-flight perks like meals and other amenities but specifically through the labor (and “obviously” better looks) of female flight attendants. These comparisons almost always were made in contrast to an imagined service in

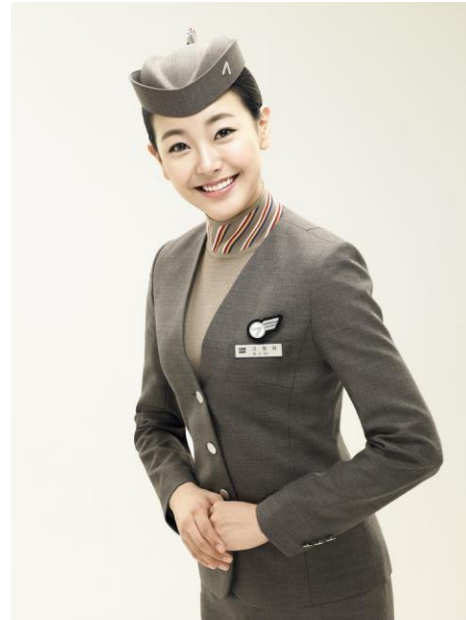


Figure 3: American Airlines “stewardess” (1930s) [left]; Asiana Airlines

flight attendant (*sŭngmuwŏn*) (present-day) [right]⁴⁹

Many Asian airlines, particularly premiere ones like Singapore Airlines, Korean Air, and ANA, All Nippon Airlines had service and flight attendants that harkened back to a time I only had heard about or had seen in glossy Hollywood images. A 1953 summary of flight attendant

the West that was “inferior.” Interestingly, my mother (and other female relatives) also agreed with these points. (To be fair, women like my mother also tended to highlight the industriousness of Korean female flight attendants). Surprisingly, views regarding appearances were not exclusive to non-academics. During my fieldwork in South Korea, a prominent female social scientist shared this view after I had introduced my research project. She commented, “Korean service *is* so much better. The flight attendants are more beautiful, too.” In a related (and unexpected) instance, a Korean American scholar of Korea once expressed surprise at seeing my short stature upon our first in-person meeting. Illustrating the pervasive attitude that the flight attendant occupation best was understood through its display of ostensibly attractive bodies, this scholar declared, “Alex, I thought you would be so much taller! I mean, you study flight attendants!”

⁴⁹ Image on left (Barry 2007). Image on right (Hong 2014).

recruiting criteria describes the type (rules that bear striking similarity to official and unofficial hiring trends in contemporary Asia): applicants must be “between 5’2” and 5’7” tall; have a good figure, weigh... between 100 and 125 pounds, with weight proportionate to height; between 20 and 26 years old; single with no dependents (marriage terminates employment); charming and personable with poise and beauty; in perfect physical condition with even, white teeth, clear white skin without blemishes, straight, slender legs and attractive, shiny hair; willing to retire between ages 30 and 32” (Omelia and Waldock 2003: 54).



Figure 4: Early flight attendant image in the West (1936)⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Omelia and Waldock 2003:16.

After my preliminary fieldwork in Dubai, I managed to stay in touch with only one Emirates female flight attendant I had befriended named Minkyung (see Chapter 3). Once in South Korea for my formal fieldwork, through friends and family, I was able to meet a few current female flight attendants, this time working mostly for South Korea-based (not Dubai-based), “domestic” (*kungnae hanggongsa*) airlines. As I later came to learn, the preparation for and trajectory of Korean flight attendants who worked for foreign (*oeguk hanggongsa*)-not Korean-based airlines (*kungnae hanggongsa*) were different. The former confronted different interviewing processes, one requiring less stringent physical requirements like those around age limit, weight, height, and overall physical “beauty.” The latter were considered more prestigious among aspiring and current Korean flight attendants. But South Korea-based airlines also were notorious for their almost militaristic hierarchies and work culture, which also encompassed exacting and “sexist” physical standards.

Despite meeting and even interviewing a few current Korean airline flight attendants—those working mostly for South Korea-based (*kungnae hanggongsa*) not Dubai-based or foreign airlines (*oeguk hanggongsa*)—unlike my experience in Dubai, none of these interactions resulted in any long-term correspondence. Instead, most of my relationships with the deepest rapport were with Emirates Airlines flight attendants I met during preliminary fieldwork in Dubai or with aspiring flight attendants (primarily female) I met during long-term fieldwork in Seoul. Establishing long-term relationships with current Korean flight attendants during my fieldwork in South Korea was surprisingly difficult. Instead, most of my interactions in South Korea with current Korean flight attendants meant us meeting once for a conversation or interview and only keeping in touch over a few months via social networks (e.g., the Korean messaging application,

Kakao). In this regard, my relationships with this group felt more akin to a journalist meeting briefly and/or keeping in touch with “sources” but failing to develop any deeper relationship. Most current and former flight attendants appeared relatively uninterested in me, as well as my study. This pattern continued even though I formally had been introduced by a specific person, either a friend of a friend, family member, or an acquaintance. I suspect that part of the ease of my meeting and maintaining relationships with flight attendant interlocutors in Dubai was the relative smallness (approximately 7,000 in Dubai and Abu Dhabi combined in 2012) of the Korean community in the UAE. In addition, as many interlocutors later told me, the isolation they felt in Dubai compelled them to “help” and even befriend a fellow Korean traveler in the area.

Conversely, in South Korea, most current Korean flight attendants already had established lives and routines that welcomed little disruption from an outsider researcher. Or they simply were tired after constant travel, which was a response I frequently heard. Another possible factor might have been the nature of my positionality as a cisgender, heterosexual Korean American man studying a female-dominated and frequently sexualized occupation. The image of a sexually predatory and self-entitled heterosexual Korean American male persists in contemporary South Korea. Despite sometimes appearing stereotypical (Cho 2012), the image was one I was highly self-conscious of whenever conducting research around women. Nevertheless, the situatedness of all knowledge (Haraway 1988), as well as my context-specific positionality also made me privy to unlikely findings.⁵¹ This included my mostly female interlocutors sometimes saying that they likely would have felt less comfortable hanging out with a “native” Korean, especially female, researcher. For example, many aspiring, current, and former Korean flight attendants I met held

⁵¹ For more analysis on my unique positionality please see (Lee 2018 forthcoming).

strongly negative views about ostensibly more professional Korean women, particularly “snobby” Korean “feminist” academics.⁵²

Another way to meet interlocutors was through “Meetup” social events. A popular social networking site, meetings centered on different themes, everything from cooking to speed dating. Although there were no “flight attendant” meetups, there was something close: Korean English language exchange meetups, of which there were dozens. I had guessed that many aspiring flight attendants, especially those hoping to work for foreign airlines (*oeguk hanggongsa*), would be interested in improving their English and meeting foreigners. Eventually, I befriended an aspiring flight attendant, Hana, who allowed me to attend one of her aspiring flight attendant study group sessions (*sūt'ōdi moim*): Plane School in this dissertation.⁵³ I later joined several other study groups (*sūt'ōdi moim*), some consisting of as few as three to as many as fifteen members. Membership varied. Generally, the majority always were women. Only a few groups I ever joined, on occasion, included (except me) a single man. The few men that did show up tended to appear once but never return again. Based on conversations and my mostly female interlocutors, many men may have felt intimidated by the presence of so many women. The format of meetings and who could join depended on the group. Some were very strict, requiring different forms of approval by lead members, including preliminary interviews among the membership. These groups tended to be the most organized with meeting agendas sometimes resembling college course curricula. For all

⁵² Ironically, I consider myself a staunch feminist ally.

⁵³ Like the other members, Hana, was in her early-to-mid-twenties aiming to work for a coveted foreign-based airline (*oeguk hanggongsa*) like Emirates Airlines. Unlike most of the others, however, she already had experienced professional work as an intern at a prestigious bank Seoul. When I first met her, she had decided to abruptly stop studying for an advanced degree in finance to try her luck at her “real” dream occupation, working as a flight attendant.

groups, however, membership tended to be fickle. Each study group (*sŭt'ŏdi moim*) had a series of core members with new and old additions constantly slipping in and out at different intervals. A few stayed on and became new core members.

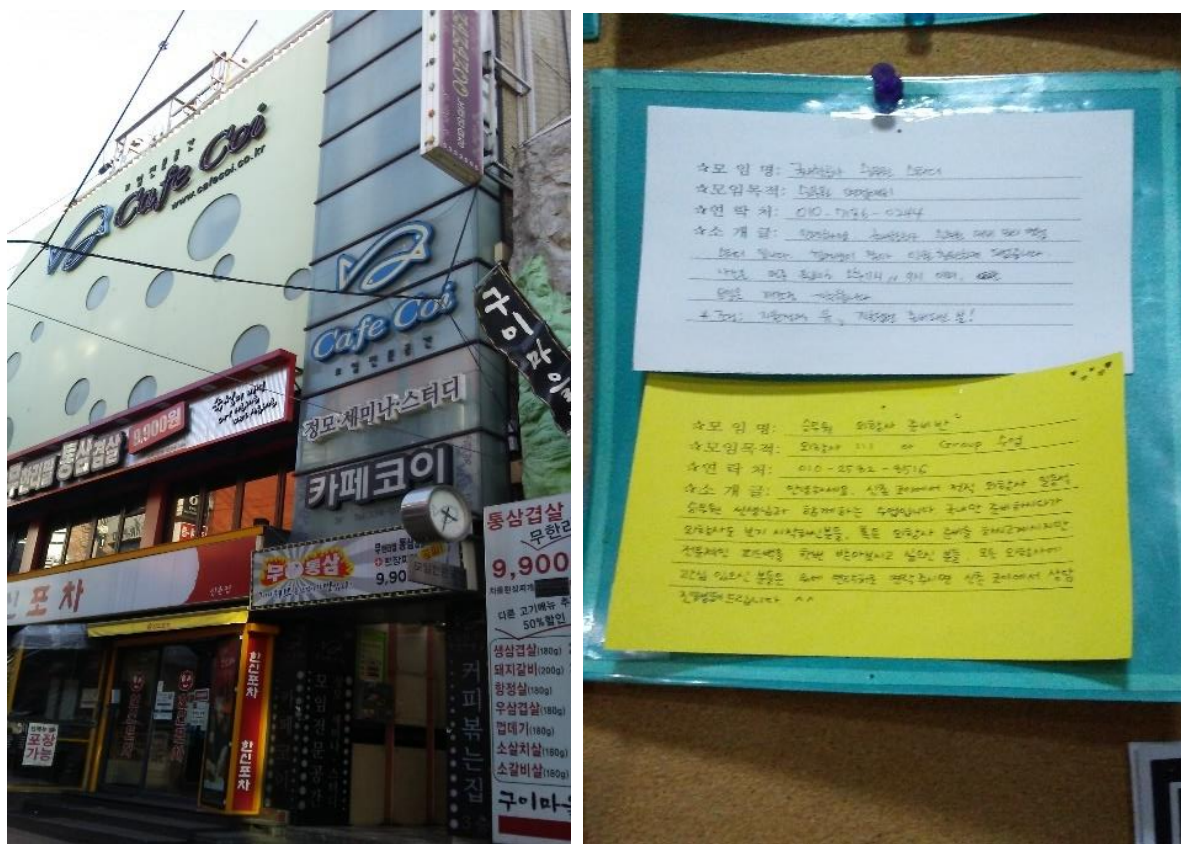


Figure 5: A typical study group (*sŭt'ŏdi moim*) space: “Café Coi” (left)

A typical posting to join/start a flight attendant study group (*sŭt'ŏdi moim*) (right)⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Korean to English translation:

“Name of meeting: A study session for aspiring flight attendants preparing for a foreign airline
Meeting goal: A 1:1 study session or a group study
Contact information: 010-
Introduction: Hello, this is a study session at Sinchon Coi Café with the instructor, _____, a former foreign airlines flight attendant. This also is a study group for people who were preparing to apply for a South Korea-based airline but have decided to start preparing for a foreign airline. Or it’s for people who were preparing for a foreign airline but want to receive some

Members of these study groups (*sŭt'ŏdi moimsi*) met in multiple ways, including through personal or professional contacts. Perhaps the most common means, however, was through a specific “flight attendant online portal,” which was incredibly popular among all aspiring, current, and former Korean flight attendants. Known as “Flight Attendant Network,” the portal is an online, members-only forum.⁵⁵ During my fieldwork, every interlocutor I met knew about the site and many relied on it heavily for hiring news and updates, advice, and gossip. Later in my field research, with the help of my research assistant, Maria, I uploaded a post about my research. Through these posts, I met several key interlocutors.⁵⁶

Within the social field of my flight attendant interlocutors, there also were more formal institutions like private flight attendant training institutes (*hagwons*) and commercial airlines.

expert feedback. For anyone interested in preparing for a foreign airline, please contact the above number and we can proceed with a consultation at Sinchon Coi Café.”

⁵⁵ A pseudonym.

⁵⁶ I was able to glean other meaningful ethnographic data from the Flight Attendant Network portal, oftentimes not directly by reading the site but by meeting interlocutors who would recount the site’s latest news. These included the general feelings at any given time among the mostly aspiring flight attendant membership. Moods fluctuated between anxiety and hope. At one point, my research and I as a researcher became a subject of one of the portal’s discussion topics. After posting about my research, “a Korean American male academic looking to interview flight attendants,” many members (mostly women, I presume, but possibly some men) expressed deep suspicion. A few assumed it was a scam by a rogue Korean man looking to sleep with Korean women. More interestingly, however, was a single poster who wrote a lengthy post asking that “the researcher” *not* study flight attendants. “Why would anyone want to study us?” the aspiring female flight attendant posted. “What we do isn’t that special. If people read such a study, they might look at us and what we do and find even more reason for contempt.” Through the help of my research assistant, Maria Lee, I never replied to this specific post. To my knowledge, no one else ever replied to the post either. Instead, however, I received many emails from members after the woman’s critical posting asking *to participate* in my study.

Following a more general trend of privatization of education in South Korea, *hagwons* are known for their specialization in the teaching and training of specific job-related skills. Today, there are approximately a dozen flight attendant flight attendant training institutes (*hagwons*) in Seoul and roughly twenty in the entire country.

As for commercial airlines, Dubai's flagship airlines is Emirates. South Korea's flagship airline is Korean Air, followed by Asiana Airlines. In recent years, there has been an increase in the number of commercial airlines that have been created in South Korea. Smaller and considered less prestigious than their major airline counterparts, these "low-cost carriers" (LLCs for short) (*chōbiyong hanggongsa* or *chōga hanggongsa* for short) offer lower fares and less amenities. Korean LCCs included Korean Air's subsidiary airline, Jin Air. The rest included Air Busan, Eastar Jet, Jeju Air, T-way Airlines, and Air Seoul. The most popular foreign airlines among my interlocutors were the Arab Gulf airlines. Emirates Airlines always ranked first in popularity with Qatar airlines a distant second. Etihad Airlines of Abu Dhabi rarely made this list. Other popular foreign airlines included those in Asia like China Air and Singapore Airlines, as well as European ones like Luftansa and KLM Royal Dutch Airlines. As a rule, U.S.-based airlines were not considered because of their strict policy of hiring only U.S.-born citizens.

Unfortunately, despite my initial efforts, I was unable to directly interact with any flight attendant training institutes (*hagwons*) or commercial airlines in South Korea or Dubai. But I was able to speak with many flight attendants and other airline staff (pilots, ground staff, etc.) related to these companies.

CHAPTER SUMMARIES

This dissertation is organized into six chapters. In this Introduction (Chapter 1) I set up the primary empirical and theoretical frameworks of this study: an emphasis on the conditions and contours of the flight attendant occupation in contemporary South Korea and its connection to the Korean state's broader project of projecting itself as an advanced country (*sŏnjin'guk*) to itself and the world. In describing the growth of the service sector, I tried to show how despite its unfavorable reputation in the West, the flight attendant occupation in South Korea has thrived. Likewise, I highlighted how the personal social mobility aspirations of my interlocutors mirrored and sustained a larger South Korean vision of its national future.

Chapter 2 (Service Mobilities Through Local Adoptions of Commodified Care (AKA Service)) aims to expand on my Introduction's argument. Through archival examples and ethnographic vignettes, I try to demonstrate how the cultivation and maintenance of Global Korea through the local idiom of "superior service" (*sŏbisŭ* and *sŏbisŭ maindŭ*) must be understood against a longer history of valorized flight attendant labor. Through ethnographic examples, I also illustrate the onerous task of cultivating this form of embodied gendered labor.

Chapter 3 (Security Narratives: Serving to Secure Self and Nation) presents a case for understanding the distinction between service, safety, and security as historically and socially-contingent constructs that sustain the devalorized status of service while overlooking the embeddedness of each category within one another. In demystifying the seeming classificatory border between these categories, I highlight the invisible security work behind devalued feminized care work while also revealing the performative nature of Security itself.

Chapter 4 (Dirty Work, Glamorous Migrant: Reproducing Global Hierarchies of Race, Gender, and Nation), moves the ethnographic focus outside the context of South Korea to Dubai, a coveted destination for most aspiring Korean flight attendants. In demonstrating how current

flight attendants for Dubai-based Emirates Airlines negotiate their gendered and racialized statuses, I reveal wider implications of supposed superior Korean in-flight service, chiefly the reproduction of global hierarchies around gender, race, and nation. Doing so argues what might be at stake with South Korea's globalizing ambitions among both Koreans and non-Koreans alike.

Chapter 5 (Off Tempo: Gendered Histories of South Korea) describes how the significance of the flight attendant occupation and gendered narratives of service, more generally, take on new meaning within the memory of former "old-timer" Korean flight attendants who worked for foreign and domestic airlines during the 1970s. Highlighting this group's earlier cosmopolitan experiences, including the important though unacknowledged role of their service, helps to illuminate the significance of their labor (and in turn, the larger role of contemporary Korean female laborers) to Korean modern history.

In my Conclusion (Chapter 6: A Momentary Reprieve from "Hell"), I provide concluding thoughts and a summary of this dissertation's arguments. Although the flight attendant occupation symbolizes only a momentary reprieve from the "hellish" reality of contemporary South Korean social and working life, its significance might be found in the process of affective longing itself.

CHAPTER 2: SERVICE MOBILITIES THROUGH LOCAL ADOPTIONS OF COMMODIFIED CARE (AKA SERVICE)

Fieldnotes, September 2, 2015

“I can’t stand them sometimes. They’re so fake. For aspiring flight attendants everything is an interview. Every moment, every interaction, every forced smile... it’s them always practicing to become a flight attendant. That’s why they can be so annoying!”

-Ye Sül, an aspiring Korean Emirates Airlines female flight attendant

Fieldnotes, February 23, 2015

“Sorry, I don’t want to meet all the aspiring flight attendants and their aggressive cheerfulness today. I’m not in the mood.”

-Hyo-joo, a former Korean Emirates Airlines female flight attendant responding to my request to attend a study group (sūt’ōdi moim) I was attending

Fieldnotes, February 8, 2015

“If I don’t become a flight attendant I don’t know... Bartending, working at a club, serving drinks at a coffeeshop. I’ve done all that. I don’t want to do that again, not when I’m in my thirties.”

-Dean, an aspiring Vietjet Airlines Korean male flight attendant

Fieldnotes, April 15, 2012

“I’m getting older now [early thirties], so I can’t do this much longer. I have to get out of [Dubai] soon and do something real with my life.

-Victoria, a current Dubai-based Korean Emirates Airlines female flight attendant

The fieldnotes that introduce this chapter speak to multiple and contradictory ways aspiring, current, and former flight attendants engage in what I refer to as “service mobilities” of contemporary South Korea. By service mobilities, I refer to how South Korea’s young labor force (particularly women) participates in the country’s expanding domain of service labor as a response to the country’s ongoing era of neoliberal reform in the wake of the 1997 IMF Crisis. In this chapter, I argue that the flight attendant occupation in South Korea represents the latest example of an earlier form of valorized feminized labor. Appreciating this point complicates a predominant perception in the West (and among certain class-privileged Korean women) that—in largely drawing on histories of flight attendant activism in the U.S.—depreciate the occupation outside the U.S. as glorified menial labor. That the labor and identity of these traveling “diplomatic servants” is so contested (both in the West and in South Korea), however, mirrors South Korea’s own uncertain status in a global capitalist order.

As I describe in Chapter 1, neoliberal restructuring laid the ground work for contributing to an increasingly untenable employment atmosphere for young Koreans. Consequently, many aspiring, current, and former Korean flight attendants expressed a desire to participate in the “highest-end” of a commonly stigmatized sector (service and transportation work) in South Korea. Many had heard about the hardships of the occupation but rarely, if ever, expressed the view that they structurally were prompted to pursue such a physically and mentally exhaustive occupation. Instead, they framed their seeking this occupation as a personal choice (albeit a personal choice to

escape “hell”), or even a life-long dream.⁵⁷ Tracing some key historical factors that led to the appearance of this peculiar job in contemporary South Korea helps to explain the rationale behind these sentiments. I follow with a brief outline of my understanding and usage of the mobility concept in the social sciences to theorize my research subjects. Afterwards, I include a vignette that demonstrate the stakes behind pursuing service mobilities through the popular flight attendant occupation. Finally, I conclude with a discussion on the contested meanings of service mobility trajectories, as well as on locally-specific meanings of the service concept.

A SELECTIVE HISTORY OF FLIGHT ATTENDANTS

The flight attendant occupation represents the latest in a long line of historically gendered feminine labor. The occupation’s favorable image as a gendered icon of South Korea and the latter’s nationalist narratives of global, advanced status (Koh and Balasingamchow 2015) strongly echo the occupation’s earliest representations in the West. In her historical analysis of American flight attendants, Barry describes how until the 1970s the stewardess (today, flight attendant) occupation was occupied by young and single white women whose “good looks and unusual occupation prompted reverence, envy, and desire” (2007: 1). Since the occupation’s beginnings in the early 1930s, airline marketing and employment policies “succeed[ed] brilliantly” in creating a select corps of “airborne ‘Glamour Girls’ to help sell seats to an imagined white, male, and professional-class passenger” (ibid).⁵⁸ Ironically, the feminization of in-flight cabin service and

⁵⁷ In making this claim, they enacted the neoliberal logic of flexibility and its valorization of ever-malleable agents in the marketplace through the gloss of “free choice” (Freeman 2014: 210).

⁵⁸ Scholars like Phil Tiemeyer (2013) uncover the vibrant (albeit numerically smaller) history of Western men, many of whom later played a central role in LGBTQ and AIDS activism in the early 1970s, working in the occupation as early as the late 1920s.

the flight attendant occupation, more generally, was the idea of a woman. Initially wanting to work for Boeing Air Transport, nurse and trained pilot Ellen Church approached Steven Stimpson, a manager of Boeing Air Transport (a predecessor to United Air Lines) on February 12, 1930. Unable to work as a pilot because of her gender status, Church proposed to Stimpson that nurses could assist passengers during flights. As Barry notes, at first, Boeing Air Transport had considered young Filipino men, reproducing an existing association between affluent (white) travelers and the men of color who served them (e.g., African American Pullman porters). But at the time airlines already had demonstrated a preference for white cabin staff, motivating Boeing Air Transport to exploit the “psychological punch” of having young and attractive white women (Barry 2007: 18).⁵⁹ Eventually, though, Boeing Air Transport and other budding commercial airlines adopted the practice of hiring mostly women. This was a practice that would continue into the present day. By the 1940s and 1950s, early airlines distinguished themselves from other modes of service and transportation like the railroads by offering a “fellowship of whiteness” by providing basic reassurance that the same planes most of the post-war public was fearful of were safe. According to Barry, white flight attendants “did what racial stereotypes would not allow black male attendants to do: signal to fearful air travelers that they were safely in the hands of [a superior race] able to master the new technology of flight” (2007: 17).” Symbolically, these early female flight attendants served to secure an emotional border between feeling anxious to carefree among commercial aviation’s earliest passengers.

⁵⁹ Interestingly, even this idea initially was rejected by Stimpson’s supervisor who claimed that male pilots disdained the idea of having “flying nursemaids” encroach on their all-male territory (Barry 2007: 18).

Importantly, as Barry and others (Whitelegg 2007; Murphy 2016) argue, since the 1940s subtle and overt forms of activism via individual and collective acts of resistance against workplace harassment, sexism, and equal pay also defined the occupation. Hence, popular perceptions (both in the U.S. and in South Korea) of the “older,” “less attractive,” and less service-oriented” Western flight attendant conveniently forget that much of these negative stereotypes actually signaled the legacy of post-war rank-and-file struggles for improving flight attendant working conditions.⁶⁰ For example, union struggles over “safety” licensing by the federal aviation authorities in the early 1960s by militant flight attendants working with more conservative (and mostly male) pilot’s unions successfully combatted increased workloads and health concerns. These unfavorable conditions were the result of technological advances (e.g., faster jet engine airplanes) that intensified during and after World War II. Afterwards, since the 1950s, flight attendant safety licensing carried with it important symbolic meaning, despite its mention as little more than a footnote in previous studies of flight attendants. The then-union for flight attendants, the Air Transport Division Transport Workers Union of America, AFL-CIO (ALSSA-TWU), framed their calls for licensing, namely its emphasis on safety credentialing, as a fundamental means of their achieving the kind of professional recognition that had proved so elusive (Barry 2007: 78).

⁶⁰ Deregulation of commercial aviation through the federally-mandated Airline Deregulation Act of 1978 dramatically shaped the industry, making it almost unrecognizable from its former glamorous self in the U.S. The deregulation of the airline industry served as an apt symbol of the shift towards neoliberal policies in the West (and eventually in Asia), more generally. Deregulation increased competition among airlines, loosened government oversight, and decreased fares (which, in turn, increased the number and diversity of passengers). Prior to deregulation, the federal Civil Aeronautics Board had regulated all domestic air transport like a public utility. Earlier, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 rolled back industry-wide hiring restrictions based on age, body, and gender—albeit unofficially—to discourage overt workplace discrimination (Barry 2007: 128).

Foremost in hindering their professional status, American flight attendants claimed, was the occupation's numerical domination by women, which only intensified the stereotypical "caring" (i.e., service) nature of the work itself. The first quality highlighted the latter, a characteristic deemed natural to women and, therefore, valid as a justification to undermine the value of flight attendants' labor. Barry makes this point clear: "While closely linked to nursing [e.g., Ellen Church and subsequent early stewardesses who were licensed nurses], airline passenger service belonged to an expanding range of 'hostess' jobs in travel and hospitality industries that generally lacked even an equivocal claim on professional status" (2007: 33). Similarly, institutional factors appeared to solidify this socially-constructed, hierarchical relationship between safety (and implicitly, security) with professionalism and service with subordination. The governing board of commercial aviation at the time, the Air Transport Association (ATA) flatly stated in 1957, "Historically the use of flight attendants aboard an aircraft has been prompted by service to passengers, thus, their justification has been economic and not for reasons of safety" (2007: 77). In 1962, the head of the ATA maintained this position by emphasizing that stewardesses were hired by airlines to "provide service and charm, not safety" (ibid).

Today, many Western flight attendants maintain this view. In this dissertation, I examine and critique this common perception. Underpinning this ideology is an adherence to a Cartesian epistemology that views the anthropocentric "subjective" feelings of the body (namely the senses, i.e., affect and emotions that service practices are built on) as separate and subordinate to the rational "objectivity" of the mind (i.e., enacted in supposed technical and safety prowess) (Alvares and Faruqi 2014). Moreover, this Cartesian framework helps to reify a masculinized domain of safety (oftentimes interchangeable with the notion of security), reproduced in fields like International Studies (see Chapter 3), as professional while re-establishing a service sphere heavily

reliant on bodily knowledge within a devalued, sphere of femininity and domesticity. Disability scholars remind us how the privileged subject within this ideology—the “founding subject” behind Foucault’s liberal rhetoric of individualism (Foucault 1984: 124-125 quoted in Goodley, Hughes, and Davis)—gives meaning to a so-called empty world. Accordingly, this founding subject rests on the idea of a Cartesian body-mind dualism fabricated to justify the European/Western “man of reason” as superior to other bodies deemed lesser. Included in this group are women, racialized others, queer people, and the “disabled” (ibid). The claims of the ALSSA-TWU reworked the gendered configuration of this idea (a Western man of reason to a *woman* of reason). But the result, I argue, has had a similarly detrimental effect outside the West: discursively banishing the body work behind the supposed nonmanual, rational technical proficiency of safety (and security) while implicitly relegating any expressions of bodily labor (not least in its supreme articulation, service) as antithetical to (feminist) “progress.” This is a hegemonic idiom of “feminist progress” among most flight attendant feminism in the West (although it also exists among more orthodox feminists in South Korea, too). Implicitly, this logic separates two ostensibly separate domains: mental aptitude through safety and security protocols as “professional” and menial work through the production of glamorous affects, emotions, and bodies as “unprofessional.”

To be clear, in reworking this earlier history, my aim is not to discount the hard-fought gains of flight attendant feminist activists in the West. Rightly, their struggles have critiqued the societal bias of subordinating women by representing expressions of female bodies closer to “nature, in contrast to man’s physiology, which supposedly frees [the latter] more completely to take up more socially valorized projects of [valorized] culture” (Rosaldo and Lamphere 1974: 73). Moreover, this universalizing framework has placed women in societal roles that typically occupy a lower order than that of men (ibid). Rather, I find fault with the universalizing and moralizing

tendency of this ideology. Despite the omnipresent fact of culturally attributed second-class status of women in every society, as Sherry Ortner reminds, specific ideologies, symbolizations, and social-structural arrangements pertaining to women vary widely from culture to culture (1974: 68). In a similar vein, we must examine how culturally-specific values attached to male and female activities were “in themselves ‘sources of power’—able to work either *against* women as sources of domination and oppression or *for* women as sources of empowerment and transformation” (Rosaldo quoted in Lugo 2008: 189). In this way, demonstrating female subordination as a cultural universal is less important than justifying this stance through specific ethnographic materials and examples (Rosaldo and Ortner quoted in Lugo 2008: 188). As I try to demonstrate in this study, scholars must “recognize other forms of gender-and culture-based subjectivities” while accepting that “others choose to conduct their lives separate from our particular vision of the future” (Ong 1988). In other words, we must cultivate “a serious appreciation of differences among women in the world—as products of different histories, expressions of different circumstances, and manifestations of differently structured desires” (Abu-Lughod 2002: 783). The story of flight attendants in Korean history illuminates this call for alternative ontologies of the body while articulating different forms of structural desires around popular service mobilities taking place in contemporary Asia.

Although mobility strategies of Korean women via travel (e.g., rural to urban migration) have permeated South Korea throughout its earlier colonial and modern periods, the figure of the flight attendant exemplifies the redoubling of these gendered endeavors. In her book, *Airborne Dreams: “Nisei” Stewardesses and Pan American World Airways* (2011), Christine Yano theorizes the symbolic role of the first Asian (American) flight attendants in the U.S. This cadre of then-second generation (*Nisei*) Japanese American flight attendants working for Pan American

World Airways (Pan Am)—among the first nonwhite “stewardesses” to work for any American airline at the time—represented personal and corporate aspirations in tension against a broader, historical geopolitical landscape. Among them were the racialized specter of World War II, Cold War confrontations in Asia, heated race relations in the U.S., a growing American and global popular consumer and leisure culture, and images of exoticized Asian women (2011: 179). Pan Am’s strategy to make Nisei stewardesses “both desirably exotic and believably familiar” was a corporate strategy that also conveniently paralleled the then-national aspirations of a postwar-U.S. for an emergent sense of globalism. For Yano, this earlier image of the Asian (American) flight attendant as a soft power instrument helped literally and symbolically authenticate Pan Am’s (and by proxy, the U.S.’s) expansive bid to dominate the international aviation market through an assimilation of acceptable difference. Caring, feminized Asian bodies and “professional” uniforms, in this regard, served as apt metaphors of this postwar-era American imperial aspiration (2011: 179). I argue that a similar process is occurring in contemporary South Korea but one that should be understood within the lens of a selective Korean flight attendant history.

Studying the arrival of commercial aviation in South Korea is not difficult. Extensive English and Korean language sources exist on this topic. For instance, the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum-sponsored anthology *Airlines of the Jet Age* (2011), notes that the beginning of the Jet Age, “if recognized as the first London-Johannesburg Comet 1 [airplane] service in 1952... was only a year before the end of the Korean War in 1953.”⁶¹ Local service, although limited mostly to the wealthy or military personnel, was initiated by Korean National

⁶¹ The Jet Age references the period in which commercial airplanes became equipped with jet turbine engines, which significantly shortened the distance of travel and time of flight. It also is a period, particularly the 1950s to 1960s, romanticized in popular media for the seeming glamour of its airline laborers (chiefly flight attendants) and passengers.

Airlines (KNA) in 1949. First established in 1946 after World War II in South Korea, KNA's first official passenger flight was two years later on October 30, 1948. The flight was from Seoul to Busan. Operating between 1947 to 1961 (with operations suspended between 1950-1952 during the Korean War), the privately-owned carrier became nationalized in 1961, eventually becoming present-day Korean Air Lines (K.A.L.). Due to government retrenchment in 1967, however, K.A.L later was turned over to a private corporation, the Hanjin Group, which has maintained ownership ever since. In its initial years, flights were limited to intercity travel, the most popular route being between Seoul and Busan. By 1964 the first international routes were established, first to Japan and later to Hong Kong (via Taipei), (then) Saigon, and Bangkok. Indicating the budding relationship between the U.S. and South Korea, passenger service, twice a week between Los Angeles (via Tokyo and Honolulu) and Seoul began in 1971 (Davies 2011: 275). Although travel restrictions on most civilian passengers were not lifted until the late 1980s, demands for air travel increased among a select group of affluent Koreans in the early 1970s.

In contrast to this larger history of commercial aviation in South Korea, piecing together a history of flight attendants in the country is less easy. Nearly every Korean language source (e.g., via national and university libraries, commercial bookstores, and museums) publishing “a history of flight attendants” either references the occupation’s storied history in the West (i.e., citing Ellen Church and commercial aviation’s birth in the U.S.) or not at all. Indeed, even a seemingly authoritative source—the official Korean language history of Korean Aviation in South Korea (Federation of Korea Aeronautics 2015)—makes little mention of the work of flight attendants save for one or two pictures (included as figures in this dissertation). This also is the case with the surprisingly extensive field of Korean language dissertations on Korean flight attendants. No accounts are anthropological, sociological, or historical. Rather, almost all are in the fields of

organizational management (e.g., focusing on institutional profits and procedures), psychology (e.g., focusing almost entirely on the “oppressiveness” of the concept of emotional labor, *kamjŏngnodong*), fashion (e.g., focusing on airline uniforms and advertising), and marketing (e.g., focusing on corporate branding).⁶² Ultimately, this dissertation draws on fragmented and disparate sources, chiefly limited accounts of the occupation in old Korean newspapers and the narratives of former flight attendants from the 1970s (see Chapter 5).

As a primary source, though scant, early representations of the flight attendant occupation in South Korea are revealing. Not unlike in the U.S., from its arrival in Japanese colonial Korea in the late 1930s, the flight attendant occupation as desirable feminized/female labor par excellence largely went uncontested. As it was in other national contexts, the figure of the flight attendant for its citizens benefitted from aviation’s symbolism as the future and “techno-fantasy,” which also encompassed “an emergent sense of then-internationalism in East Asia” (Yano 2011: 4). Yet, the occupation still existed within a vision of the future that equated masculinity with mechanical mastery (male pilots) and femininity with technology’s domestication (female flight attendants) (Barry 2007: 12).

⁶² Even official sources like commercial airlines and private training institutes (*hagwons*), as well as most of my interlocutors, were unfamiliar or uninterested with the job’s history in South Korea. Historiographies of the occupation in the country tended to recall stock histories and images of the job in the U.S. An extensive survey of Korean language dissertations on the flight attendant occupation through Korean academic online portals (Korea Education & Research Information Service (KERIS) and RISS) and the National Assembly Library of Korea also exhibited this pattern.



Figure 6: Early advertisement for Korean National Airlines (KNA) [1957]⁶³

While small, archival data about the history of Korean flight attendants generally supports this vision. In what appears to be the first publicized notice about the flight attendant occupation in then-colonial Korea, a *Chosun Ilbo* article dated January 27, 1931 describes the advantages of working as a “beautiful person” (*ryōin*), a.k.a. flight attendant (or “Air Girl,” *eyakkōl*, at the time) within the Seoul-based branch of a foreign, Japanese company: flying abroad, working with exotic goods like designer clothes, foreign liquor, and perfumes. In another example, in

⁶³ English translation of advertisement text: “KNA—Everybody, freely fly the fast and safe planes of South Korea’s national flag carrying airplanes.” Korean National Airlines.” Listed underneath the airplane are the travel times and names of regional cities in South Korea: “Gwangju; (unclear); Jeju (island): 2 hours; Gangneung: 1 hour.”

what appears to be the first publicized image of a Korean flight attendant (see Figure 7), a young Korean woman in a simple Korean traditional dress (*hanbok*) sits across from what appears to be two airline interviewers.⁶⁴ Tellingly, an emphasis on physical beauty, women, and the future again are highlighted. In a mix of Chinese characters and Korean, the title reads, “Who is Beautiful? Approximately 70 people applied to Air Girl Recruitment” (*lyō-in-ŭn e-ō-kkōl mo-chip-e ŭng-mo-cha 70 yō-myōng*).⁶⁵ Situated above an ad for Japanese medicine, the short article consists of only one paragraph. Describing a job recruitment event that had occurred a few days prior, the article reads:

A Gyeong-Seong (area in Seoul) branch of a Japanese airline transportation company” (*il-pon-han-kong-su-song-hoe-sa*) recently had been looking to hire “beautiful women” (*ryōin*), also known as “air girls (*ekkōl*), since July 10. Since then, the recruitment has finished. Approximately seventy beautiful single women applied downtown. Out of twelve, an interview was held. Only one person out of these beautiful women was selected. The (*aritttaunch'ōnyō*) beautiful woman who was hired out of this group is like a “first flower” (*hanttōlgiŭkkot*) in the Korean airline industry.

The article further describes the ornamental role of having “pretty girls” (*ōyōtpun*) serving coffee and hot coffee to airline passengers as a “cutting edge plan.” (*ch'ōndanjōk kyehoek*). Tellingly, the

⁶⁴ *Chosun Ilbo*, 11 July 1937.

⁶⁵ Still a major Korean newspaper today, the *Chosun Ilbo* (“Korea Daily”), was founded on March 5, 1920.

사람의 일대 오십상반지에 사는
김정호(金正浩)씨

기타이 우를소리가남으
 회안동(會安洞)
 에서 최근조선

咸北慶興

은총원(恩寵院)리우주(劉周)씨가 발견
 되어 식산일용기서(食山日用記書)로 경부
 국에 보내져 있었다.

이의조지메는 매우 교묘하게
 의뢰되었지만 모든사람들에게는 분
 별하여 연락할 필요가 없다. 드발행후
 시일이 경과되었을때와 상응한
 무덤과 차야. 영웅스배수(英雄斯倍水)
 안에서 백관(百官)의 위조지폐가 출
 현하였으니 이면이아라한다.

? 은人體

에集券=결·어예=
 名餘十七省(應)

시내작곡	청정(長谷川町)	에잇느일	보향공수	승화사경	성명(聖名)	(日本航)	空輸(航空)	社京城京
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영웅(英雄)은 장강(長江)과 한강(漢江)의 리우(麗人)이다.
 그는 가난하고 말더듬이인 '오야'라는 이름으로 불린다.
 그는 시골에서 자랐고 그의 아버지는 농부였다.
 그는 매우 교묘하고 그의 어머니는 그를 매우 사랑했다.
 그는 매우 교묘하고 그의 어머니는 그를 매우 사랑했다.

(*Chosun Ilbo* Newspaper, July 11, 1937)

After the rise of Korean commercial aviation in South Korea (post-Korean War (1950-1953)) this emphasis on physical beauty continued unabated with other desirable status markers in subsequent news accounts. For example, a small 1964 article in the *Chosun Ilbo* mentions an Ewha Womans University graduate and “doctor” obtaining a job at U.S.-based Northwest (now Delta) Airlines.⁶⁶ Curiously, it notes how “this [was] the first time a doctor has become a stewardess in the world.” Notwithstanding the questionable veracity of this statement, celebratory accounts like these further built the mythology of the flight attendant occupation in South Korea. Publications between the 1960s and 1990s added to this image, frequently witnessing a series of “success story” profiles on flight attendants. Short in length (usually only one or two paragraphs), these profiles highlighted the diversity of this elite corps of mostly young female laborers. For example, a 1967 profile describes a woman with “beautiful features” (*mimo*) triumphantly returning to her hometown of Seoul after nine “successful” years working for a foreign-based airline.⁶⁷ Another example in 1981 serves as one of the most noteworthy examples of the occupation’s longstanding emphasis on physical beauty in South Korea—this time used as a marker of relative national advanced status. Entitled “The Article about Women Abroad” (Oct. 25, 1981), the article reports on a National Assembly meeting in Kenya wherein politicians discussed the competence of then-government owned Kenyan Airway flight attendants. According to the article, among the most common complaints the assembly members had were about the airline crew’s appearance,

⁶⁶ Most Koreans regard Ewha Womans University as the top-ranking women’s university in South Korea.

⁶⁷ A 1968 article describes an interesting twist on this image of feminized beauty and docility, noting how a Korean stewardess was able to import illegal drugs and diamonds through her occupation (what became of her and whether she was arrested is not mentioned).

specifically their “ugliness.” A representative speaking in defense of the Kenyan flight attendants, however, insisted that flight attendants “must be judged by their capacities rather than by their appearance.” They added, “Should flight attendants commit suicide because they are ugly? Blaming them because they are ugly is to blame God, the Creator.” Although seemingly trivial, the Korean author of this article ends their piece by noting, “Our K.A.L. crews are all beauties, so [all Koreans] are happy because we do not need to be worried about these kinds of problems.”⁶⁸

There were exceptions to this stereotypical image, however. More recent popular media accounts acknowledged the difficult nature of the service occupation itself, as well as its hard working (albeit still “beautiful”) almost entirely female laborers. For example, an August 31, 1990 piece, “Serving the Sky for 7 years, Around the World 110 Times,” highlights the occupational feats of a then-Korean Airlines female purser (flight attendant supervisor).⁶⁹ A member of K.A.L. since 1983 after graduating with a degree in economics from Sungshin Women’s University, Oklyen Kim slowly had risen the ranks of her occupation. Increasingly responsible more for training new recruits than for traveling (she flew only three to four times a month), Kim stressed the vital role of flight attendants in caring for and comforting South Korea’s increasingly foreign-bound citizenry. Quoted in the article, she said, “I welcome passengers like they are guests in my home. I feel happy when Korean seniors who travel far to a country without any other guides feel

⁶⁸ Ironically, several years later on September 9, 1988 (*Chosun Ilbo*) a Korean flight attendant apparently did, in fact, commit suicide for this reason. According to the article, a K.A.L crew member committed suicide by hanging herself off a metal veranda structure. Earlier, the woman had received plastic surgery to make epicanthic folds on her eyes, which most Koreans deem more attractive. Deeply dissatisfied with the results, the article claims, the woman committed suicide months later. After scouring subsequent *Chosun Ilbo* articles within a span of two to three years before and after this news event, I was unable to find any follow up.

⁶⁹ *Chosun Ilbo* 1990.

comfortable because of me. Sometimes passengers even faint because they are so nervous. So, cabin crew should take care of people more than anything else.”

Despite a growing emphasis on the seeming white-collar nature of the occupation (i.e., the requirement of good although not elite academic credentials and the occupation’s promise of regular career advancement), many popular depictions at the time still highlighted the motif of Korean female flight attendants’ physical beauty as the ultimate metric of her professional and cosmopolitan status. Another article from the 1990s, “Stewardess Ms. Park Insook Spends Every Day Busily Doing Three Different Jobs,” again foregrounds the aesthetic prowess of this occupation, one that draws on a longstanding association between body capital and development:

Ms. Park Insook, a Northwestern Airlines (NWA) crew member, works very hard to develop herself. She works as a fashion model. She also is preparing to go to graduate school in translation while spending half of every month abroad. Her first job was a fashion model but she wanted more diverse experiences, so she became a flight attendant at NWA. Later, she also wanted to learn English translating, so she set her goal to go to graduate school. Although she tries hard at everything she does, these days she is nervous. Since she was young, her parents always had protected her. She was unaware of outside challenges and, of course, nobody ever informed her about what careers she could pursue as a woman. Consequently, Ms. Park believes women should be educated to learn many things through their careers, as well as constantly developing themselves.⁷⁰

⁷⁰ *Chosun Ilbo* 1990.

These earlier representations of the flight attendant and her occupation were both at odds and in line with earlier models of feminine behavior. On the one hand, the image of a “beautiful” ideal of female cosmopolitanism and domestication—what Barry terms the “stewardess mystique”—mitigated the potentially unsettling realities of flight attendants: “that they were gracious and attentive because they were paid to be and worked about as far removed physically from the [feminized and devalued] domestic realm as possible” (Barry 2007: 9). On the other hand, the dominant model of the feminized flight attendant in these Korean news accounts still were rooted in Confucian teachings of women as dutiful daughters, faithful wives, devoted mothers, and sometimes even warriors who ultimately returned to fulfill traditional roles (Hyun 2004: 32).

Despite a woman’s situation shifting depending on the political and social conditions of each era, throughout the Chosun period (1392-1897) women’s lives until the Japanese colonial period (1910-1945) were limited by the regulations of a patriarchal and hierarchical society. During this time, there was great social emphasis on training women to fulfill their roles within the patriarchal family. Most girls, except for upper-class women, were excluded from schools and formal education—unlike boys (Hyun 2004: 8-9). More recently, Korean women’s secondary position in the workforce was naturalized as employers (and even labor unions) expressed their hiring preferences according to predominant ideas about manhood and womanhood, often designing new technologies with the sex of the worker in mind (Morgan 2009: 11). In addition, the Korean state has been instrumental in promoting the modern configuration of the family (centered on a monogamous heterosexual couple and their offspring) to sustain the reproduction of labor (Baraclough and Faison 2009: 3).

The flight attendant occupation since its arrival has represented a contradiction to the historical notion of femininity and labor as antithetical in South Korea—or more specifically, the

conflict between ideal(ized) womanhood and manual labor haunting working-class women during the latter twentieth century (Baraclough and Faison 2009: 4). Not surprisingly, many aspiring, current, and former flight attendants face conflicting responses to their pursuing South Korea's growing service mobilities. These are both internal (among fellow flight attendants) and external (among Korean and Western, predominantly American, societies).⁷¹ In South Korea, female flight attendants are sexualized for their hyperfemininity and derided for their ambiguous class status. In the West, some feminist critiques (primarily among flight attendants but also some academics) suggest that they are victims of stubborn "Asian patriarchy" (Hochschild 2004: 130) and "behind" within the telos of advanced, gender-egalitarian countries.

In the next section, I explore the expansion of what I term service mobilities of contemporary South Korea. Doing so, I hope, will challenge stereotypes of service labor as fundamentally oppressive, even as I remain critical of the Korean cultural form's problematic manifestations around gender, sexuality, race and nation.⁷²

⁷¹ V. Spike Peterson offers a useful working definition for "women," "gender," and their relationship. I quote at length: "'Women' is typically a reference to embodied people—agents, role-players and victims of social (inter)action—who are 'sexed' as female... 'Gender' is conventionally a reference not to biological (sex) difference but to the socially constructed dichotomy of (culturally specific) masculinity and femininity that is naturalized (depoliticized) by its appropriation of 'biological' sex difference. What feminists insist on, and non-feminists tend to ignore, is that gender is not only about 'women'—but about men and masculinity—and gender-sensitive accounts are not only about 'adding women' to otherwise unaltered research questions. Moreover, the dichotomy is deployed not just to naturalize the oppression of women but the oppression of all that is associated with the 'the feminine' ('natives,' nature, and Others generally). In this sense, gender is also about racism, heterosexism, imperialism, classism, and nationalism" (Peterson 1995: 870).

⁷² Following Omi and Winant, I subscribe to the idea of race as "an unstable and 'decentered' complex of social meanings constantly being transformed by political struggle" (1994: 55). In the context of labor migration and the contemporary global racial order, Junaid Rana contends that the boundaries of race "lie between the body and performances that aim to restrict and subjugate" (2011: 26).

SERVICE MOBILITIES OF SOUTH KOREA

The flight attendant service mobilities presented in this study show another side of the substandard working conditions, unequal power relations, and complex emotional lives of the women who provide service work. It does so by highlighting on-the-ground responses to the realities of Hell Chosun that challenge scholarly representations of youth trajectories in Asia as largely “precarious” and bleak (Allison 2013; Chun and Han 2015). Rather than principally representing a repressive means (i.e., menial work within the service sectors) to a more liberatory end (e.g., a secure office-working job), the flight attendant occupation among my interlocutors represented a highly coveted end in itself—a quality of distinction nearly all other service jobs did not possess.

Admittedly a broad category, I define the service economy as a sector of the labor market defined by “pink collar” labor traditionally considered “women’s work.” The service economy also is characteristic of national growth in so-called low-income or developing countries (Cali, Ellis, and te Velde 2008).⁷³ Likewise, mobility as an analytic concept deserves a working understanding for the purposes of this chapter. Conventionally, social mobility can be understood as a concept intimately tied to class. Most stratified societies offer a certain degree of social

⁷³ Carla Freeman (2000) provides an effective definition of pink collar labor in her research on Caribbean informatic workers within the global economy. For her, pink collar denotes the feminization of work that is itself gendered, not only because it recruits women workers almost exclusively, but also because the work process itself is imbued with notions of appropriate femininity. This includes a quiet, responsible demeanor along with meticulous attention to detail, quickness and accuracy. Freeman also includes another important aspect within the making of pink collar work: “the lining of work and clothing—production and consumption” (2000: 3). By this, she foregrounds the centrality of the pink-collar worker’s appearance (feminine fashion) as it relates to the space they inhabit as workers (so-called professional settings) in conditioning women’s experience of the job, as well as their emergent identities (2000: 4).

mobility or the upward or downward change in one's social class position. Noel B. Salazar and Nina Glick Schiller (2013) describe academic interest in a more abstract conception of mobility in the social sciences (the so-called "mobility turn") as having emerged from a growing postmodern interest in analyzing intensified "flows" of capital, objects, and especially people through the same analytical lens. At the heart of such an endeavor is fostering new understandings of movement.⁷⁴

Echoing scholarship on the related concept of cosmopolitanism (Appiah 2010; Brown and Held 2010), Peter Adey writes how movement traditionally connoted non-normative and negative meanings, harkening an association with nomadic and rootless existence (Adey 2006: 77). Recent theories on physical and metaphoric movement, such as those operating within popular nodes of travel like commercial airports, reproduce this earlier theme. For example, Adey considers airports "placeless," abstract and without meaning (ibid). Similarly, Marc Auge (2009) goes further, describing airports as "non-places." In contrast, mobility also has been imagined as an emancipatory means to transgress power structures through material and metaphysical domains (Creswell 1997; Adey 2006: 88).

The service mobilities I describe in this chapter exist within this ambiguous space of identificatory rootlessness and liberatory hope. That this individual pathway also mirrored and defended a larger story of South Korea's global identity and relevance in the twenty-first century usually was incidental to my interlocutors. Yet, as I maintain in this dissertation, the combined effect of this service mobility maintenance on the part of mostly Korean women has helped to secure a broader Korean nationalist vision: South Korea coming to terms with its transformation

⁷⁴ There is a risk of a term like mobility (not unlike like globalization) losing its meaning in its vagueness. For example, Peter Adey (2006) aptly reminds, "practically everything is mobile." More fruitful, as I try to do in this dissertation, might be to focus on the contingent relations between movements and forms of sociality and stratification that emerge from these encounters.

as a hermit kingdom country once routinely disparaged for its unworldliness—typified by its notorious inhospitality to foreignness—to an aggressively “global(izing)” country.⁷⁵

Increasingly, across the world, the energy and matter of local environments are being redirected in a global ecology that requires smooth connections for the endless circulation of commodities (Fuller & Harley 2004: 105). As service-cum-care laborers, Korean flight attendants flatten difference (e.g., the diversity of domestic and global passengers) into manageable contours, reconfiguring geography (e.g., making familiar “place” in supposed non-places like airplane cabins and airports) according to the spatio-temporal rhythms and cross-modal standards of global capital (Adey 2006). In so doing, Korean flight attendants also facilitate numerous material and biological flows—and, equally important surveilling “inspections” (Lugo 2008)—while also being transformative of them (Gottdiener in Adey 2006). As I described in Chapter 1, the discourse of advanced country (*sonjin’guk*) aspiration continues to color Koreans’ representations of their national sense of self vis-à-vis the world (Kim 2011: ii). The fraught meaning over the flight attendant occupation distills and makes legible broader Korean apprehensions over its uncertain position between supposed advanced country (*sonjin’guk*) and backward country (*hujin’guk*) status. In this way, I suggest that service mobilities, as a potential (albeit problematic) vehicle for upward mobility makes an effective parallel (Moodie 2002: 246) with the peculiar national story of South Korea’s uncertain “place in the [global] sun” (Cumings 1997). In making this comparison,

⁷⁵ James Ferguson’s (2006) explication of “the globe” in “globalization” seems apt here. He writes how the globe in globalization is not simply a synonym for “the world.” For him, the world refers to a more encompassing categorical system where countries and geographical regions have their “places,” with a “place understood as both a location in space and a rank in a system of social categories. This can be explained in the expression “knowing your place,” what Ferguson terms, “a place in the world”—or what also resonates with Cumings’s apt expression, “Korea’s place in the sun” (1997).

the flight attendant occupation also emerges as a larger site for witnessing the gendered effects of South Korea's nationalist project. By making this claim, I do not argue that the figure of the flight attendant or its occupation is the only or even best symbol to understand the relationship between the production of cultural forms (e.g., service, security and safety) and national identity. Many other scholars (Koo 2001; Park 1997; Kim 1997) have addressed these concerns from the gendered perspectives of Korean and diasporic Korean laborers. Rather, I propose that these relationships and tensions are especially pronounced in the figure and occupation of the contemporary Korean flight attendant, making the latter an especially good mode of analytical critique.

Today, the service mobility phenomenon in South Korea should be understood from a broader global context of the "entrepreneurial ethos under the precarity of neoliberalism" (Freeman 2014: 2; Hardt, 1999, Hoffmann 2010). Whereas the international division of labor once sought cheap "manual workers" for producing light-industry consumer goods in the 1970s, more recent practices have targeted employees with higher education, language skills, and technological knowledge (Hoffmann 2010: 1). Lisa Hoffmann notes how this "celebration of talent" and quality (*suze* within the context of her fieldsite, China) is a worldwide phenomenon (2011: 2). Although different from a reformist, post-socialist, post-Mao modernization model (1979 to the present), South Korea shares an important similarity with that of China during the former's rapid industrialization (1970s to the present). Like China, with private wealth accumulation, new social and class identities began to emerge in South Korea, taking shape in the intersection of new work experiences, leisure pursuits, family histories, and policy shifts. Additionally, South Korea has not been immune to global competition for highly mobile capital and human resources, which has led to greater "place-wars" and an entrepreneurial ethos than in the past (Hoffmann 2010: 3).

But this talent (also referred to as skills in the global labor market and specs in South Korea, as explored in Chapter 1) is highly stratified, resulting in asymmetrical life chances and trajectories for those considered “more” or “less” talented. In the wake of late 1990s Korean neoliberal restructuration (i.e., neoliberal reforms after the 1997 IMF Crisis), a dearth of employment opportunities for both skill classes helped to create a “new poor.” Fresh from having graduated from university and adversely affected by both a collapsing post-IMF Crisis national economy and a resurgent conservative gender regime that endorsed gender discrimination in the job market, a younger generation of “frustrated, young, unmarried women” continues to acutely feel the effects of this new poor reality (Song 2015: 1). As a response, many women have chosen work in a range of irregular, part-time jobs notorious for their low pay and lack of job security. Although unique to different local contexts, Song notes that this troubling condition is part of a larger trend of youth unemployment across the globe, including in the U.S (ibid). In contrast, other mobility scholars (Freeman 2000; Freeman, Miller, and Yano 2013) are not as pessimistic. Writing about the politics of pain and pleasure (Shimizu 2007: 19) among Caribbean pink collar informatic workers, Carla Freeman describes the seeming contradiction of highly regimented and restrictive labor processes working in tandem with the pleasure these women derive from the professionalism of the job (e.g., modern and clean facilities and a measure of social respect) relative to other service or manual jobs with less favorable amenities (2000: 2). This is a condition my interlocutors also experienced, many of whom expressed a pronounced longing for the future, an elusive quality or mood driving many young women like themselves to “choose” the flight attendant occupation as the primary vehicle for their service mobility aspirations.

In the case of flight attendant occupation and the larger service industry it falls within, the production of emotional labor and their adherence to “feeling rules” remains central. Hochschild

originally theorized feeling rules as the ways a feeling, as a form of “pre-action, a script or a moral stance” interfaces with directing action (Hochschild 1983: 56). Yet, as she notes while citing Marcel Mauss’ explications on gift giving and social debt, the level of adherence to these rules also can signify one’s location on a social hierarchy between those who must follow the rules because of their subordinate position and those who possess the luxury not to:

[T]o have higher status is to have a stronger claim to rewards, including emotional rewards. It is also to have greater access to the means of enforcing claims. The deferential behavior of servants and women—the encouraging smiles, the attentive listening, the appreciative laughter, the comments of affirmation, admiration or concern—comes to seem normal, even built into personality rather than inherent in the kinds of exchange that *low-status* people commonly enter into. Yet the absence of smiling, of appreciative laughter, of statements of admiration or concern are thought attractive when understood as an expression of machismo. Complementarity is a common mask for inequality in what is presumed to be owing between people, both in display and in the deep acts that sustain it (1979: 84-85, my emphasis).

Thus, one’s social location within the spectrum of emotional exchange between giver and receiver oftentimes also indexes one’s broader position in a social hierarchy. Indeed, as Hochschild writes, even “the amount of interest people have in feeling rules and emotion work itself may tend to follow these social lines, as well” (1979: 57).



Figure 8: “The shepherding flight attendant”: a cartoon in a flight attendant memoir depicting submissiveness to an unruly male passenger⁷⁶

⁷⁶ The scene depicted shows the “shepherding” of a dissatisfied passenger over the seemingly trivial issue of an unavailable food option (Chung 2009). Korean to English translation:

Following this logic, that emotional labor codified through “superior” service was so central to the flight attendant occupation further seemed to reinforce Korean flight attendants’ acutely subordinate position in Korean society—despite the occupation’s ostensible glamour. The service mobilities described in this dissertation promised my interlocutors hope. But it also exercised draconian modes of discipline and control in its selection (i.e., hiring). Statistically, most aspiring flight attendants did not become flight attendants, many abandoning this goal after only one attempt.

[Left to right, Top to bottom]

양치기 승무원

The shepherding flight attendant

“(앗! 식사의 갯수를 잘못세었다...) ”

Oh dear! I set up the number of meals wrong...

손님, 스테이크 드시면 안될까요?

Passenger, might you possibly have steak?

비빔밥(sic)이 다 떨어져서...

We ran out of bibimbap [a Korean dish]...

제가 먹어봤는데요,

I ate some but,

스테이크가 훨씬 맛있어요.

The steak is much more delicious

얼마나 부드럽고 육즙이 풍부한지...

It’s so soft and the gravy is so rich...

주절주절...

불과 3 분전 상황!

The situation just 3 minutes before

손님,

Passengers,

스테이크가 다 떨어져서...

We ran out of steak...

솔직히 비빔밥이 정말 맛있어요

Actually, the bibimbap is really delicious

스테이크 별로예요.

The steak isn’t that good.

오늘 실린 고기가 좀

The meat on board is a bit

질기네요.

In the following vignette, I highlight how internal and external forms of inspecting who was deemed worthy of crossing the border from being a humble follower (i.e., an aspiring flight attendant) to successful leader (i.e., a current flight attendant) consistently played out during my fieldwork.

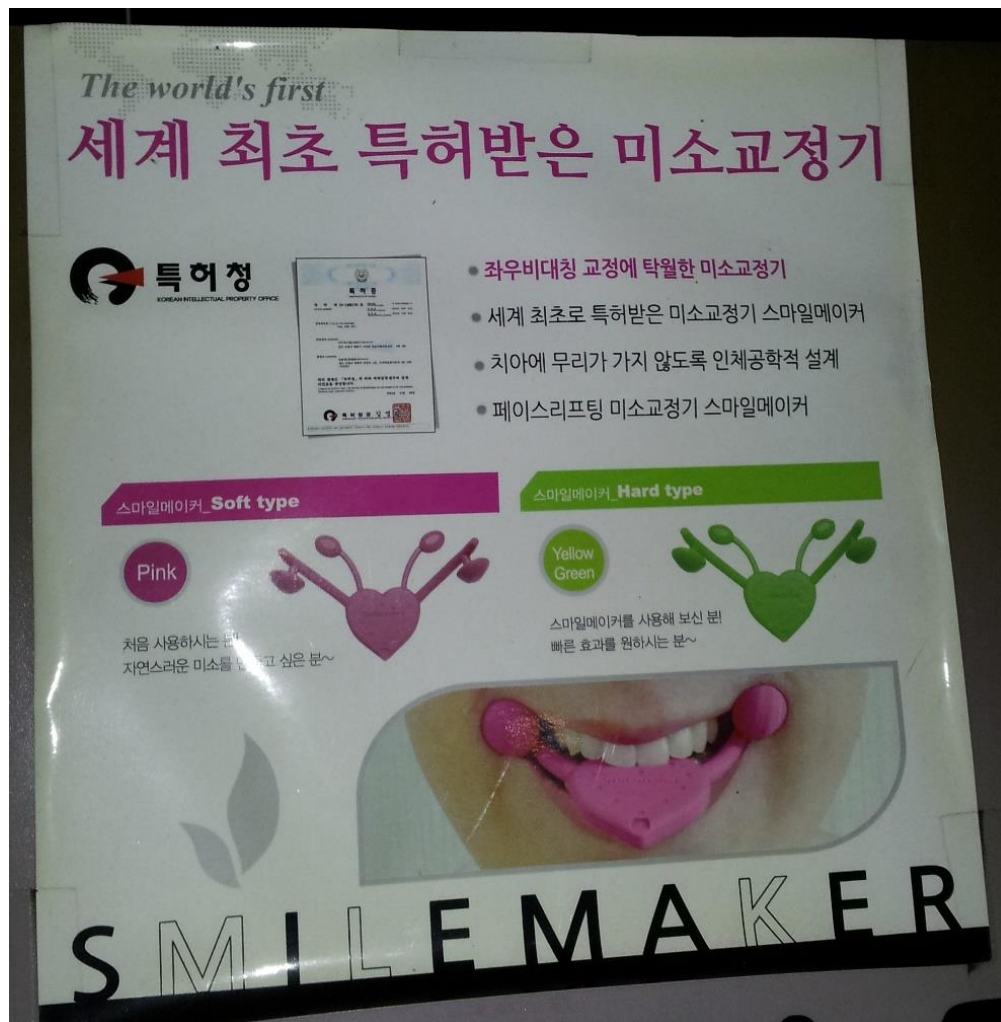


Figure 9: “The world’s first” “smilemaker” to help train workers in the service industry⁷⁷

Rattling on...

(능청~ = text near smiling flight attendant)
(Displaying guile)

(땀 질 땀 질 = text left of flight attendant’s head)
(Sweaty)

(찌릿찌릿!!! (text left of passenger’s head)
Tingling

SERVICE MOBILITIES (STUCK) IN TRANSIT

May 15, 2015, Conference room, Regal Airport Hotel, Hong Kong, Late morning

I was up next. Around me in this large conference room were approximately 200 other “aspiring” flight attendants for Dubai-based Emirates Airlines, West Asia’s largest commercial airline and the world’s “number one airline.”⁷⁸ Of the roughly two hundred applicants, I estimated that around a fourth were men. The rest were women. The smell of light perfume permeated the

(덜덜덜 = text left of flight attendant’s foot)
(Trembling)

모야! 쳇! (text right of passenger’s arms)
What is this! Pshaw!

할 수만 있다면, 농사를 짓고 싶다.
If I could I would like to build a farm.

비행기 안에서 야채도 키우고, 소도 키우고 싶다.
I also would like to grow vegetables in the cabin, as well as raise cows.

아~
Ah

하지만, 이곳은 풀도, 소도 자랄 수 없는
But in here we can’t even grow grass or cows

하늘 위의 섬!
An island in the sky! (Chung 2009).

⁷⁷ I discovered this prominently placed advertisement in front of a flight attendant private training institute entrance in one of the central downtown districts of Seoul.

⁷⁸ As I learned during my fieldwork, Koreans were among the most avid applicants to booming Gulf airlines in West Asia—so much so that many airlines no longer held their employment hiring fairs (Open Days, *Op’ūndei*) in South Korea. Doing so would mean hosting an event overtaken by thousands of Korean applicants, well over the average of Open Days (*Op’ūndei*) in other cities. Instead, in the past few years, Gulf airlines like Emirates have avoided hosting in South Korea altogether, trusting that most Korean aspiring flight attendants still would travel to whatever nearby city (sometimes as far as in Europe or the U.S.) just to apply. During my fieldwork, it appeared that most Korean aspiring flight attendants were willing to make this added investment.

room. All were Asian, many hailing from Hong Kong but also a sizeable contingent from South Korea. We were all there to attend an Emirates-organized “Cabin Crew Assessment Day,” a job fair-type event open to the public. Like other booming Arab Gulf airlines, Emirates regularly held these events (referred to simply as an “Open Day” (*Op’ūndei*) by aspiring flight attendants) multiple times a month in select major cities around the world.⁷⁹ Although everyone was made up and dressed well, there were subtle differences in fashion. As I learned from interlocutors during my fieldwork, each country had their own distinctive mark. Based on observations at a few other Open Days (*Op’ūndei*), including in Kuala Lumpur and Chicago, some of these generalizations appeared true, at least for the women. Across the board, men tended to look similar. Almost all were tall and dressed in dark-colored or black suits, nice dress shoes, white shirts, ties, and well-groomed hairstyles. The women, however, exhibited a far greater range of styles. Most of the Hong Kong female aspirants were above or over the minimum-average height (5’2” to 5’3”), wore modest black skirts, white blouses, and black dress shoes. Many had their hair neatly pinned up and their make-up seemed muted with flesh-tone colors that hardly stood out. Most of the female applicants who appeared Korean expressed more distinguishing styles. They wore red lipstick with matching pink, red, or fuchsia skirts. Although also placed in a standard bun like that of their Hong Kong counterparts, most of the Korean women’s hair was rolled tighter with less noticeably protruding stray hairs, giving the bun a more “polished” effect. Many of the Korean women also wore more ornate heels, instead of flat cornered shoes, perhaps to accent the colorful panache of the rest of their outfits.

⁷⁹ Emirates Airlines Website. Group Careers 2017.

Having decided to “apply” as a flight attendant on a whim—I originally was in Hong Kong for a brief sightseeing trip—I only had one suit on hand, a less than seemly beige, slightly oversized suit. All the other male applicants were dressed in black. Everyone told me how aside from appearing poised and personable, the only other thing that mattered was how “sharp” and clean-cut (*kkalkkūmhada*) one looked. This meant exhibiting a kind of “purity” throughout your body: clear skin, white teeth, freshly ironed clothes, and flawless make-up, among other physical requirements. More implicit was a clear expectation that one not sully strict gendered and sexualized expectations of squarely “feminine”-looking women and “masculine”-looking men.

We were all sitting on rows of handsome hotel chairs in a ballroom. In front of us were two ex-flight attendants. One was Juno, an older white European woman in what looked to be her sixties. The other was Olivia, a younger white Australian woman who appeared to be in her early forties. In a display reminiscent of the “good-cop/bad cop” routine, personable Olivia did most of the talking while sullen Juno sat quietly in one of the two small tables positioned in the front right side of the room. Far on the left side of the enormous conference room was another empty table where Olivia was to sit. Just prior, Olivia and Juno had shown us a promotional video introducing the wonders of Dubai and Emirates Airlines. It was the kind of advertising piece one might find from any high-end tourism agency. Set to punchy music, the video lasted only five minutes but included all the stereotypical highlights of Dubai as *the* world’s luxury destination: quick panning shots of the city-state’s spectacular skyscrapers and desert vistas, endless food and leisure activities, and young and attractive (mostly) white “expats” amid a panoply of “multicultural” (i.e., non-white) faces. Juxtaposed with these fantastic but familiar images was the logo, “Emirates,” first emblazoned on the airlines’ sleek and shiny Airbus A380 and Boeing 777-300ER planes, and later on the polished uniforms of its almost entirely female cabin crew. After the lights turned back on,

I could see several applicants chatting among themselves. Many reacted with smiles, conversing with one another with pronounced vim and vigor, “Such a dream.” “Can you believe it?” “It would be so nice to be there...” Soon after, Olivia interrupted the quiet chatter. We applicants were to sit quietly with our one-page applications, and head and body shot pictures. One by one, Juno would signal with a glance, finger, or spoken “next,” and another candidate would get up from their chair and approach her table. Slightly disheveled and seemingly disinterested, Juno would receive the handed documents, quickly inspect the smiling aspirant, sometimes ask a question, and finish. The applicant would say thank you and walk outside the conference room.

By the time I reached the front of the room, ready to receive my aesthetic inspection, I remained mindful of my emotions. Despite my calm demeanor, my mind was racing. “I’m not really trying to be a flight attendant. So, why do I feel so nervous?” I only could speculate that those around me felt the same. Among aspiring flight attendants, Juno possessed an almost mythic reputation. Above all, Juno cared about one thing: someone neat, tidy (*kkalkkūmhada*) and “attractive.” Rumor had it that she only cared if an applicant was not “too old” or “too ugly.” Against such stark “skill” criteria, the scene around me made sense. Seeing all the primping and preening of the mostly female aspirants—their constantly checking their reflections in hand mirrors, their practiced smiles, and, most poignantly, their visible oscillation between confidence and dread—made me wonder if I had stumbled upon a job interview or a beauty pageant.⁸⁰

⁸⁰ To be fair, in quieter moments with some of my interlocutors, some were equally as critical. This sentiment was most pronounced among those aspiring flight attendants who continued to experience rejection over a series of months to years. However, even within this group, opinions varied. Most agreed that the drastic standards for body, face, and dress were unreasonable, if not even “sexist.” However, most of my interlocutors were resigned to the fact that these standards were “just the way things were,” particularly for any service job in *South Korea* that even they believed “required pleasant and pretty faces.” Likewise, one core issue Asiana Airlines flight attendant union members had several years prior was the issue of wearing pants instead of skirts. Only a few interlocutors were openly hostile about these hiring standards, complaining that

Soon after, Juno requested applicants hand over their documents directly. I heard that this was a ruse for her to more carefully inspect an applicant's hands and nails. Anything short of immaculately manicured hands meant an easy excuse for rejection. This procedure went with the standard complexion test. While less extreme than those conducted by South Korea-based airlines (*kungnae hanggongsa*) where female applicants oftentimes are required to arrive and an interview "make-up free" to ensure only those with "flawless" skin are hired, Emirates' requirements were nearly as severe in their gendered inspections. Applicants had to meet the following: be at least twenty-one years old, have an "arm reach" of eighty-three inches (212 cm) "while standing on tiptoes," be a minimum height of 5 foot 2 inches (although anecdotally and by observation the actual requirement seemed taller), have no visible tattoos, and be physically fit. Beyond these physical attributes, the aspirants had to be fluent in English, possess at a minimum a high school diploma, and be able to "adapt to new people, new places and new situations."⁸¹

Finally, Juno signaled for me to approach. Impassive, Juno scarcely looked at me. She just asked when I graduated college. Later, other applicants told me that this was her way of determining my age. "2003," I replied. With the bulk of hired male flight attendants in their early to mid-twenties, I knew I probably was too old to be applying. But I was still curious. In retrospect, that I had prepared so little for this event made the experience easier for me than it had been for the rest of the hopefuls. Most had prepared for weeks, months, to sometimes years

they were "unfair" and altogether based on the subjective (oftentimes biased) opinion of a specific interviewer.

⁸¹ In recent years, these expectations have caught the attention of U.S. flight attendant unions who have argued that Arab Gulf (and Asian) airlines owe much of their success to "repugnant," "sexist," and homophobic policies.

for the opportunity. For example, at the Open Day (*Op'ūndei*) I met Ye Sŭl, one of the key interlocutors who first encouraged me to apply (for “research”). Ye Sŭl was a twenty-four-year old, “1.5 generation Korean” who had been aiming (but continually failing) to become an Emirates Airlines flight attendant over the past two years.

Born in South Korea but raised in Argentina, Ye Sŭl spoke fluent Korean and English and had been living in Seoul since returning to South Korea as a high school student from Buenos Aires. During her third year at a Korean university, she decided to drop out of college as an English major to focus entirely on her dream of becoming an Emirates Airlines flight attendant. Towards this aim, she attended numerous training institutes (*hagwons*) and study group sessions (*sŭt'ŏdi moim*) while also paying for the occasional private aspiring flight attendant consultant. In addition, she had been working as a waitress at a sports bar in Itaewon, Seoul's famous/notorious foreigner district.⁸² Like every other applicant, Ye Sŭl personally had paid for her own airplane ticket, accommodations in Hong Kong, and other costs related to her interview preparation (hair and makeup, dress, etc.). All said, an average fee for such a risky excursion—one that promised little to no guarantee of passing even the first round of the interview (there were four to five in total)—ranged between 300,000 to 600,000 won (276 to 552 USD), depending on airfare and lodging costs. While men also paid for their airfare and lodging, they saved significantly on not having to pay for hair, make-up, and assorted clothing, all of which cost up to a few hundred thousand won.

⁸² Notably, Itaewon recently has shaken its seedier reputation as a district surrounded by one of the U.S.' largest army bases in the country to a foreigner-friendly “foodie” and nightlife destination. Ironically, juxtaposed with this party image is Itaewon as the historic home of South Korea's largest Arab and Muslim population.

Outside the conference room in the lobby, applicants who had just finished like me stood around in the spacious lobby. All of them (nearly two hundred) watched in silence as Olivia slowly put up a list on the wall, approximately ten pages with twenty names per page. If one passed to the second round, their name was highlighted in bold orange. If one had failed, their name had no highlight. Slowly, I heard the screaming. One by one, I could tell who had been picked and who had been dropped. Many of those who had been selected had their hands in the air and hugged nearby friends or colleagues. Many of those who had not been selected openly cried. My name was not highlighted. After the initial sting of rejection, I asked myself questions. What was the appeal of this peculiar occupation, one that enticed so many young Koreans to sacrifice so much *before* even reaping the benefits of becoming a formal employee? Whether reading books on the subjects (training manuals and memoirs by ex-flight attendants), visiting the physical locations of flight attendant training institutes, or scouring on-line spaces of airlines, training institutes, and former flight attendant blogs, the metaphor of flight as embodied by flight attendants stood in for the unfulfilled yet hopeful dreams of a growing segment of South Korea's disillusioned young laborers. Exploring the limits of and stakes behind these representations and hopes is what I turn to next.

CONTESTED MEANINGS OVER SOUTH KOREA'S RISING SERVICE MOBILITIES

In 2011, American Airlines suggested holding a beauty contest to “celebrate flight attendants” by “finding the most attractive crew members.”⁸³ Flight attendants for the world's largest airline were asked to find and vote for the “best looking” male and female crew members

⁸³ NBC News 2011.

to appear as models in a photoshoot for the company. The Association of Professional Flight Attendants, the largest independent flight attendant union in the U.S. lambasted the event as “a ridiculous beauty contest.” The union’s leader, Laura Glading, an ex-flight attendant stated, “This campaign just transported us back fifty years to the days of girdles, weight-checks and single, female-only stewardesses having to quit when they were married, pregnant, or reached the ripe old age of thirty.” In the context of the U.S. Glading might have been correct. But even if she was, what was so intolerable about a beauty pageant? Sarah Banet-Weiser’s treatment of American beauty pageants in the 1990s is a fitting observation about the parallel experience of flight attendant interviews described above. Banet-Weiser refers to the former as a “site in which the meanings ascribed to individual and cultural identities [particularly around notions of national identity, femininity, and agency] are continually negotiated and often vehemently contested” (1999: 2). Similarly, we can understand the flight attendant occupation, especially its enormous popularity, in South Korea as both a reflection and producer of South Korea’s nationalist aspirations for global recognition.

The flight attendant occupation represents a complicated arrangement of claims and embodies a variety of nationalist expressions. Citing Banet-Weiser, the occupation can be seen as “a civic ritual, a place where a particular public can ‘tell stories to themselves about themselves,’ as well as a highly visible (and hence, political) performance of gender” where the “disciplinary practices that construct women as feminine are palpable, on display, and positioned as unproblematically desirable” (1999: 2, 3). Not unlike female beauty pageants—something “maligned, adored, and misunderstood” by the global public—the flight attendant occupation also serves as a gendered ritual for many Korean women (and increasingly a small group of men). Consequently, its supposedly backward hiring practices in (East and West) Asia need to be situated

within broader debates over the global and local, as both the symptom and enactment of the anxiety caused by the new vision of a globalizing social order (Banet-Weiser 1999: 21).

But as Glading's comment suggests, Banet-Weiser's view is of a scholarly minority. Moreover, it is telling that Glading uses a temporal reference (being transported fifty years back) to criticize the supposed regressiveness of having physical looks as a criteria of service labor. Following this logic, however, what might we make of other, "non-Western" regions of the world that "fail" on this count? Hochschild (1983) provides a possible response. Conducting research during the late 1970s at a time when the airline industry met increased competition and economic restructuring with the hiring of Asian *American* flight attendants, Hochschild quotes an anxious (presumably white) female American Delta Airlines flight attendant union member. According to this flight attendant, "[Pan Am] would love nothing better than to get rid of us and fill the plane with loving, submissive Japanese women. But for one thing, regulations prevent them from going to Japan, so they go for Japanese-American women. And there the joke's on Pan Am. Those women are so used to being browbeaten that they are a lot tougher than we are" (1983: 131). Here, the Asian/American women depicted in Hochschild's quote become similarly indicted as a regressive remnant of a less progressive Western past.

The idea of progress since the European Enlightenment remains an underlying explanation of the history of the world, and the rationale of almost all stage theories (Wallerstein 1997: 30). More specifically, the metaphors of evolution or of development were not merely attempts to describe; they were also incentives to prescribe," specifically to the non-West. (ibid). Among Western flight attendants, this prescription of Asia's "backwardness" occurred early on, as evidenced by Hochschild's quote. Yet, although bounded by and often fully aware of extant patriarchal barriers, this dissertation's interlocutors tried to make full use of their limited

opportunities to explore and expand the scope of their life and career trajectories. Significantly, these contemporary pursuits echo earlier pursuits of “modern womanhood” in South Korea since the late nineteenth century (Choi 2009: 182). Scholars (Freedman, Miller, and Yano 2013; Weinbaum, et al 2008) have written about earlier service mobility cases, namely the emergence of the “Modern Girl” throughout Asia (or “New Woman,” *Sin Yŏsŏng*, in colonial Korea) during the early twentieth century. Spurred by internal migrations (this time from rural to urban areas) that accompanied inchoate processes of industrialization, many women in then-growing pink collar work and leisure industries (retail, transportation, and beauty pageants) discovered new opportunities to transgress the boundaries of what was then deemed appropriate female behavior. On the other hand, as new, yet highly visible, feminized figures, these women also stood in as “cautionary tales of modernity,” vehicles for moral panics surrounding normative gender and class roles. Ironically, in the West, similar discourses deriding this mostly female occupied industry continue to frame it in terms of its victimhood—its members as “incipient or actual victims deprived of agency and entirely at the mercy of industrialization, patriarchy, consumerism, or capitalism” (Stabile 2013: xi).

Today, related discourses continue to appear, as Glading’s and Hochschild’s comments suggest. In the context of the West, divergent narratives converge on the figure of the contemporary Asian flight attendant and her defining feature, service. One narrative (held primarily by men) views the U.S.’ decline in service as reflecting the decline of a white, heterosexist, Western masculinity whose dominance was sustained, first, by the figure of the hyperfeminized flight attendant of the 1930s to 1950s and, later, that of the hypersexualized Western flight attendant of the 1960s to 1980s. Held by Western flight attendants like Glading, the second narrative views the idea of an overtly hyperfeminized, hypersexualized flight attendant as

reflecting notions of service rooted in female subjugation during an “unenlightened” American past.⁸⁴ The first narrative longs for the past to return while the second wants to bury it for good. Yet both seem to agree that this past incarnation continues to operate in Asia. Surprisingly, most of my interlocutors pursued their service mobilities aspirations fully cognizant of many of the negative stereotypes surrounding flight attendants. Although most were not aware of many (largely female) Americans’ negative perceptions of the occupation, my interlocutors said they did know that some Koreans, chiefly women with “real” professional jobs (*chǒnmun chigŏp*), looked down on them. Regardless, many of interlocutors were steadfast that the occupation was the best fit for their unique, “open-minded” personalities. For them, it was one of the only occupations in South Korea that promised their brand of aspirational adventure, self-actualization, and social recognition. Underpinning this service mobility aspiration was the cultivation and mastery of *sōbisŭ* and *sōbisŭ maindue*, culturally-specific idioms of “superior” service that I clarify in the next section.

SERVICE BY A DIFFERENT NAME

The concepts of “service” (*sōbisŭ*) and “service mind” (*sōbisŭ maindue*) emerged in South Korea around the early 1990s. This was concurrent with IMF reforms after 1997, as well as the state’s aggressive globalization bid to shed South Korea’s earlier war-torn, poverty ridden image into one that spotlighted its advanced, *sŏnjin’guk* global status. As mentioned in Chapter 1, these efforts were enacted by the state’s campaign of globalization (*segŭyehwa*), the relaxation of longstanding restrictions on civilian travel, and the hosting of the 1988 Olympics. The arrival of Western franchises like Starbucks in the country during the 1990s further stimulated the

⁸⁴ The list of critics was surprisingly diverse, including lay people to scholars alike. In the U.S., many of my fellow female academics shared this opinion, as well.

standardization of customer service and hospitality within commercial spaces.⁸⁵ Prior to this period, Korean service appeared to have been considered anything but superior. For example, after Korean Air’s safety rating was downgraded by the U.S. Federal Aviation Administration in 1999 (see Chapter 3), an outside audit was performed on the carrier’s operations. Although denounced by Korean Air officials as sensationalized and inaccurate, the audit detailed instances of crew insouciance like rudeness or “read[ing] newspapers throughout the flight... often with newspapers held up in such a way that if a warning light came on, it would not be noticed” (Gladwell 2008). Also reported were “bad morale, numerous procedural violations” and shipshod training procedures. Disturbed by this negative image of Korean Air’s service and safety standards, then-president Kim Dae-jung was compelled to comment, “The issue of Korean Air is not a matter of an individual company but a matter of the whole country... Our country’s credibility is at stake” (ibid).

Apparently, the image of unfriendly (and unsafe) planes had been around even earlier. For example, a *Chosun Ilbo* article dated nearly decades earlier in April 4, 1982, shows the title, “K.A.L. (Korean Air) Will Be Friendlier: Stewardesses Have Been Educated on Twenty Forms of Etiquette.”⁸⁶ The article begins with the striking revelation that up until that point, most Koreans referred to K.A.L. by the adjective, “unfriendly” (*pulch'injöl*)—as in unfriendly (*pulch'injörhan*) K.A.L.” As a result, the flagship carrier decided to improve its service under a company-led system referred to as the “service revolution.” “Great news for Koreans,” the

⁸⁵ Earlier understandings and configurations of (gendered) hospitality had existed in Korea, specifically within the labor of traditional “hostesses” (e.g., at male-catering coffee shops (*tabang*)) or female entertainers (*kisaeng*) of Korean nobility. Yet, the specific words, *sōbisū* and *sōbisū maindue*—and their accompanying contemporary meanings—likely were not present in South Korea prior to the 1990s.

⁸⁶ *Chosun Ilbo* 1982.

Korean article points out. Among changes ushered in by the so-called service revolution were: educating crew members about better service (*söbisü maindu*): having flight attendants “re-learn” how to bow to and maintain conversations with passengers more than once, offering only traditional Korean foods like *kimbap*, *toenjangguk*, and *kkorigomt'ang* to first class passengers, starting a toll-free customer service line for passengers, and alerting passengers two hours prior about their flight status.

That these reforms supposedly happened as early as in the 1980s but had not been recognized in the 1999 outside audit report suggests that either these standards were not upheld, that outside reports were inaccurate, or a combination of both. Either way, it appears that the perception of Korean air carriers practicing superior service, both by Koreans and by non-Koreans, took shape largely after the 1990s, particularly after the IMF Crisis of 1997. Outside media reports strengthen this assumption, a 2002 New York Times piece stating in its headline, “New Standards Mean Korean Air Coming Off Many ‘Shun’ Lists.”⁸⁷ That year, Korean Air hired retired Delta Air Lines vice president David Greenberg as an outside consultant (and later executive vice president of operations for five year) to “rescue... the airline from international disgrace” (ibid). Among his reforms were to “[not] change the Korean culture [but rather to] figure... out a way to present information that’s compatible with [Korean] culture.” Although his primary focus was on improving the reputed “unsafe” standards of Korean Air at the time, his changes also included “rigorous” new training and testing standards. Additionally, under his influence, a new, more “democratic” cabin “culture” basing promotions and transfers in the company’s ranks on merit rather than connections and friendships was implemented. Outside reports claim this imported expertise was integral to Korean Air’s now soaring international

⁸⁷ Kirk 2002.

reputation and finances.⁸⁸ Although service has “improved,” the meaning and forms of these supposed Western-infused democratic reforms remain decidedly local.

Sōbisū is a loan word of “service” in English. During my fieldwork it was used interchangeably with the words *sōbisū maindeu*, the combination of two words, “service” and “mind” in English. *Sōbisū* in Korean conforms to standard understandings of service, “the occupation or function of serving;” “employment as a servant”; or “contribution to the welfare of others.” In the context of South Korea, according to the National Institute of Korean Language, *sōbisū* is described as “making another person feel good via friendliness and sincere treatment.” The related concept of *sōbisū maindeu* is a regulation of feeling to engender a positive feeling in another. In this way, *sōbisū maindeu* represents the means through which a service worker can provide good *sōbisū*. As such, *sōbisū maindeu* represents a conceptual translation of Hochschild’s “emotional labor” or labor that requires one to “induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others”—notably the sense of being cared for and safe. (1983:7). However, embedded within the meaning of both words is a distinctly Korean understanding.

During an interview, Mina, an experienced twenty-eight-year old flight attendant and employee trainer for Korean Air, elaborated on the meaning of service (*sōbisū*) through its imagined contrast with a Western (*Sōyang*) other. Appearing youthful in the late twenties, Mina’s style was subtle yet distinctive: clear complexion, well-groomed hair, manicured hands, and equally sharp attire. When asked to describe the difference in service standards between South Korean flight attendants vis-à-vis non-South Korean ones, she responded:

⁸⁸ Korean Air was a subsidiary of now once successful (not bankrupt) integrated logistics and container transport company, Hanjin Shipping Co., Ltd, one of the world’s top container carriers.

Westerners probably think flight attendants don't require the skills of an "elite" (*ellit'ŭ*) person because it's just a simple service job. But in Korea being a flight attendant is popular, so all of them are young, pretty, thin, and college graduates. In the West, you know, there aren't any pretty flight attendants. There are a lot of old flight attendants, fat flight attendants. It's a job almost anyone can get—even without a college degree. But in Korea, because the job has become so much more popular and the competition for it keeps getting worse, the standards of service (*sŏbisŭ*) to become a flight attendant in Korea keep getting higher.⁸⁹

Her response was unremarkable. When describing the service standards of Korean flight attendants, nearly all my interlocutors made an implicit contrast with the "terrible" standards of service in the West. Against such a negative foil, my interlocutors elevated their own status. At times, indirectly or directly, this elevation also took on a palpably nationalist tone. For example, during our conversations, Mina made consistent reference to how the "superior" service (*sŏbisŭ*) standards of South Korea (not only within the flight attendant occupation but almost all hospitality industries in the country) indexed something larger. For her (as with many other flight attendant and non-flight attendant Korean interlocutors I spoke with) it also spoke to South

⁸⁹ Notwithstanding the problematic nature of Mina's somewhat "lookist" comments, her assessment of the lower educational requirements of certain Western airlines is not unfounded. For example, American Airlines requires only a minimum of a high school diploma or GED equivalent. The same goes for popular airlines in the Arab Gulf like Emirates. In contrast, most South Korea-based airlines, especially major carriers like Korean Air and Asiana Airlines, require at a minimum a college degree (although I did hear of occasional exceptions being made for select applicants who were deemed to possess exceptional service mind, *sŏbisŭ maindu*).

Korea progressively outpacing even the U.S. on certain basic features of advanced country (*sŏnjin'guk*) status, chiefly hospitality and customer service. But these praiseworthy comments oftentimes collapsed under the weight of reconsideration. For example, when discussing other domestic issues like education or employment, Mina just as easily bemoaned how “undeveloped” (*kaebaltoeji anŭn*) South Korea still was—particularly in terms of social issues like gender inequality and educational standards. In this way, her ongoing negotiations with the value of her personal and professional identity seemed to mirror South Korea’s own attempt at circumventing its own earlier identification with cultural, economic, and political coarseness.

Mina’s valorization of her position takes on added complexity considering local stereotypes. In South Korea, despite its generally favorable image, the flight attendant occupation is not without controversy. Although many young Korean women covet the occupation, women of a more privileged academic and/or economic background generally disparage the job. Time and again, during my fieldwork, white collar professional women (including several female Korean scholars) told me how the job was “3-D” (dirty, dangerous, and demeaning). In these instances, responding to these women I often defended the occupation’s greatest incentive, unlimited travel. Most, however, reacted by saying that they still could travel on their own (albeit less frequently) with the greatest reward not having to be subservient to (i.e., serving) passengers.⁹⁰ Consequently, the majority said they had no interest in the occupation, characterizing it instead as short-lived and demeaning.⁹¹ Another discourse about the occupation

⁹⁰ Most Korean *American* women I met had this disparaging opinion, as well

⁹¹ In one of the most negative examples I encountered, a Korean woman I befriended in her late twenties framed any Korean (woman or man) seeking to become a flight attendant as having “low dreams.” Tall, thin, and attractive, she confidently claimed that many people had told her she had more than enough “beauty” to become a flight attendant. Instead, she said she chose to

is among mostly Korean men who imagine flight attendants as the epitome of wholesome femininity or the ideal woman to marry. The other side of this perception (not unlike those possessed by the Western men introduced earlier) is the highly sexualized trope of the stewardess as ultimate erotic fantasy. Finally, the last discourse about the occupation is one held by my interlocutors, largely women, usually from more modest economic means and academic credentials. Most of them already had been working in the service field for years (mall, restaurants, hostels) and wanted a “promotion.” Becoming a flight attendant, in this respect, was less a means to an end than a highly sought-after end in itself. Eunjung, the twenty-six-year-old aspiring flight attendant with the colorful vocabulary I introduced in Chapter 1 spoke to this idea. A graduate of a low-tier, two-year technical college, she told me how she initially believed she could not become a flight attendant. For her, it was something only “important people” did: “It has a very elite feeling. In Korea if you say, ‘flight attendant,’ everyone says ‘Wow!’ It has a very good image.”⁹² For Eunjung, the occupation denoted a globe-trotting, polished professional who wined and dined with the world’s rich and famous.⁹³ That the occupation also guaranteed

become a “real” professional instead. When I met her in South Korea she had been working as a manager at a prominent German-based finance company.

⁹² As was customary among most of my aspiring, current, and former flight attendant interlocutors, most had both Korean and English names. Curiously, unlike their Korean names, many already had or recently had chosen their English name. At times the “fashionable” nature of this name choosing became comical. For instance, Eunjung, originally had chosen the English name Brenda. Throughout our meetings, she would change her name, sometimes as often as once a week. At one point, after deciding that my name also sounded appealing, she decided to call herself “Alex.” These were practices largely unquestioned among the other aspiring Korean flight attendant members. Many did the same, oftentimes asking me what English names “sounded the best” or “most sophisticated.” Additionally, some of my Korean interlocutors preferred using their (given and chosen) English names over their Korean ones, a sign of what I started to interpret as a form of additional acquired class status. In these cases, I have followed this convention, albeit by using pseudonyms.

⁹³ In one of my ethnographic vignettes in Chapter 4, I illustrate how this perception was not entirely untrue.

relatively steady employment and attractive fringe benefits within South Korea's gloomy economy propelled it from any other lowly "service" job to something unique. Indeed, although she was not religious, Eunjung likened serving others to a calling. Becoming a flight attendant, she explained, was the culmination of her natural disposition to help humanity.⁹⁴ But Eunjung's ambitions, not unlike those of so many others I saw at the Emirates Airlines Open Day in Hong Kong, generated decidedly unresolved rewards. Sadly, by the time I had left the field in 2015, she still had not succeeded in passing a flight attendant interview, even after nearly one and a half years of preparing.⁹⁵

Understanding the perspective of hiring employers helps to elucidate why so many like Eunjung encountered so much rejection. During an interview Mina, the experienced Korean Air employee trainer, explained to me what airline personnel like herself looked for when hiring. In an about face from earlier stereotypes of flight attendants centering almost solely on the latter's physical "beauty," Mina chronicled the added burden of another abstract and abstruse requirement aspiring flight attendants supposedly were required to meet: "Let's say there's a job applicant. She says she wants to be a flight attendant 'just to look pretty and wear a fancy uniform.' But she doesn't fully grasp the true nature of service mind (*söbisü maindu*)," Mina

⁹⁴ Her sentiments were not groundless. On top of leading a study session multiple times a week, she also worked multiple part-time jobs throughout Seoul. Moreover, her usually sardonic personality masked a profoundly sweet and accommodating person inside. At social get-togethers with other study group (*süt'ödi moim*) members, for example, Eunjung always would be the one first taking orders, pouring classes, and asking if everyone was "okay." Not surprisingly, her generosity also made her a reliable key interlocutor during my research.

⁹⁵ I have since lost touch with Eunjung. I only can speculate if she ever was able to fulfill her dream of being hired by a commercial airline.

explained. “So even if she’s tall and pretty, if she doesn’t have service mind (*sōbisŭ maindu*), she’ll fail—and she won’t even know it.”

Another eight-year veteran flight attendant for Asiana Airlines, South Korea’s other largest and prestigious carrier, Minjeong, expressed a similar concern for the nuances of service mind (*sōbisŭ maindu*): “The service mentality is the most important part of a good flight attendant. Some people just don’t have it in them. But we can easily spot applicants who don’t really care about the service aspect, and who are only applying because they were told they were pretty, or something.” These sorts of assertions about the abstract yet authentic quality of service mind (*sōbisŭ maindu*) as something internal, innate, and easy to detect (to the trained, scrutinizing eye—like that of Minjeong’s) are revealing. First, they deflect critics who demean flight attendant labor (and by implication all service work in general) as low-grade and simple. Additionally, such a restricted definition of service mind (*sōbisŭ maindu*) also elevates the skill into something exclusive, elite, and within the realm of the professional.

At the same time, Mina’s comments later in our conversation betrayed her earlier, loftier portrayal of service mind (*sōbisŭ maindu*), illustrating the tenuous hold she and other flight attendants seemed to have on the perceived value of such a skill—and by implication, her own fraught occupation. It happened after she re-emphasized the centrality of appearance within service mind (*sōbisŭ maindu*):

I think it’s a cultural difference but by nature Koreans care a lot about appearances. One’s appearance and attire says everything about a person. “*Oshi nalgaeda*,” you know that

expression, right? ⁹⁶ So, in important situations, we think it's just *basic* etiquette. Like at my job, when we meet a guest or passenger, our company expects the minimum level of courtesy [from their employees], which means having a nice appearance, a nice "image". This doesn't mean we have to all be pretty, just sharp (*kkalkkūmhada*), sleek, and proper, someone who follows etiquette. So, with that if you also add a smile when you give service, then the person receiving it feels good too. That's why we stress always smiling. It's not about having a certain body shape or being pretty that we focus on, you know.

Here Mina's comment, particularly her stress on "basic," highlights the unmarked yet essential quality embedded within the cultural idiom of service mind (*sōbisū maindu*). The service mind (*sōbisū maindu*) required to "make someone feel good" when "you give service" is premised on particularly disciplined (clean-cut, *kkalkkūmhan*) body, one Mina equated with basic manners of social interaction. Jong-hwa, a thirty-four-year-old former flight attendant for Emirates Airlines confirmed this point during an interview. Upon hearing my question as to the role of looks within service mind (*sōbisū maindu*), she replied matter-of-factly, "Obviously, that goes without saying. That's just a *basic* requirement. Everyone knows that." Indeed, during my fieldwork, I never met an aspiring, current, or former flight attendant who did not agree with this view—even if, sometimes, begrudgingly so.⁹⁷

⁹⁶ *Oshi nalgaeda* is a common Korean expression meaning "Your clothes are your wings." The English equivalent is "clothes make the (hu)man," connoting a person's projected social status through the clothes they wear.

⁹⁷ In another example, another interlocutor—this time, Dean, a male Korean current flight attendant for low-cost Vietnam-based carrier, VietJet Air—told me, "I once had a flight attendant recruiter tell me, 'this is your meal ticket' while pointing at his face.

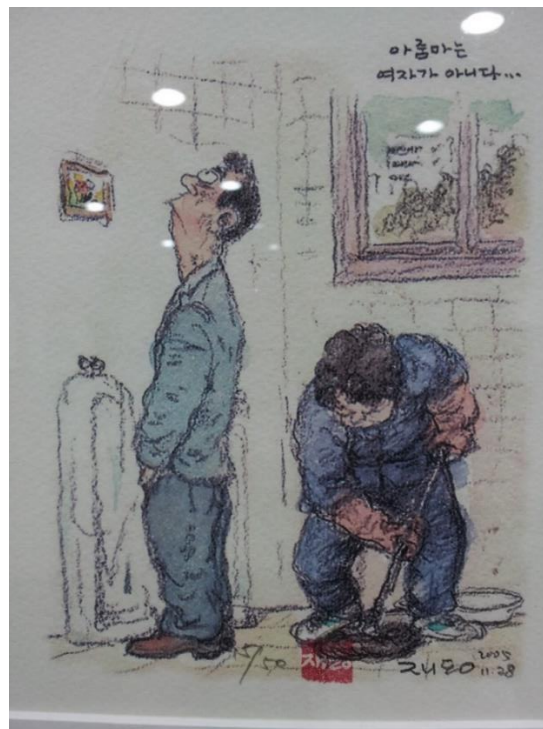
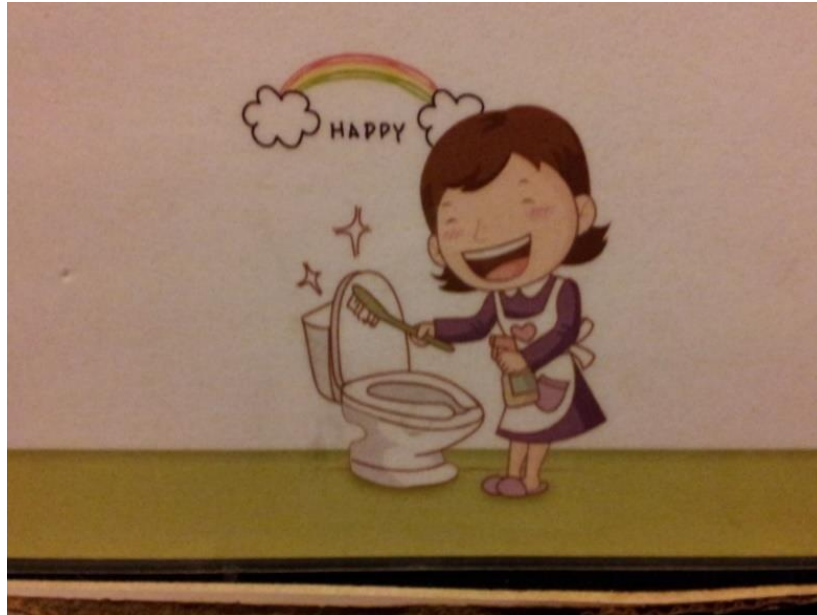


Figure 10: Not uncommon depictions of gendered labor in contemporary South Korea
(location: male Seoul city bathrooms)⁹⁸

⁹⁸ English to Korean translation: “Middle-aged women are not women.”

CONCLUSION

While critical of the “lookist” ideologies at play within a similarly body-centered industry, modeling, in the West, scholars like Ashley Mears (2011) provides perspective on the practices I describe. Mears writes, “As a labor market, modeling is prototypical of precarious work in the new economy, with its rising importance of soft skills. Classifying people into looks happens to all of us all of the time. We all do aesthetic work and are judged for our performances, but with less transparency than in modeling work” (2011: 253). Would such a view be overly generous of a flight attendant occupation that continues to rely on the reinscription of patriarchal norms and capitalist aspirations that are expressed aesthetically through the disciplining of “beautiful,” clean-cut bodies? (Kang 2014) Perhaps. But it also draws attention to the ways in which certain marginalized groups (either by gender or class standing) attempt to carve a level of dignity and possible upward mobility within larger structural forces so often stacked against them.

Within the context of South Korea, many of my interlocutors stressed that the standard path towards standard upward mobility, namely a 9-to-5 corporate job backed by elite academic credentials and family background, was becoming futile. Consequently, they belabored their pragmatism becoming/being a flight attendant as much a means *towards* success as a meaningful form of success in of itself. My interlocutors referenced South Korea’s “hellish” condition—its centerpiece being widespread job insecurity across all sectors—as evidence of their supposedly more practical, even more enlightened outlook. They figured, why not enjoy the benefits of a “world-class” job, however physically and emotionally taxing (and socially fraught), that

promised many of the same if not better rewards granted regular workers: adequate to impressive pay and benefits, a measure of real prestige, and most admirable, endless travel. In this respect, we might view their service mobility strategies as the latest example of how marginal youth (in this case ambiguously classed South Korean flight attendants) creatively have responded to the precarious effects of late capitalism. In transferring their human capital of emotional labor and body management mastery, they were able to escape—however constrained or fleeting—the confinements of their earlier subordinate status (Zhen 2001).

CHAPTER 3: SECURITY NARRATIVES: SERVING TO SECURE SELF AND NATION

Following scholarly insights by Jeffrey T. Martin (2006) and John T. Hamilton (2013), this chapter questions the classificatory distinction between service and safety/security. Interrogating this typological separation, I argue, evinces how a conceptual formulation that helped female flight attendants in the West garner greater social and occupational respect—heralding their role as “safety professionals” rather than “service workers”—works unevenly in South Korea. More problematically, defining a hierarchical relationship between discrete categories of service, safety, and security diminish the invisible security labor of flight attendants while obscuring the performative nature of more familiar forms of security work (e.g., policing). Ultimately, considering Korean flight attendants’ in-flight service as security labor is a necessary corrective to popular narratives that diminish the full scope of this historical form of gendered service.

SECURE UNDERSTANDINGS OF SECURITY

August 16, 2015. United Airlines flight from Incheon, South Korea bound for Los Angeles, California. 3,000 feet somewhere over San Francisco International Airport

“Thump... thump!” The sound echoed behind me as a full flight of passengers and I hurled through the sky. This was not your usual approach and landing. Racing towards the ground, the Boeing 747 I was riding furiously shook as it continued to drop altitude. Heavy cloud cover over this famously foggy city further intensified the turbulence of the flight’s final approach. After twisting my neck far enough to the left I finally could identify the source of the

sound. Splayed on the floor was the hefty body of what looked like a man who had fainted. Positioned next to him on their knees was a tall, heavy-set, white flight attendant, likely in her fifties, doing her best to resuscitate the unresponsive man. She was providing what I later would learn is called a precordial thump: striking the middle of an unconscious passenger's sternum with the bottom portion of one's fist. But the passenger still did not respond. Outside, roaring against such a rapid descent, the engines now sounded like they might explode. No soft landings here. Within only a minute or two we dropped thousands of feet. My ears popped as we dived towards the runway.

“Boom!” The plane's back wheels violently hit the tarmac as the whoosh of air pressure against the breaks released a final, deafening rumble. We were now on safe ground but the atmosphere was no less intense. Emergency medical responders rushed from both the front and back entrances of the plane. There was some commotion among the paramedics, other flight attendants, and now the captain who emerged from the cockpit over how to proceed. I recall thinking how rare it was to see the captain of a flight, except during emergencies. After nearly an hour, the flight attendant who so valiantly tried to save a passenger's life emerged from the galley. It was the first time I saw her face. Sweating, disheveled, and visibly exhausted, she exhibited a sense of grit and professionalism I still remember today. The captain announced that although we had made an emergency landing in San Francisco, we would take off again for our scheduled destination, Los Angeles. During the short, one-hour flight from Northern to Southern California, even more impressive was the same flight attendant. Only moments earlier, she had been, literally, fighting life and death to secure the safety of a passenger. By the time we were back in the air, however, she was immediately serving passengers on the plane. Ultimately, I never knew whether the male passenger had survived. But witnessing in such dramatic fashion

the safety and security skills of an American airlines' flight attendant made me reflect on the "other" skill that defined the flight attendant profession: safety (and by implication, security).

For the average passenger, the actions of the United Airlines female flight attendant I describe fall squarely within a flight attendant's other occupational description *apart from* service: safety (and security). Although encompassing a multitude of nonspecific tasks, including greeting and serving passengers, defusing passenger complaints, enforcing in-flight safety and security protocols, cleaning and maintaining the cabin during flight, and acting as an intermediary between flight captains and passengers, the flight attendant occupation remains defined by its responsibility to provide service *and* safety.⁹⁹ If care is defined as "watchful attention" or a "suffering of mind" mixed with "uncertainty, apprehension, and responsibility," it becomes the chief means of (or commodified skill for) obtaining commercial aviation's primary aim: passengers' safety.

But posing a clear contrast between service and safety (as commercial aviation, the public, and much scholarship are apt to do) can be artificial and obfuscating.¹⁰⁰ Defining these modes of gendered and classed labor—service (and security) work—as distinct elides specific historical, political, and cultural factors behind their formations. This chapter attempts to disrupt familiar categorical distinctions between service, safety and security by building on a formulation of security posed by Hamilton (2013). Following Hamilton, security is etymologically derived from the word *se-cura*, ("se" meaning without and "cura" meaning

⁹⁹ Here, I present safety, or "the condition of being safe from undergoing or causing hurt, injury, or loss," as subsumed under the larger category of security.

¹⁰⁰ Nearly all the dozens of Korean dissertations on flight attendants I found at the National Assembly Library, a repository for humanities and social science scholarship, also had this tendency.

“care”).¹⁰¹ In this respect, security specifies the condition of being “free from care,” a type of gendered labor generally devalued by popular discourse. Envisioning security in this way enables us to recast the in-flight labor of Korean flight attendants—more commonly associated with the feminized field of “emotional” (Hochschild 1983), “affective” (Hardt 1999), “domestic” (Parrenas 2015), “intimate” (Parrenas 2010) or “care” (Rodriquez 2014) labor—as a form of commodified security labor.

Conversely, as I elaborate on in this chapter, more common understandings of security within commercial aviation should be viewed as a kind of performative service (or “security theater”). It is performative (Bial and Brady 2007: 145, Butler 1998, Austin 1962) in the sense that it *does* something as an embodied “utterance,” constituting rather than merely reflecting a reality to an audience. Although enacted differently, service and security as performance fulfill similar functions: both secure the ontological security (Giddens 1991)—subtly via in-flight service and overtly via security inspections—of an airlines’ passenger. Additionally, both aid the status of the airline (and by proxy the country from which it derives) as key sites for the constitution of idealized modern social imaginaries (Jasanoff and Kim 2015), chiefly the aesthetic, technological, and even moral prowess and progress of a nation personified by its “modern” machinery (“beautiful” airports, airplane, and flight attendants).

Hence, upholding a strict division between service and security can impose an implicit and uncompromising barometer (Kwon 2005: 277) by which, in the case of my research subjects, non-Western, Asian workers are (ill-)defined and (de)valued: either as providing “good” service

¹⁰¹ My thanks to Jeffrey T. Martin for first introducing me to this novel theoretical approach to security.

at the cost of “good” safety (and security), or the opposite.¹⁰² These are securing acts of inspection that try to contain and explain unsettling contradictions inherent to the flight attendant occupation, particularly in Asia. During my fieldwork, the people I met, both Korean and non-Korean, tended to praise Asian airlines’ “superior” service more often than the Western airlines’ “superior” safety. People I met tended to mention the latter point of praise only after being asked if there were any redeeming qualities of Western airlines whose service standards they deemed indisputably in decline (Gerchick 2013). From the perspective of the U.S., highlighting the supposedly superior service of Asian airlines couches broader gendered grievances over progressive social movements in the U.S. that enabled flight attendants to gain greater power on the job within the innocuous, culturally essentializing language of good or bad service. From the perspective of South Korea, highlighting Korean airlines’ superior service (at the expense of its security) exposes similar societal unease over and means of inspecting changing gender roles and greater female empowerment in a globalizing South Korea. Conversely, expressing concerns over the “inadequate” safety standards of Korean airlines also echoes longstanding societal and geopolitical security concerns in the region. On a global stage, the normalization of this framework, service as distinct from safety (and security), has aided in figuratively cleansing the literal and figurative role of the flight attendant in inspecting the potentially “dirty” threat of difference—a theme I expand in greater detail in the next chapter (Chapter 4). In the following vignette, I illustrate how the conceptual borders between service, safety, and security appear more porous when witnessed as performance.

FAMILIAR SECURITY FRAMEWORKS

¹⁰² In short, I consider safety a subset of the broader idea of security.

January 20, 2015. Los Angeles International Airport. U.S. Department of Homeland Security Transportation Security Administration (TSA) check point.

I was waiting in line at the designated security check area governed by the TSA. The line was long. Maybe as many as three hundred people. I counted what must have been ten to twenty “hidden” cameras attached to the ceiling observing every moment of this palpably securitized space. Around me were other requisite markers of this designated “TSA Security Checkpoint,” a panoptic showcase of the latest security technologies: high definition internet protocol (IP) security cameras, human security personnel, and even the occasional canine unit. Other familiar signs reminded me that I had to be vigilant, not about fending off an external threat, but rather how much of a threat I myself might project. I passed by a sign, “Private Screening Advisory.” Underneath the wording was a series of familiar images indicating “Prohibited Items—Not permitted beyond this point.” Below this intimidating list was TSA’s recurrent assurance to those it inspected: “Your safety is our priority.” In front of me, a young white woman suddenly erupted in frustration. Directing her fury at an African American TSA agent, she yelled, “You said it would be only thirty minutes. But thirty minutes has passed! I’m going to miss my flight!” Across the mass of people on the other side of the long space I heard an older white woman shouting, “This is bullshit! That line is going faster when we got here earlier. How can you tell me *they* are going faster when *we* got here first?” I stood silent.

With few exceptions, abruptness and indifference bordering on rudeness by TSA security agents is the hallmark of this experience. Crossing this securitized border also entails aggressive check after check, inspection after inspection. For some, particularly those disenfranchised or marginalized, some borders are never to be crossed. As an inspecting agent, the TSA security agent fulfills this securitizing role. Another sign greeted me: “Notice of Additional Screening:

All persons and property may be subject to additional screening beyond this point. If you elect to enter this area, you may be subject to mandatory screening. Your safety is our priority.” I noticed another line for “Global Entry, Diplomats, and [flight cabin] Crew.” Apparently, the latter had no trouble with these lines. In front of me, there was yet another sign: “Please remove the following items from your carry-on bags: shoes, laptop from bag, light outerwear/jacket, belt, shoes.” After taking off my shoes, jacket, and belt, I placed them in one of the many plastic containers. Gesturing with his hand for me to come forward, a TSA agent allowed me to pass. I was scanned and finally could pass this artificial, securitized border.

In the U.S., ongoing debates over the nature and effectiveness of security checks persist. Groundless restrictions over people (largely those residing in Muslim-majority countries) and items (most recently, laptops from said countries) by the current Trump administration further substantiate the principal role of “performing security” within the practice of state-sanctioned Security.¹⁰³ Although an industry with an annual budget of \$7.9 billion employing 62,000 people, the TSA has a reputation for overspending and inefficiency, particularly in regards to shoddy training and the maintenance of ineffectual body scanners—the first line of defense within commercial aviation’s security system. Although requiring regular training, criteria for becoming a TSA agent also has been the subject of persistent critique. Criticisms center on the relative ease of hiring—U.S. citizenship, a high school diploma, GED or equivalent, one year of security or aviation experience, English proficiency, and a background check are the only

¹⁰³ Prior to 9/11, airport security was governed mostly by private companies. The federal government stepped in airport security measures immediately after the events of 9/11, federalizing a once privately outsourced occupation. Airports are still allowed to hire private firms to administer security procedures, but they must receive approval from the TSA as part of the TSA’s Security Partnership Program (SPP).

requirements—yet inflated benefits of the job (generous pay and overtime).¹⁰⁴ Despite these perks, not unlike similar stresses of the flight attendant occupation, high levels of stress from passengers pushes many TSA agents to see the job as a temporary stepping stone another, more secure, government agency position. Assuming that security measures are sound even after a passenger successfully passes through an airport’s designated security checkpoint, including TSA agents, X-ray machines, and full body scanners, innumerable threats remain.¹⁰⁵

Not surprisingly, some like veteran pilot Patrick Smith describe the ritual of airport security as “folly” (2013: 181). In his candid writings, Smith adds weight to this chapter’s argument that industry-wide designations of security from service are less clear-cut. Responding to the question of how much commercial air travel has changed since the events of 9/11 he writes, “More than any clash of civilizations, the real and lasting legacy of Mohammed Atta is

¹⁰⁴ Transportation Security Administration 2003.

¹⁰⁵ For example, between passing through a designated security check, window shopping a terminal’s vast consumer and leisure spaces, and finally boarding a plane, a determined “terrorist” could, in theory, fashion many, albeit crude, means of disrupting the TSA’s priority to ensure safety. For example, worldwide, passengers can dine at a variety of restaurants, all of which include sharp metal utensils and heavy glass tableware. A resourceful would-be terrorist also could peruse an airport’s many stores and eateries to weaponize anything from sharp souvenirs, heavy electronics, or hazardous equipment. Case in point, the circumstances surrounding what weapons may or may not have been used to hijack the four flights on September 11, 2001 remain inconclusive. Strong speculation suggests, however, that some form of sharp object like utility knives or box cutters may have been used to overpower passengers and crew. Although regulations for most American airlines changed shortly after 9/11 to restrict the use of metal cutlery on airplanes, including business and first class, many business and first-class passengers continue to serve “real” silverware. Outside the U.S., most European airlines lack these restrictions all-together, and depending on the outbound destination, and an increasing number of international destination-bound American airlines also have metal utensils for passengers above economy class.¹⁰⁵ Assuming all these security protocols have worked up until this point still casts doubts. Many airline workers, including baggage handlers and pre-and post-flight airplane custodial and catering staff are required to pass through minimal security, although these rules continue to change. Finally, an enterprising terrorist simply could join the security system as a security agent to sabotage the entire infrastructure completely (Smith 2013).

something more mundane: tedium... The long lines, searches, and pat-downs; the color-coded alerts, the litany of inconvenient rules and protocols we're now forced to follow—all this meaningless pomp in the name of security” (2013: 224).¹⁰⁶ Former chief council of the Federal Aviation Administration and senior Department of Transportation aviation official Mark Gerchick echoes this sentiment. “As the last ‘successful’ attack on aviation receded in time,” he writes, “security annoyance began to eclipse security fear. Did they really need to confiscate all those nail scissors and penknives and cigarette lighters?” (2013: 237). Both sentiments speak to the performative aspect of security, a characteristic oft-ascribed to the theatricality of flight attendant service but rarely of practices designated as Security within commercial air travel.

Designated security checks within commercial air travel, in this respect, fulfill an ultimate function not unlike designated in-flight service: both allow passengers to be free from care (i.e., to feel secure). Consequently, mandatory security checks at airports are as much about providing passengers the freedom *not* to care, or at least “illusions of care” (Moodie 2002: 247) as they are about actually preventing threats—an ultimately unobtainable aspiration. Yet, security still is seen as somehow different than that of service. In the next section, I turn to why this might be and what implications might emerge from this tendency.

SECURITY BY ANOTHER NAME

Although not acknowledged in most literature on emotional labor, TSA security agents (like the forgotten bill collectors featured in Hochschild’s book, *The Managed Heart*: (1983)) represent “the opposite pole of emotional labor” (1983: 138). Their labor exemplifies a

¹⁰⁶ Mohamed Atta was one of the lead organizers of the September 11 attacks.

masculine sensibility characterized by its concern for justice (Gilligan 1982). Oftentimes, this gendered concern is manifested in the kind of cold, efficient, and bureaucratized “ethic of indifference” (Herzfeld 1992) during formal airport security inspections I described earlier. According to Gilligan, this concern for justice is rooted in a broader socialization process wherein men begin with an orientation toward separateness while women veer toward connectedness. From the perspective of the former, “socialized living requires an intricate moral system of rules and rights in order to resolve persons’ competing claims to justice” (1983: 477). In contrast, flight attendants embody a feminine concern for care, the result of socialization more interpersonally oriented, especially in South Korea, but are no less morally sophisticated than men (1983: 477). Discourses following the distinguishing logic of “good/bad security versus service” betray this contention, however. Gilligan was writing against a “masculine bias of psychoanalytic theory” at the time, one she countered through a gendered critique of moral development (1982: 8). While I stray from the psychoanalytic dimensions of her argument, I subscribe to her underlining assertion that a “masculine bias” also exists within forms of labor, both as it is practiced and theorized. Analyzing how the categories of security and service are made distinct demonstrates this bias, specifically how security work officially sanctioned as such (i.e., TSA agents) is valorized because it is masculinized labor (generally performed by men) while service work popularly recognized as such (i.e., flight attendants) is devalued because it is feminized labor (generally performed by women).

If TSA security agents represent the harsher “front stage” (Goffman 1956) of commercial aviation’s surveilling apparatus, then flight attendants represent its softer “back stage”; the latter represents security’s “good cop” to the former’s “bad cop.” This two-pronged good cop/bad cop strategy of displaying contrasting modes of security (more “negative” security checks that are

unpleasant for the passenger yet display commercial air travel's safety competence matched with more "positive" modes of in-flight service that mitigate past and future passenger complaints by demonstrating overt concern and care) works as an effective strategy in engineering compliance (and hopefully customer satisfaction and loyalty) on the part of passengers. The perceived contrast between supposedly distinct categories—security and service—serve only to accentuate the construed positivity and negativity of both (Rafaeli and Sutton 1991).

In maintaining the "feminized" side of emotional labor (in its overt displays of passenger care and consideration), the flight attendant can perform the feminized side of security work: appealing to the gendered expectation of feeling cared for by those "who bring in the most money," business*man* whose companies carry contracts for first-class travel with the airline (Hochschild 1983). Likewise, the TSA agent, in maintaining a masculine ethic of indifference, enacts Western society's valorization of dispassionate rationality over passionate emotionality (Herzfeld 1992). Hence, overt depictions of security within the commercial airline experience tend to reify persistent tropes of "masculinity with mechanical mastery and femininity with technology's domestication" (Barry 2007: 12). Within the literature on global care and domestic labor, until recently, security has not been an explicit category of interest. In Hochschild's book (1979), the word "security" appears only four times compared to "care" (twenty-eight times). Christine B.N. Chin's book, *In Service and Servitude: Foreign Female Domestic Workers and the Malaysian "Modernity" Project* (1998) was another early precursor to the scholarly field of emotional/care/intimate labor (henceforth, care literature), which burgeoned after the mid-2000s. In her book, care appears twenty-six times against security's ten appearances. Although recent scholarship has included security when connecting this form of feminized labor within broader conversations about global capitalism's reliance on how to secure *insecure* flows of information,

technology, and bodies, the majority do not talk about security outside a specific framework of job (for the laborer) or national security (for the nation-state employing such labor).

For example, in their well-cited edited volume, *Intimate Labors: Cultures, Technologies, and the Politics of Care* (2010), Eileen Boris and noted labor migration scholar Rhacel Salazar Parrenas, the word security appears only eight times compared to care's thirty-nine times. Similarly, in the expansive *Towards a Global History of Domestic and Caregiving Workers* (Hoerder, Meerkerk, and Neunsinger 2015), security appears a mere eleven times to care's forty-six times. Accentuating the number of times security *does not* appear in prominent analytic texts is relevant. It sketches out an argument for how entrenched gendered and feminized qualifiers like care, and its related expressions of emotions, intimacy, and affect, inadvertently have been adopted by prominent leaders in the field. My aim in this chapter is not to discredit their invaluable labor but rather to offer an analytic alternative. Doing so, I hope, will serve a similar aim in revalorizing the devalued labor of global feminized migrant labor (performed primarily by women, as well as rethinking established scholarly boundaries between feminized care labor studies and masculinized security studies).

A cursory overview of accepted Security Studies scholarship illustrates this bifurcating and hierarchizing tendency. Billed as “the most comprehensive textbook available on the subject,” *Security Studies, An Introduction* (Williams 2012) attempts to relate security issues to wide-ranging theoretical discussions concerning liberalism and critical theory, among others. “Feminism” is included as a subject of interest, in fact, an entire chapter. But its positioning as a distinct “theoretical approach” alongside other lenses like “Liberalism” and “Critical Theory” risks relegating it to an add-on, external lens, subservient to more seemingly pressing theoretical book section headings—some might say, more analytically “secure” (i.e., longer established)

concepts—such as “Terrorism,” “Ethnic Conflict,” or “International Arms Trade.” Tellingly, the chapter on Feminism, although framed only within more conventional themes like “weapons,” “war,” and “armed conflict,” is written by one of the sole female scholars of the edited volume.

Williams concludes by identifying its limits within the disciplines it most commonly is associated with, International Relations and Political Science. Security Studies scholar James Der Derian writes how “[n]o other concept in international relations packs the metaphysical punch, nor commands the disciplinary power of ‘security’” (2009: 149). Here, Derian inadvertently locates the kind of circular logic that reproduces the hegemonic association of the security concept with only select, “hard major” disciplines like science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) and business. Specifically, security remains an influential analytic in the study of encounters, particularly those deemed international. Yet the former remains associated within the disciplinary confines of “harder,” masculinized fields like international relations and political science.¹⁰⁷ Thus, what this chapter argues as a narrowness in the field of meanings over the security concept also indexes broader forms of disciplinary inspections.

The circumscribed nature of the security concept has not been absent within anthropology either. For example, in the recent *The Anthropology of Security: Perspectives from the Frontline of Policing, Counter-terrorism and Border Control* (Maguire, Frois, and Zurawski 2014), “Security” still largely is employed within a familiar field of descriptors: policy professionals, policing and inspecting of the urban poor, state surveillance, irregular migrants, and counter-terrorism. Yet anthropology and trends within the discipline offer promising new horizons. For example, in 2012, the influential journal, *Cultural Anthropology* devoted an entire online feature

¹⁰⁷ The distinction between “hard” and “soft” academic disciplines exists largely within popular not scholarly debates.

on the issue of “Security.” According to the editors, “From terrorism to swine flu, to the current economic crisis, issues of security, broadly defined and experienced, seem to be taking front and center stage in our contemporary moment” (Stewart and Choi 2012). Many articles still connect security within the familiar realm of threats around national security, public policy, and biomedical threats. Others, however, point more toward more critically reconceptualizing the idea of security to better understand “the social dynamics of contemporary capitalism” (Welker 2012).

What might it mean to put cross-cultural notions of in-flight flight attendant service with those of security? Hamilton (2013) provides constructive insights. In the example that follows, he attempts to explicate the relationship between care and security, first by decoupling the latter’s over-association with the familiar subjects I mention above. Hamilton points out the constitutive role of care in securing the former’s status.

Without care no one can be secure. This is true for security as well as for safety. Yet, the requirement of care does not mean that concern must fall solely to the one to be secured. Because threats—particularly those that jeopardize life itself—can often overwhelm the wherewithal of a single subject, it is common to appeal to institutions and agencies that are better equipped and therefore in a more advantageous position to take care of individuals. The secured subject relinquishes the responsibility of care by submitting to a higher authority, by obeying the will of a collective, or simply by trusting technology. A sovereign state, which occupies a privileged place above the populace, can arguably foresee and identify threats better than others... The provision of security, then, is not only an act of care but also an expression of power. And power is always

something that stands to be abused (2013: 284).

Adhering to this viewpoint, the notion of a flight attendant as security laborers seems less farfetched. Standard representations of security vis-à-vis flight attendants, particularly in the post-9/11, current Trump context, remain fixated on the identification, policing, and inspection of “terrorist” threats. As referenced earlier, a recent example of this was an unreasoned and ineffective ban on large-size electronics from airlines departing from several Muslim-majority countries. Although airport Security (i.e., security checkpoints, x-ray machines) initially enforce this regulation, flight attendants act as the rules on-the-ground policing and inspecting agents. That Korean female flight attendants are praised for their service at the expense of their security labor may reveal two things: it helps to reconcile a larger societal concern over “lost masculinity” (McHugh and Abelman 2005) through a re-domestication of labor performed largely by women while indexing a more global concern with an on-going national concern over Korea’s insecure place as a “modernity at the margins.” Through the language of service over security, this national insecurity has reproduced a longer history of neglected and underappreciated feminized labor in South Korea.

KOREAN AIRLINES: “SUPERIOR SERVICE” BUT “UNSAFE”

Conceptualizing Korean flight attendants’ in-flight service as security labor is a necessary corrective to popular narratives that diminish the full scope of this historical form of gendered service. Korean female flight attendants face a stronger burden than that of their Western counterparts to discipline their bodies and emotions to ensure “superior” service. Coupled with these stringent acts of gendered self-care are equally rigorous standards for maintaining safety

and security, as they popularly are defined, which is to say, effectively conducting emergency safety procedures and handling so-called terrorist threats. The latter aspect of this Security labor performed by Korean female flight attendants, however, scarcely is recognized in either U.S. or South Korean accounts. What is more, even when recognized, descriptions typically conform to the routine stereotype of the “‘dynamic, active, masculine’ West dialectically opposed to the ‘passive and feminine East by the Orientalist gaze’” (Tikhonov 2015). This is a familiar binary of the Asian as traditional, emotional, and increasingly physically proficient (i.e., beauty-oriented) yet still not modern, irrational, and technologically undeveloped (Said 1979). Global and local reports below illustrate this unfavorable tendency.

On December 21, 2016, after decades of pop obscurity, 1980s singer-songwriter Richard Marx again made headlines. While flying a Hanoi to Seoul-bound Korean Air flight with his new bride, Marx jumped into action as a nearby “psycho passenger” went berserk.¹⁰⁸ The son of a powerful Korean conglomerate (*chaebol*), 34-year old Lim Beom-Joon became intoxicated and increasingly violent during the entire four-hour flight. Lim went on to make national and international news for allegedly slapping a nearby passenger, attacking two female flight attendants by grabbing their hair and forcefully resisting all efforts to being restrained by make-shift rope. Although later sympathizing with the injured crew on board, Marx condemned Korean Air’s supposed lack of security and safety training, writing, “The all-female crew was clueless and not trained as to how to restrain this psycho and he was only initially subdued when I and a couple other male passengers intervened... Korean Air should be sanctioned for not knowing how to handle a situation like this without passenger interference” (ibid). Koreans took

¹⁰⁸ Del Valle 2016.

to the Internet to voice their opinions on the situation, many expressing embarrassment at the international attention while largely agreeing with Marx's assessment [include quotes from Korean news sources]. On the other hand, Korean Air defended the safety and security training of its crew, noting that they had followed proper protocol until the police were allowed immediately to board the plane upon landing. One week after the incident, nevertheless, Korean Air publicly changed its safety and security training. Chiefly, it adopted a "looser" policy to use tasers on unruly passengers while also suggested possibly hiring more male flight attendants.

What Marx described echoes earlier accounts of Korean airlines' historically shoddy safety record in the industry. The association of Korean (and more broadly Asian) airlines as unsafe ("abysmal" and "pathetic," in the eyes of many Westerners) persists, as evidenced in popular accounts both in the U.S. and South Korea.¹⁰⁹ Arguably, few theories have been as influential in perpetuating this myth than *Outliers: The Story of Success* (2008) by New York Times best-selling author Malcolm Gladwell. This is ironic since Gladwell himself hoped to dispel some of this perception by noting how safe Korean airlines *now* had become (mostly due to the influence of Western safety and security standards) from aviation accidents. In a problematic chapter entitled, "Ethnic Theory of Plane Crashes," Gladwell takes an accepted aviation social fact (Smith 2013; Davies 2011), that Korean airlines historically have suffered from a reputation of negligent safety and security and refashions a new one: Korean culture solely was to blame. This perception rested on the view that an overly rigid hierarchy of social ranking contributed to bad safety standards. Accordingly, language rules based on perceived social rank structure manners of speech that are more indirect and suggestive rather than direct and imperative. Hence, Gladwell implicitly suggests in this example (not unlike Marx's related

¹⁰⁹ Mayerowitz and Koenig 2014.

critique) a superior service sensibility is good for Service but not Safety and Security; indeed, it could be deadly.

Up until changes in pilot and crew training occurred during the early 2000s, this theory held sway in the face of Korean airlines' unattractive record. Despite a demand for air travel by a growing affluent class spurred by concentrated industrial development since the 1980s, South Korea's aviation image has been marred by international incidents (Davies 2011). The following is a condensed list of these commercial airline accidents (Smith 2013). December 11, 1969: an interregional flight from Gangneung to Seoul was hijacked and forced to fly to Pyongyang, North Korea, but no fatalities were reported. On April 20, 1978, a Boeing 707 "wandered" into Russian airspace and was shot down by a Soviet military jet. The captain conducted an emergency landing near Murmansk, the then-U.S.S.R.'s ice-free naval base port, resulting in two deaths and thirteen injuries. On November 19, 1980, a Korean Air Boeing 747 departed from Anchorage and crashed into an embankment on the edge of the Seoul-based airport. There were multiple injuries and fifteen deaths. On September 1, 1983, after again deviating into Soviet prohibited airspace, a Korean Air flight was shot down by a Soviet interceptor. All on board died. On July 27, 1989, due to poor visibility, a Tripoli-bound flight incorrectly lands and crashes into a nearby neighborhood. Multiple deaths and injuries both among crew and those on the ground are reported. Improper de-icing of the wings on a November 25, 1989 domestic flight between Seoul and Ulsan causes an aborted takeoff and engine explosion. But there are no fatalities. On August 6, 1997, a Guam-bound Korean Air Flight 801 crashed into a jungle valley, which resulted in the deaths of over two-thirds of the passengers.

Most recently, a 2013 Asiana Airlines flight bound for San Francisco crash landed at San Francisco International Airport (SFO), resulting in three deaths and multiple injuries. So

notorious was this national image that the U.S. Department of Defense had imposed a ban on its employees flying on Korean Air as recently as 2002 while the Federal Aviation Administration had placed the Korean airline in a “lower category. This prevented Korean Air from expanding service to the U.S. or share codes with American carriers (Gladwell 2008). In April 1999, Delta Air Lines and Air France suspended their flying partnership with Korean Air (Gladwell: 2008).

Yet, safety records also have had their critics. As ex-pilot Smith forwards, “safety records” are misleading at best, erroneous at worst. Accordingly, “[T]here is virtually no such thing as a ‘dangerous’ airline, anywhere. Some are safer than others, but even the least safe airline is still very safe” (2013: 207). Nevertheless, among global airline rankings, South Korean carriers (Emirates consistently ranks within the top ten) do not fair especially well.¹¹⁰ According to influential German-based Jet Airliner Crash Data Evaluation Centre (JACDEC), South Korean flag carrier, Korean Air ranks fiftieth with the country’s second largest carrier, Asiana, ranking slightly higher at forty-fourth place.¹¹¹ Taking into account that JACDEC includes data chronicling death and hull losses stretching as far back as 1983, Korean Air still holds the unpleasant distinction as the fifth “most dangerous airline in the world.”¹¹² Of course, this metric does not take into account significant measures since then to overhaul safety and security protocols. Moreover, illustrating the unreliability (or insecurity) of security (and safety) indicators more generally, in a recent 2013 review by another rating agency, Australia-based Airlineratings.com, Korean Air and Asiana Airlines were listed among the top eleven carriers for

¹¹⁰ There are no separate rankings that measure the “security” of airlines against threats like terrorism or hijackings. Under these conditions, safety rankings serve as an imperfect yet useful assessor for both.

¹¹¹ Jet Airliner Crash Data Evaluation Centre 2015.

¹¹² Ibid.

best safety and service. Gladwell also supports this contention by noting how since 1999 (and up until 2013) Korean Air's safety record was "spotless."

Nonetheless, as the Marx case illustrates, popular U.S. appraisals of Korean airline security, in striking contrast to their near unanimous praise of Korean airline service, veer towards the negative, oftentimes culturally essentialist. Before the Marx incident, another recent incident received international notoriety: the Asiana Airlines crash of July 6, 2013. Upon descending at SFO during a routine flight from Incheon to San Francisco, Flight OZ 214's pilot misjudged his landing, striking the airplane's tail against a seawall projecting outward from the runway. With both engines and the tail separating from the aircraft, passengers and crew were forced to quickly evacuate as a fire broke out from the wreckage. Of the three hundred and seven passengers on board, one hundred and eighty-seven were injured and three died.¹¹³ Directly citing the "ethnic theory" originally outlined by Gladwell (2008), many U.S. American media outlets took seriously the question of hierarchical "Confucian values" possessed by the Korean crew in causing the crash. Headlines like "Korean culture may offer clues in Asiana crash" were rampant.¹¹⁴

In the aftermath of the Asiana Airlines crash, many individuals and the city of San Francisco filed lawsuits against the airline. Among the complaints noted in U.S. news reports were "an extensive litany of errors and omissions" by a flight crew "improperly trained and

¹¹³ In an egregious example of making light of the 2013 crash of Asiana Airlines Flights 214 at San Francisco International Airport, anchors at a San Francisco television news station read a list of the flight's pilots: "Sum Ting Wong," "Wi Tu Lo," "Ho Lee Fuk," and "bang Ding Ow." The case received brief notoriety for reporting live on air offensive phonetic double entendres of the actual names of the flight crew. More subtly, though, the story made international headlines for days with many Western reports questioning whether "Korean culture" ultimately was at fault.

¹¹⁴ Wee 2013.

supervised.”¹¹⁵ San Francisco media hailed the rescue efforts of fire fighters at the crash site while overlooking a narrative taking shape in Korean media about the “heroic” safety (not service) skills of Asiana’s mostly female flight attendant cabin crew.¹¹⁶ News reports depicted the familiar image of young and attractive female flight attendants escaping a burning plane with injured male passengers on their backs. The Asiana Airlines crash was a rare exception (at least in Korean popular media) to the image of the Korean female flight attendant as more professional in her service than her mostly security-oriented, safety professional Western counterpart.

The tension between the perception that adherence to service rules come at the cost of safety and security might be best illustrated in the following example. Known as the “nut rage incident,” on December 5, 2014, then-vice president of Korean Air Heather Cho demanded that her John F. Kennedy International Airport-bound Korean Air flight re-taxi to the airport’s gate. This was in response to her dissatisfaction with a flight attendant “incorrectly” serving a first-class passenger like herself, a bag of macadamia nuts in their original packaging instead of on a plate. After a heated exchange, Cho assaulted the male flight attendant and his female coworker and demanded the pilot to return to the gate. For weeks after, Cho and Korean Air became the target of vehement criticism over their actions. Cho eventually resigned and was given a twelve-month prison sentence for interfering with a commercial flight. Despite most of the Korean public regarding the incident as an exceptional example of *chaebol* (Korean conglomerate) entitlement, most service working interlocutors I spoke with claimed the opposite; for them,

¹¹⁵ Dye 2013.

¹¹⁶ Numerous Korea media reports visually supported this narrative with dramatic photographs of Asiana Airlines female flight attendants with young passengers strapped on their backs while evacuating the plane, as well as exclusive interviews with the shaken cabin crew.

although extreme, Cho's actions revealed a pervasive culture of entitlement within all customer service relations in South Korea. Some, including my flight attendant interlocutors likened servers as "serfs" under a "king-like" customer.¹¹⁷

Yet there are several cases of safety and security seemingly taking a back seat to preoccupations with service. Recalling the earlier Korean Air report criticizing the safety training of doomed Korean Air Flight 801, Korean netizens rebuked recently established (2009) Seoul-based airline, Eastar Jet. During a routine flight on June 6, 2016, an Eastar flight from Seoul to Jeju island flying at 10,000 feet had to make a turnaround when one of its doors was found insecurely closed. During the emergency descent at a nearby airport, however, news reports noted the captain's failure to follow correct safety procedures and instead instructing a flight attendant to "hold tight" the defective door. Even after safely landing, rather than recording the incident in a flight log, the captain had maintenance workers place duct tape on the door before returning the plane to the mainland. Afterwards, the pilot faced the suspension of his pilot's license by the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport.¹¹⁸

Unfortunately, this was not an isolated occurrence of safety oversight. Just six months earlier on January 6, 2016 there was a more serious incident onboard a Jin Air passenger plane from the Philippines to Seoul. The plane was forced to turn back forty minutes into flight after cabin crew noticed an open door.¹¹⁹ Many passengers captured the noise of rushing air and

¹¹⁷ This opinion was encapsulated by the expression, "*sonnimŭn wangida*," or "the customer is King." Even among "lower-tier" Korean service workers, such as baristas and waiters I met, there were common stories of them having to go extraordinary lengths to please ornery customers (of all ages). These tasks included personally washing clothing "damaged" by spilled drinks, apologizing profusely in a humiliating manner, or paying individual cash compensation for "dissatisfied" customers.

¹¹⁸ Lee 2015.

“chaos” on board. Among the one hundred sixty-three passengers on board, many reported nausea and ear pain, symptoms considered precursors to the loss of cabin pressure and eventual lack of oxygen on board. The Korean headline of the incident described it as a shocking flight, one where flight attendants told one another literally to hold the door. The fallout was swift, one Korean internet critic (“netizen”) writing, “The Philippines is an undeveloped [*hujinguk*] country with undeveloped airlines, and our country and airlines are the same.”¹²⁰ Collective criticism about these incidents drew on broader societal dissatisfaction over security measures, not only on planes but other modes of transport. A strong undercurrent behind the recent impeachment of President Park Geun-hye, was her bungling of the MV Sewol, a passenger ferry that capsized on April 16, 2014 killing most of its four hundred seventy-five passenger, majority teenage, crew. Park and her administration faced criminal accusations of negligence in safe and secure rescue of the ship’s young passengers. That so many Koreans found the incident entirely preventable added to the public angst. The ferry was carrying more than three times its legal limit of cargo and the captain violated evaluation protocols by ordering passengers over the intercom to stay in their cabins while the ship was sinking.

The Sewol ferry accident was the deadliest peacetime maritime accident in decades. As such, it exposed and articulated ongoing anxieties many Koreans had about South Korea’s ever-insecure status in the world—an uncertainty also marked on the country’s symbolic ambassadors, the flight attendants of this study. As expressed by Young-ha Kim, a novelist and short-story writer, the stakes of the safety/security debate extended beyond this single incident.

¹¹⁹ Cripps and Choi 2016.

¹²⁰ Chung 2015.

Instead, South Korea's seeming failure to secure the safety of its most vulnerable citizens (high school children) spoke to bigger fears that the country's progress had been an illusion or façade. Kim paralleled President Kim Dae-jung's lament in 1999 that the issue of Korean Air insecurity (i.e., its poor international safety record) was a matter of the whole country whose credibility was at stake (Gladwell 2008). But this time, it was less about what the world thought about South Korea than what Koreans thought themselves. Netizens flooded news reports and blog postings about the tragedy, again lamenting about South Korea's *still*-undeveloped, backward country (*hujinguk*) status (Kim and Pieterse 2012). The spectacle of these national safety/security failures, to an increasingly global audience, became a metaphor for South Korea's continually frustrated "modernity on the margins" (Park 2012): South Korea as still developing yet never developed, globalizing yet never global.

SAFETY AND SECURITY STILL MATTER

Throughout my fieldwork research and interviews with interlocutors, I learned that most Asian airlines (including those in the Arab Gulf, i.e., Middle East) emphasized service over security. Of the dozens of manuals and memoirs inhabiting the cottage industry of flight attendant literature in South Korea, only a few make mention security and safety procedures. *Stewardess: Fabulous Career Woman Stewardess Interview* (*Stewardess Mōtchin Kūllobōl Sūt'yuōdisū Myōnjōp*) (Chung 2013), an archetypal "study manual" featuring an overview of the occupation, its requirements, and mock interview questions (in English and Korean) includes little to no description of safety and security procedures. Rather, chapter headings in this formal book are written as follows: "Train your mind!"; "What is service"; "Service manners training"; "Speech training"; "Why speech is significant"; "Applying for airlines"; "Non-verbal and verbal

communication”; and “Mock interview practice,” among many others. (Chung 2013: 5-7).

Accompanying the chapters of this three hundred forty-four-page monograph are charts, diagrams, and illustrations, the plurality focusing on crafting the face and body or dealing with interpersonal relations. In another example, the popular memoir *Stewardess, Secret Note: Life Skills Learned 10,000 Meters Above in Heaven* (Sŭt'yuŏdisŭ Pimillot'ŭ - Man Mit'ŏ Hanŭl Wiesŏ Paeun Insaengŭi Kisul (Chung 2009), written by eight current and former Asiana female flight attendants makes little to no mention of security or safety procedures. Instead, among its many colorful pages, which include photographs and “day in the life” cartoons, the focus is similar with the Chung 2013 manual. At the same time, the former does not sugarcoat the hardships of the occupation, including rude customers, tiring and tedious work, and frequent loneliness. What emerges through literal and pictorial representations, nonetheless, is a narrative of pioneering women who *despite* these odds persevere and prosper. Like so many other books of its genre, *Stewardess, Secret Note* also includes requisite pictures of cheerful and charming female flight attendants standing in front of landmarks like the Eiffel Tower or more intimate moments of heels off tired feet in the shadows of service.

The outward absence of Security within these popular representations was later distorted by reports of the “priority” of safety and security among my current and former flight attendant interlocutors. Seulki was a 24-year old female flight attendant for Eastar Jet. Upon being asked what she felt about the Marx ordeal and the subsequent condemnation of Korean safety/service locally and international, she displayed a mix of disappointment and slight frustration. It felt as though she had heard the negative commentaries before. In a lengthy answer, she said that safety and security—at least as it was commonly understood—was essential to her occupation.

The first thing that is important about safety training is knowing what exit a passenger must go to and if they can be told to escape quickly during an emergency. This is what we practice. Therefore, we even have a specific command we use for escaping, “command” [in English], which is a simple mix of English and Korean because it’s also an informal [rather than formal] register of speech. Also, outside of that situation, we learn how to extinguish fires, evacuate passengers from fires, and perform CPR. All this is included in our safety training *after* we become flight attendants. These are our first lessons and every year afterwards we receive regular safety trainings]. We can be certified as flight attendants *only* after receiving this safety training certification. Regarding terrorism, it’s included in our security training, too. We don’t have practical training but we do learn personal security. For example, we learn how to act during a hijacking situation. We need full knowledge in these situations. Also, the purser during a flight is the agent in charge of who boards or not. So, they have the authority to subdue a belligerent passenger like the person in the Korean Air [Richard Marx] incident. But actually, we have specific equipment on the plane to deal with that kind of disorderly passenger. Learning how to tie a rope, how to use security equipment, for example—these are procedures flight attendants are well-informed about since we get a full “announcement list” of passengers before a flight (my emphasis).

Seulki’s display of safety and security expertise did not end there. She concluded by sending me an in-company video of Eastar’s safety training procedures. Throughout the approximately five-minute video clip, the viewer is exposed to an extensive array of standardized safety, security, and airplane-orientation procedures among entirely female flight attendants. At times in fully

uniform clad in formal classrooms, at other times in full-size simulations of the airplane, female flight attendants are seen becoming familiar with diverse types of aircraft. They also are shown handling safety and security equipment (including rope and tasers to be used during role playing against the same kind of “riot passengers” Marx complained about) and emergency situations (hostage, bomb threats, and crash landings).

In another scene, a room full of Korean female flight attendants, under the guidance of an instructor, “administered” the same kind of CPR I witnessed first-hand during this chapter;s opening vignette on human dummy models. Of course, witnessing this display was not entirely a surprise. I had seen similar training experience, albeit never directly, before. But it always struck me as somewhat jarring to see all the “hidden” skills behind the façade of this famously service-oriented occupation, a façade greatly enhanced in the Korean context. Case in point, during my entire eighteen months among informal flight attendant study group (*sūt'ōdi moim*) members and select private training institute and airline staff, I almost never heard about or witnessed explicit talk about the provision of safety and security as an occupational priority. Instead, nearly all discussions, particularly those that centered around the all-important interview and hiring process, centered on the production of a culturally defined in-flight service marked by feminized displays of embodied care.

Hana, a thirty-something former Korean language teacher of mine who later became an Emirates Airlines flight attendant in 2015, also downplayed the role of service in favor of safety/security during one of our conversations. In response to the international commotion over the Marx incident, she repeated the pervasive view that Korean airlines like Korean Air (unlike

that of Emirates) did, in fact, tend to “fall behind” such global safety standards.¹²¹ Even among flight attendants, namely those working for South Korea-based and non-South-based airlines, differing views on this subject were common. Hana stressed that safety was “number one” at “her airline,” Emirates.

I can say this with confidence because during the briefing before every flight the pilot and purser really emphasize this. They repeat it all the time. Also, if a passenger ignores the safety rules or gets violent I can resist or even refuse service. I just don’t deal with it.

In terms of terrorism, we receive all that training, as well. We have instructions on how to act depending on the situation. That’s why more than service we come to think more about service and security.

Hana’s confidence in Emirates safety record is not unfounded. But her assurance that this record supersedes an equally strong emphasis on service (including its more egregiously gendered elements) is less reliable. Skepticism over the reliability of safety rankings by Smith (2013) notwithstanding, in 2016 Emirates ranked second (behind Cathay Pacific Airways) as the safest airline by JACDEC.¹²² Also, unlike Hana’s downplaying of service, Emirates also ranked first as

¹²¹ In an unexpected twist of ethnographic fate, Hana later confessed that it was my influence that largely pushed her into applying to become a flight attendant. When I first met her early in my fieldwork in 2014 in Seoul, South Korea, she had been working full-time as a private Korean language instructor. I would meet her once to twice a week and practice individually crafted language lessons focusing on Korean society, labor, and aviation. For practice, I would rehearse Korean scripts and general findings of my fieldwork with her. Upon my arrival back to Champaign from the field, she later informed me that all our talk about flight attendants had inspired her to apply to Emirates Airlines. Of all my interlocutors, she remains the most positive about the occupation, never once complaining about it.

¹²² Jet Airliner Crash Data Evaluation Centre 2016.

“the world’s best airline,” a designation strongly driven by perceived superior service, according to influential industry rating organization Skytrax (2016). But considering that Western (i.e., U.S. and British) airline unions consistently shame Gulf airlines’ service standards as indicative of sexism, homophobia, and violations of flight attendants’ labor rights” (themes I explore in the next chapter), Hana’s assuredness about Emirates’ prioritization of safety/security over service was telling. Although indirect, it appeared to modify an inclination, expressed by contemporary Western flight attendants: professional status was attainable only via superior safety/security and not through service. Likewise, Seulki’s and Hana’s assertiveness about all three categories of in-flight labor seemed to express new terms—safety *and* service professionals—for elevating the Korean flight attendant occupation.

Yet this emphasis was most pronounced during the aspiring flight attendant stage. Repeatedly, I had heard from aspiring, current, and former flight attendants, as well as other airline industry workers (e.g., airline trainers, pilots) that safety and security requirements were standardized across the global aviation industry. As such, “Safety and security could be taught, but Service could not be.”

Although less acknowledged for it by the public, South Korean flight attendants do provide direct and indirect security (in the vein theorized by Hamilton). From take-off to landing, they practice security checks, safety procedures, and even the policing and inspection of (undisciplined) passengers, adding literal weight to the suggested security laborer label. Moreover, as I came to learn through my fieldwork, many actions that outwardly are only service-related, such as picking up trash from the floor or having passengers stow their tray tables, are security/safety measures encoded within more familiar service procedures. Significantly, South Korean flight attendants can fulfill the commercial aims of superior service

(and security) only after “securing” multiple, sometimes competing parts of their own laboring emotions and bodies. For instance, they can guarantee the security of passengers during a flight only after regulating the “true” (tired or irritated) nature of their emotional and physical selves. This dynamic is evident in the ethnographic examples that follow.

RECONFIGURING SERVICE WORK AS SECURITY WORK

“Now I realize I probably didn’t need to be so friendly. I wish I wasn’t so friendly,” Minkyung told me. Minkyung was a twenty-six-year-old flight attendant who had been working for Emirates for three years when I met her in 2012. She shared this comment upon her arrival back in Seoul in 2014. After nearly five years working as an Emirates Airlines flight attendant, she had decided to move back to South Korea to be with her family. In addition to asking her how she was readjusting to life in her hometown, I wondered how she reflected on her prior experience as a flight attendant. “Emirates always made sure that we were kind to our customers—no matter what.” Except for exceptional cases like an explicitly offensive passenger, flight attendants were instructed always to be subservient to a request or complaint. Famously, Hochschild (1983: 7) theorized as this process of detaching oneself from the “real” emotions underlining the performance they exhibited as a highly “alienating” (in a Marxist sense) cost of emotional labor (1983:7). But Minkyung was nonchalant:

Of course, it’s always hard, especially because I’m a sensitive person by nature. It’s especially hard when the passenger thinks just because you serve them they’re a king or something. A lot of times, you’ll have people who in regular life are normal, nice. But somehow the minute they get on a plane and have someone serving them, especially

people who haven't flown a plane much (like Indians), [see Chapter 4] they treat them like a personal servant or even slave. It was exhausting, especially since Emirates is all about good service. We always had to be friendly and polite. But now I realize I probably didn't need to be so friendly. I wish I wasn't so friendly.

Here, Minkyung's narrative evinces the emotional and physical costs incurred from a flight attendants' security labor. The expectation of securing the emotional and physical welfare of passengers, an argument this chapter continually aims to show, however, was instilled even earlier. It existed for any Korean woman in the service field (and arguably, most women in Korean society, more broadly). The proceeding aspiring flight attendant narratives demonstrate this tendency.

One night, I met Ye Sül, the twenty-four-year old aspiring flight attendant who had been trying to become an Emirates Airlines flight attendant over three years. We were to meet to go over the logistics of a rare upcoming Emirates Airlines job fair taking place in Seoul later that week. When we met, she was crying. Apologizing for being so emotional, she explained how she had just finished her shift as a waitress at the American-style sports bar I described in Chapter 2. Ye Sül had been working there, first as a waitress and later a bartender for the previous three months to gain what she perceived as valuable service industry-related experience. "I don't know why this happened," Ye Sül told me. "This guy kept hitting on me by grabbing me as I served his drinks. But after I tried to avoid his moves, he threw his entire drink at me!" This was not the first time Ye Sül had told me about sexual harassment on the job. Indeed, the two foreign (white American and Pakistani) male bar owners were among the biggest offenders. Having socialized with Ye Sül and other aspiring flight attendants after study sessions, I had observed firsthand her

ability to charm and entertain others. Tough and tenacious (she cursed liberally), Ye Sül seemed comfortable in nearly all social settings, Korean and non-Korean. Hence, her sudden display of emotion surprised me. Over the weeks I had known her, Ye Sül frequently told me the sense of entitlement bar patrons, overwhelmingly “global” men (mainly from the U.S. but also from Europe and Asia), exhibited in propositioning for extra attention, dates, or even sex. As I sat quietly watching Ye Sül’s anger slowly subside, I remembered other female interlocutors who had told me about similar unspoken gendered injustices they had experienced within the service industry in South Korea.

Eunjung, the twenty-six-year-old, aspiring flight attendant (Chapter 2) I befriended described similar cases. Forced to work multiple jobs within the service economy, she often became incensed when describing the indignities she said she faced as a flexible, female worker in South Korea. Recounting her “broken” home life—a verbally abusive mother and an absent alcoholic father—she explained sexism that intensified with the lowly work she performed to help support herself after college. “It’s so hard to be a woman in Korea,” Eunjung once told me bluntly. “Sometimes I want to die, it’s so hard. All Korean men are shit! I fucking hate them.”¹²³ Although not prompted specifically, Eunjung used this topic to segue into the broader topic of men in positions of power, especially in the workplace, and how they still “unfairly controlled everything in the country.” Other stories of verbal and physical abuse from her father, former Korean boyfriends, and male coworkers also surfaced. After expressing my concerns, I gently asked why she still wanted to become a flight attendant, an occupation no stranger to sexual

¹²³ Communication was primarily in Korean but oftentimes veered into moments of complete English, oftentimes due her own preference. In this exchange, Eunjung, who possessed a nearly “flawless” British accent, used only English.

harassment and sexualization, more generally. For her, the answer was obvious. Similar to Ye Sŭl, Eunjung felt she already had been doing the kind of devalued and gendered work required of flight attendants her entire adult life. As such, the assumed professionalism and received admiration of the flight attendant service occupation—even if only a veneer—still promised something valuable: a way to ensure her own security against the indignities of performing stigmatized care labor she already had been enduring.

SECURITY LABOR IN A KOREAN CONTEXT

As I have aimed to identify in earlier chapters, fundamental to the development of South Korea's economy was the dissemination of a gendered labor logic that valorized masculinized security work and the men who conducted it while devaluing feminized service (or care labor) and the women who performed it. At the same time, this conceptual distinction further obscured an increasingly salient function of the latter within an ever-differentiating and globalizing South Korea: female flight attendant's work of policing and inspecting. Here I reference the ways in which potential conflict (be they verbal or physical) are mitigated not by an aggressive figure of primal authoritarianism, but rather, a gentler, more feminine "face of the state"—or what in the Korean context Kwon (2011: 64) describes as "the lipstick line." Here, on-the-ground passenger control strategies are "embedded in both environmental features and structural relations" (Shearing and Stenning 1985: 302), thus, concealing their presence and capacity to suppress potential international incidents like that of David Dao, an (Asian) American passenger who was forcibly removed from a United Airlines flight.¹²⁴ On a sweltering summer day in 2012, Jihye, a

¹²⁴ The incident occurred on April 9, 2017. United Airlines became the target of unanimous condemnation not only in the U.S. but around the world. Many critics pointed to the incident as evidence of how far U.S. in-flight service standards had "fallen."

thirty-year-old Korean woman who had been working for Emirates for three years when I met her in Dubai in 2012, helped me identify this dynamic. “Everything we do has safety and security in mind,” she explained. “But the passenger doesn’t know that. Instead they just complain.”¹²⁵ The conversation continued:

-Jihye: So, everyone just thinks safety is about the [safety instruction] demonstration we do at the beginning of the flight. That’s not all though.

-Alex: What else do you do?

-Jihye: Sometimes there are things on the ground in the aisles, you know, trash. We go around quietly picking trash all the time or collecting it in our bags. That’s so that people don’t trip and fall on it [and complain]. So, it’s all part of maintaining safety. I heard that for Korean airlines [like Korean Air and Asiana], they are forced to do things very discretely.

-Alex: That’s interesting. I didn’t know that. Are there any other examples?

-Jihye: So many. It can be the littlest things. Maybe someone in first class is drinking too much. So, at first, we are really friendly and accommodating. We pour a drink here and there. But after time, we notice that they already have had so many drinks.

-Alex: Ah, how do you know?

-Jihye: Well, we can just see, you know. Or oftentimes we all talk with each other while we’re doing a service—usually in the galley.

-Alex: What do you say?

-Jihye: “You know, that passenger has been drinking so much... but it looks like he might be

¹²⁵ Interviews were conducted primarily in Korean (with assorted English) and all translations are those of the author.

getting a bit too excited now.” And this *has* happened a few times. I’ve never seen the worst of it, mostly I’ve heard stories, but a passenger will drink too much and then just go crazy.

-Alex: Wow. So, what do you do?

-Jihye: Anyway, to prevent this kind of thing, first we just keep an eye on the passenger. But if they keep insisting on drinking more, either we politely suggest that they don’t drink so much...

-Alex: You can do that?

-Jihye: Yeah, of course I can!

-Alex: What if they complain or something?

-Jihye: Oh, they do sometimes. But this is why we have to be really careful. We just make sure to do it with a smile, nod, *and make them think that they’re sort of making the decision* [my emphasis].

-Alex: Really? That works?

-Jihye: Yeah, it’s actually not that hard. With some charm, it’s not that hard. But sometimes they still insist. That’s when we start pouring water into the drink.

-Alex: To dilute it?

-Jihye: Yeah and by then they haven’t really noticed anyway and usually they’ll just fall asleep.

Jihye’s example indicated the conceptual murkiness of safety within the service-security binary that dominates in the aviation industry. Although easily dismissed as mere service, the meaning behind maintaining visual and emotional cues from certain passengers deemed potential threats (both to themselves and others) became clearer. Here, service labor as security labor—invisibly inserted in moment-to-moment embodied acts of restraint, assertiveness, and even charm—enabled (certain) passengers the freedom *not* to care (from the potential threat of a drunk

or “terrorist”). On the one hand, Jihye asserted that she had the power to reject the wishes of the potential drunk passenger (“Yeah, of course I can!”). On the other hand, her admission that “charm,” presumably one informed by a cultivated feminized affect, also indexed the limits of her authority within the interaction. As noted earlier, people of lower social status, particularly women, tended to have to abide more strictly to feeling rules by guarding their supposed real emotions (Hochschild 1983)

Korean female flight attendants were trained early on in this form of security labor, one glossed over as service, but still ensuring the carefree status of passengers by disarming potential emotional and physical threats. A chief component of my fieldwork in Seoul between 2014 to 2015, as described in detail in Chapter 1, included the vast array of informal study groups (*sŭt'ŏdi moims*) saturating South Korea’s capital city (Chapter 1). These study groups (*sŭt'ŏdi moims*) were composed almost entirely of young women between the ages of twenty-one to thirty and catered to aspiring flight attendants for both South Korea-based and foreign airlines. Having met through online flight attendant-oriented forums, most meetings took place anywhere from once a week to every day of the week in specific “study room” (*sŭt'ŏdi bang*) spaces or coffee shops in the city. During these one to two-hour meetings, members practiced prepared scripts in English to respond to anticipated flight attendant interview questions. After gaining the trust of one such group through the instruction of a female member and friend, I became familiar with a study group (*sŭt'ŏdi moim*) among aspiring flight attendants for non-Korean foreign airlines. This group was composed of a core of approximately five members, young Korean women between the ages of twenty-two to twenty-six, as well as one woman in her late thirties. As was common during most meetings, during the discussion practice portion of the meeting,

members agreed on a thematic question. What follows is a description of a common practice exchange:

-Female member acting as an airline interviewer: “Is there any country you would not want to visit?”

-Female member acting as an aspiring flight attendant: “As someone who loves to travel, there really is no place I would not want to travel to. But I suppose if I had to, I might say Vietnam. But it’s not because I don’t like it or anything like that. It’s the opposite actually! I already have been there a few times, so I would want to make sure to visit a new place that I have never been to in the future.”

Many of the question prompts were readily available to any aspiring flight attendant through an intricate network of online forums, private lessons (by formal flight attendants), study groups (*sūt’ōdi moim*), and paid training institutes. The scope of the inquiries was intimidating, ranging from “What is your favorite memory” to “What do you think about climate change?” But mostly, questions were situational and specific to quick thinking responses in an in-flight environment. Interviewers, I later was told, oftentimes deliberately introduced conflict into their scenarios. Depending on the subtle visual cues that their faces registered, as slight as an “insufficient” smile, they could be rejected.

Members later told me that the border between verbally diffusing potential conflicts with passengers and deflecting legitimate abuse was murkier among South Korea-based airlines. Despite official rhetoric by Korean Air and Asiana Airlines expressing a no tolerance policy of sexual harassment of its employees by passengers, anecdotally I frequently heard stories of

airlines condoning such behavior during work. Practice interview books geared towards placing aspiring flight attendants in South Korea-based airlines also include a series of prepared interactions that support the existence of this tendency.

-Airline interviewer: “If a male passenger touched an inappropriate part of your body, how would you react?”

-Aspiring flight attendant: “First, I would try to ignore and just assume that it was a mistake.”

-Airline interviewer: “What if it continued?”

-Aspiring flight attendant: “Well, then I would do my best to try to understand why they might have done that. Later, if it continued, I would try not to allow it to happen by adjusting how I stood or was positioned next to the passenger.”

-Airline interviewer: “What if he still continued?”

-Aspiring flight attendant: “Then I suppose I would inform my co-worker or supervisor.”

Most aspiring, current, and former South Korean flight attendants (more so for South Korea-based airlines than “foreign” ones) I met claimed airlines emphasized security (and safety) considerably less than service. Indeed, almost all interlocutors informed me that little to no mention was made of security or safety during the interview process. The running logic, as I heard repeated by airline recruiters and private flight attendant training institute instructors, was that these were skills that *anyone* could learn. South Korean service—“service” (*sōbisū*) and “service mind” (*sōbisū maindū*)—was not. One either had it or not. Yet, as this chapter has attempted to demonstrate, the distinction between service and security were not so easily distinguishable.

At heart, the cultivated service of my flight attendant interlocutors possessed a strong element of control directed both internally and externally. The management and maintenance of this order initially was not identifiable. Instead, this management and maintenance was “deeply embedded in process... where the ‘lines’... distinguishing formal from informal authority—state and non-state institutions—[were] ultimately contingent on the contextual aspects of specific events and interactions” (Martin 2006: 1). Through their narratives, however, I came to see the superior service Korean female flight attendants were so famous for in a different light. The symbol of softer, sanitized, and glamorous (*hwaryŏhada*) Korean flight attendant service still signified the important yet ignored production and maintenance of Global Korea. But it also helped to highlight ongoing ways in which these same “foot soldiers” of globalization have become implicated in the South Korean state’s parallel, albeit less evident, project of projecting a cleaner image of itself, one that figuratively purifies its earlier, “dirtier” history of authoritarian rule, workplace brutality, and entrenched ethnocentrism—a subject I turn to next.

CHAPTER 4: DIRTY WORK, GLAMOROUS MIGRANT: REPRODUCING GLOBAL HIERARCHIES OF RACE, GENDER, AND NATION¹²⁶

This chapter explores the stakes behind and implications of the culturally specific idiom of “superior” service (*sōbisū*) outside the context of contemporary South Korea. Through the ethnographic case of Korean (mostly female) flight attendants working for Dubai-based Emirates Airlines I discuss their negotiations of self and nation. Confronted with the humbling reality of South Korea’s uncertain cosmopolitan location in a global capitalist order, the Korean flight attendants I met felt motivated to adhere to forms of gendered and classed nationalism, which inadvertently reproduced larger hierarchies of race, gender, and nation. In so doing, they successfully uphold South Korea’s own vision of having outpaced its earlier, “dirtier” history of manual labor in the region, as well as projecting a forward-thinking, glamorous image of South Korea’s aspirational entry on the world stage.

DIRTY WORK

24 June 2014, Grand Lobby, Renaissance Kuala Lumpur Hotel, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Noon.

“When you’re there on your hands and knees cleaning shit on the bathroom floor because Indians don’t know how to use the toilet, forget all the romance and glamour,” Mohit said, shaking his head. “That’s when you know what the job really is. It’s dirty work.” Mohit was a Malaysia Airlines male flight attendant aiming to upgrade his position with famed Dubai-based airline, Emirates Airlines. As I came to realize through my research (and as numerous popular

¹²⁶ Portions of this chapter previously were published in (Lee 2017). The copyright owner has provided permission to reprint.

accounts have suggested) Emirates Airlines was considered *the* airline of the moment, whether being served or doing the serving.¹²⁷ Mohit was sharing his thoughts about his job with me and an earnest audience of aspiring Emirates Airlines female flight attendants from South Korea and Thailand. We were attending an Emirates Airlines-organized Open Day (*Op'ūndei*) almost identical to one I attended in Hong Kong (Chapter 2). Like other booming Arab Gulf airlines, Emirates Airlines regularly held these group job interviews multiple times a month in select major cities around the world (Emirates Airlines Official Website 2017). Mohit's sobering description of his occupation contrasted with the grandeur that surrounded us: purple velvet wingback couches, leather chaise lounge chairs, marble floors, and a grand chandelier that accented the hotel's palatial lobby. The aspiring Emirates Airlines female flight attendants listening to him were no less stylish. They all looked like they had been plucked straight out of a scene from a lush Wang Kar Wai movie.¹²⁸ Almost all the approximately forty people in the lobby were slender Asian women in their twenties dressed in sharp white blouses and skirts, designer high heels, and flawless makeup. Most wore their hair in a slick, coiffed bun characteristic of most female flight attendants with Asia-based airlines. Approximately a quarter of the applicants were Asian men. Many were young and tall with shiny, pomaded hair. Nearly all were wearing red-accented ties, slim-fitted suits, and fancy shoes. Although Emirates Airlines representatives insisted that looks were less important selection criteria for men, these applicants still dressed to impress.

¹²⁷ This was a view shared by nearly all aspiring, current, and former flight attendants with whom I spoke. It is also a popular view within the industry itself.

¹²⁸ Wong Kar-Wai is famous for the striking cinematography and attractive Asian leads featured in his films, such as *In the Mood for Love* (2000) and *Chungking Express* (1994).

After explaining that I was an anthropologist studying the airline industry, I managed to sit on plush couches in the lobby with a group of aspiring flight attendants, including Mohit. Most of them were waiting for their turns to participate in the first stage of the day's interview process, the group interview, or "discussion" (*tik'a*). In these gatherings, small groups of numbered applicants entered a room, sat down, and chatted in English with one another. Nearby, an Emirates Airlines interviewer silently assessed them. Throughout the Open Day (*Op'ündei*), I watched applicants chatting with others, sometimes as friends and sometimes as strangers. Most believed that they always were being inspected—even outside of formal interview spaces. "Spies from Emirates Airlines were everywhere," was the on-going rumor. A few applicants confessed to me that, therefore, it was best *always* to stay "on" with a beaming smile, polite disposition, and sense of assertive friendliness. Despite the requisite anxiety that accompanied any job interview, almost all of the applicants exuded a distinct air of professionalism, poise, and pride. Undoubtedly, the opulent surroundings, good-looking applicants, and the prospect of working for the world's premier airline played a part in creating such a feeling. But Mohit's words about "cleaning shit" and "dirty work" appeared to cut through all of this. What had been such an upbeat group now appeared solemn. No one spoke. Instead, I saw only blank faces.

The aspiring flight attendants' reaction to Mohit's comments in the Renaissance Grand Lobby made perfect sense. The largest airline in West Asia, wholly government-owned Emirates Airlines aggressively has positioned itself as a major player in the commercial aviation industry. Central to this positioning has been Emirates Airlines' assertion of its superior in-flight service, one that rivals the exotic experiences of more traditional, earthbound tourist destinations. This success, the company claims, is due to its successful mix of past and future. Adopting the motto, "Hello Tomorrow," the Arab Gulf carrier since 2012 has branded itself as the best airline in the

world. This is a contention supported by industry analysts such as Skytrax. Emirates Airlines claims to have achieved its success by reviving a quality of in-flight service lost in the West: glamour. The (female) flight attendants depicted in nearly all of Emirates Airlines' advertising imagery has embodied this message.¹²⁹ In "resurrecting" glamour as its distinguishing feature vis-à-vis that of other airlines, Emirates Airlines (and its chief laboring and performing agents, flight attendants) also has restored glamour's earlier function. Much as it did during commercial aviation's inception in the 1920s, through what Barry describes as "the wages of glamour" (2007: 39), glamour in the present obscures the "dirtiness" of (high end) service working mobile workers (i.e., flight attendants) by concealing their emotion and body-based labor. This concealment underlines the tension between a "worldly openness that implies a relativist acceptance of differences and a desire for a collective humanity united by a universal value" (Shepherd 2017). Concurrently, glamour, simultaneously elevates the symbolic status of flight attendants as an elite corps of national workers-cum-ambassadors ostensibly distinct from that of other care and domestic labor migrants.

As hinted in earlier chapters, Korean Emirates Airlines female flight attendants are emblematic of the neoliberal, pink collar working youth phenomenon currently rising in East Asia, as well as the Global South more broadly (Freeman 2000; Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2004). Despite literally serving the world as quintessential cosmopolitan facilitators, many Korean Emirates Airlines female flight attendants occupy an uncertain status between glamorous globetrotting elites and lowly earth-bound service working migrants. This is especially true within the highly race-and nation-based stratified migrant labor market of Dubai.

¹²⁹ Although numerically sizable in number, male flight attendants rarely appear in Emirates Airlines' marketing. When they do, they tend to be in the background never foreground.

This chapter examines how Korean Emirates Airlines female flight attendants navigate this tension. Chiefly, it analyzes how race functions within these young East Asians' emergent cosmopolitan sensibilities. In so doing, I also examine the implications of Korean flight attendants being recognized (this time outside South Korea) for their service. The ideology of cosmopolitanism—embedded within the aspirational strategies of both Korean flight attendants and Global Korea—as I ultimately argue, is part and parcel to contemporary globalized capitalism, including its ongoing Eurocentric tendencies (Pieterse 2006).

In Dubai, Korean Emirates Airlines female flight attendants are motivated to disavow most forms of resemblance (and potential solidarity) with labor migrants deemed less desirable. Specifically, the uncertain status of Korean Emirates Airlines female flight attendants as “model minority” (high-class) laborers of the global care chain (Hochschild 2000) and as glamorous members of the globetrotting elite evince under-examined assumptions of race and whiteness undergirding more celebratory accounts of globalization. Rather, how certain tourism and hospitality industry labor migrants—in this case Korean Emirates flight attendants—negotiate their ambiguous status as racial and class subjects demonstrates the selective tolerance of certain differences over others.

“HELLO TOMORROW” (GOODBYE YESTERDAY)

22 May 2012. KLM Royal Dutch Airlines, Flight 427, somewhere over the UAE. Dawn.

“Is that the desert below?” I asked looking outside the window on a flight bound for Dubai. “No, no!” answered Nadya, a young Emirati woman serendipitously seated next to me. She continued:

Mission Impossible (2011), you see that? It shows Tom Cruise driving from the desert straight to the Burj Khalifa. That's not true. The desert is far away! It's *all* roads, very convenient multi-lane highways that the government built. Dubai is still building. Unfortunately, though, it still has a bad image with expats. But there are so many good things about Dubai.

I was there conducting preliminary fieldwork. This was my first time traveling to West Asia. Aside from a previous semester studying scholarly works analyzing the historical, political, economic, and cultural dynamics of this complex region, I had little practical knowledge of how I would spend the next three months of my preliminary fieldwork. As we flew towards Dubai, Nadya continued praising her home city-state, citing everything it had to offer “cosmopolitan expats” like myself: the Dubai Aquarium (“The largest in the world!”), the Dubai Fountain show (“The biggest in the world, bigger than the one in Vegas!”), safety (“There is no theft in Dubai”), hospitality (“You can’t eat pork and liquor but Dubai is still so tolerant. I work with Koreans and love kimchi!”), and its good government (“The government has done so much to improve things.”).

Nadya’s winsome personality and enthusiasm easily won me over. I sympathized with her concern that Dubai was unfairly portrayed in the international media. However, her energetic praise of Dubai still reminded me of what Mike Davis (2006: 49) describes as an “emerging dream world of conspicuous consumption”—ironically echoing most popular Western representations (including negative ones) of the glamorous city-state. Significantly, Dubai, not unlike other emerging economies of the Arab Gulf, also has been accused of consistently violating the human rights of its primarily South and Southeast Asian migrant workforce

(Gardner 2010; Mahdavi 2011). In the face of dwindling oil reserves, since the mid-2000s the Dubai government aggressively has shifted its focus from petroleum production to construction, finance, and tourism. Accounting for twenty-seven percent of its GDP, Dubai's international airport and national airline support one of the city-states' most important economic sectors: tourism (Benchabane n.d.). Accordingly, Emirates Airlines has popularized the region's reputation as a global hub of money, glamour, and travel, one available only in futuristic Dubai. Specifically, for the Western passenger famously dissatisfied by the ever more deteriorating service of North American and European airlines, Emirates Airlines female flight attendants' friendly and ultra-feminized looks harken back to a longed for, bygone, time.

Emirates Airlines shrewdly provides enough touch of the multicultural, racially exotic to allay any concerns that it is anything but the airline of choice for today and tomorrow. Like other airlines in Asia like Korean Air, Emirates Airlines exploits this mix of affective longing for a romanticized "Golden Age of Travel." The former does so by relying on the trope of (Western) aviation's glamorous past to proclaim itself as forward-thinking. This, as I explored in Chapter 2, is an imagined past whitewashed of historic racism, sexism, and homophobia. Emirates Airlines boasts that it is the most culturally diverse airline in the world with a cabin crew staff of over 140 nationalities. Indeed, despite lingering social and material inequalities between diverse regions of the world, Emirates Airlines' "embrace of the cultural," to quote Shepherd (2017), literally has turned difference into spectacle. Yet unlike the past's implied racial chauvinism, Emirates Airlines (not unlike Dubai more broadly) flaunts its progressiveness (Emirates Airlines Official Website 2017). This self-proclaimed liberal vision seems to have worked. In 2016, Brand Finance Global 500 reported that Emirates Airlines was the most valuable airline brand in the world (The Independent 2016). The air carrier also was one of the fastest growing and profitable

airlines in the world, ranking number one for several service-related categories, including “Best Flight Attendant Service,” “Best Cabin Ambience,” “Most Beautiful Airline Flight Attendants,” and “Most Clean and Modern” (AG Reporter 2015). In contrast, due to increased competition, most other airlines (especially in the United States) have been forced to cut back on the most basic of in-flight services (such as simple amenities and flight attendants who “care”).

Consequently, the success of low-cost international carriers like Air Asia, Norwegian Air, and Easy Jet, as well as industry deregulation, has enabled Emirates Airlines’ status to soar (Rapoza 2014). However, rather than acknowledging how broader economic, political, and cultural factors have influenced declining Western service standards, Emirates Airlines’ global marketing largely has emphasized only one: today, Western (e.g., chiefly North American) airlines do not care about good service. Here, the implication is that the glamour of air travel associated with legendary airlines, such as Pan Am, has been lost in a West sadly scrambling to keep up with more modern competitors in West, Southeast, and East Asia.

A recent Emirates Airlines Air commercial exemplifies this point. In it, vintage stock footage of Pan Am’s glory days—replete with handsomely dressed white passengers and pretty flight attendants serving champagne and caviar—accompanies Frank Sinatra’s ode to aviation, “Come Fly with Me.”¹³⁰ A male voice narrates:

¹³⁰ Few popular media representations of the symbolic power of Pan Am’s brand power in signifying luxury and glamour come as close as Steven Spielberg’s *Catch Me If You Can* (2002). Centering on the true life con-artist exploits of Frank Abagnale, Jr (played by Leonardo DiCaprio) during the 1960s, one memorable scene illustrates the culmination of these efforts. In it, having posed for months as a Pan Am pilot, Abagnale attempts to avoid capture by hiding amid a gaggle of iconic Pan Am female flight attendants, all of whom are young, white, and attractive. Frank Sinatra’s “Come Fly with Me” accompanies the scene as this group of Pan Am flight attendants passes an audience of ogling men: businessmen, police officers, and finally the very FBI agents assigned to catch him. Standing in awe with his mouth agape, one FBI agent tells his partner, “See that blonde up front?” Without a beat, his partner quips, “I should have

Ah, the Golden Age of Travel! Champaign flowed. Comfort was king. Passengers [were] royalty. Well, that age is long gone, replaced by one that is anything but golden. But don't worry. Great things are coming. Tomorrow will be amazing, they promise. You just wait.

In stark contrast, the male narrator's words are accompanied with dingy images of contemporary air travel: crowded airports, frustrated passengers, crying babies, unappetizing food, and disheveled cabin crew members. The final montage follows with lens flares streaking across the screen amid swelling music. Prominent is an image of an attractive female flight attendant doing what she supposedly does best: greeting people on board, serving luxury food, entertaining children, offering drinks, and attending to sleepy passengers. The voice concludes, "Tomorrow's travel experience is happening today. On Emirates Airlines. Choice. It's a wonderful thing (Emirates 2015).

been a pilot." A more recent example featuring the supposed allure and glamour of aviation's bygone years is ABC's failed TV series, *Pan Am* (2011-2012).



Figure 11: The Golden Age of Travel” Emirates Airlines advertisement¹³¹

This emphasis on glamour is strongly associated with an idealized image of the flight attendant. Like other Asian airlines, Emirates’ foregrounding of female flight attendants as a metonym for high-class, cosmopolitan travel is an adoption of earlier advertising trends in the industry. In the past, advertisers portrayed travel as an indulgence both served and enjoyed mostly by an elite (predominantly white, Euro-American) cosmopolitan clientele. Today’s servers and passengers, however, are similarly refined (albeit still usually white) yet also fittingly multicultural (i.e., of different races, ethnicities, and nationalities). This is Emirates Airlines’ post-racial answer to domesticating uncomfortable difference (racial, ethnic, and national) in a global age. Doing so has allowed Emirates Airlines to effectively appropriate a gendered and racialized arrangement that once was *de rigueur* within the service industry in the West. At the same time, the airline can maintain that they support the contemporary project of

¹³¹ Emirates 2015.

multiculturalism—succinctly defined as an appreciation of difference over discussions about inequality—as a positive response to ever-globalizing capital.¹³²

Another recent Emirates Airlines commercial effectively illustrates this theme through its subtle inspections of Dubai's complicated hierarchies over class and color. It opens with a montage of home video moments that track the life trajectory of a woman since she was a baby. A man narrates, "Because she was born in Sao Paolo. Because she loved putting on a good show and a good curry. Because she was top of her class in French, Malena is one of our cabin crew." Viewers are presented with images of, in turn, a baby, a teenager, a daughter, and a student, before the camera pans out to reveal the smiling face of a light-skinned Brazilian woman. This woman, Malena, is adorned with dazzling makeup and clothed in Emirates Airlines' signature flight attendant's uniform. Behind her is a luxury hotel, two modellesque white female flight attendants, and a white male pilot. The final image is a close-up of Malena standing in the aisle of an airplane at night, serving a glass of orange juice to an appreciative white girl, her white father comfortably sleeping next to her. The male voice concludes, "Together they come from more than one hundred nations, so you'll always feel a little more at home with us wherever you're from. Fly Emirates Airlines to over one hundred destinations" (Emirates Advertising 2008). Evident in these advertising examples is a pattern of accentuating mostly white or lighter-

¹³² This falls in line with Dubai's larger state-sanctioned multiculturalist-cum-modernizing project of framing the unprecedented number of non-Emirati foreign workers in Dubai (at nearly ninety percent) as a net-positive, including a South Asian diasporic community that comprises approximately fifty percent of the city-state's total population. Yet the Dubai government continues to highlight the city-state as a multicultural playground for (white) Western business tourists. Similarly, despite paying marketing lip service to its international workforce, Emirates Airlines highlights only certain foreign workers (largely white or lighter-skinned women) as the underlining reason for their cosmopolitan success.

skinned female flight attendants as company ambassadors, a practice that continues to undermine Emirates Airlines' cosmopolitan claims of racial, ethnic, and national tolerance.

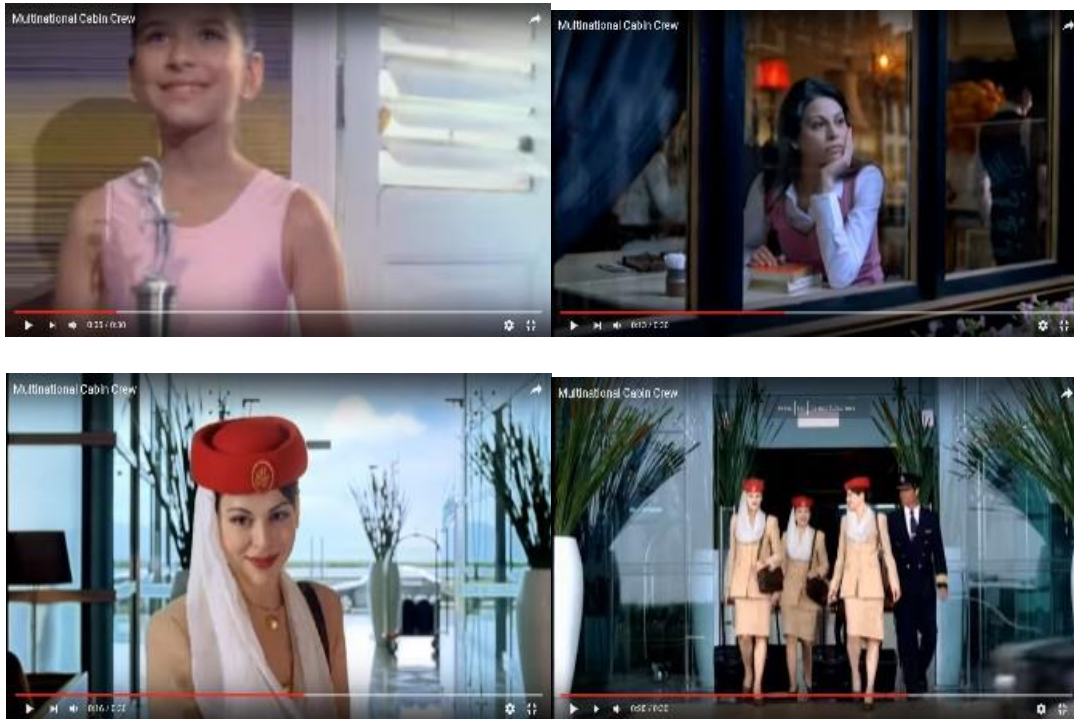


Figure 12: “More than 100 nations” Emirates Airlines advertisement¹³³

“KOREAN CREW? THEY ARE FANTASTIC!” HELLO TOMORROW WELCOMES THE
MODEL MINORITY MIGRANT COSMOPOLITAN¹³⁴

Since 1973, large, family-owned Korean conglomerates (*chaebŏl*), such as Hyundai have sent young, single men to work abroad in Arab Gulf countries like Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Such measures helped facilitate the economic policies of a post-Korean War, authoritarian South

¹³³ Emirates Advertising 2008.

¹³⁴ Quote from Emirates Airlines official in (*Chosun Ilbo* 2007).

Korean state seeking rapid industrialization via export-oriented construction projects (Shim 1983; Ling 1984). In the Arab Gulf, labor-short countries had a demand for cheap but industrious foreign labor. Flush with newfound oil wealth, countries like the UAE sought to exploit this arrangement by quickly developing their infrastructure.

As noted in Chapter 1, from the 1960s onward, South Korea experienced rapid industrial and economic development. Lacking local energy resources to sustain this growth and domestic demands for consumption, however, South Korea increasingly has shifted its foreign policy towards energy security. As a result, it has become reliant on the so-called oil-rich Arab World (Middle East Institute website 2016). No truer is this than the relationship between South Korea and the UAE. The two countries established diplomatic ties in 1980 (Oxford Business Group 2013). But it was not until the mid-2000s that industrial and trade relations between the two countries intensified. Following the devastating economic effects of the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, South Korea recovered through its external competitiveness and an export-oriented economic focus (Chopra 2001). Likewise, the Dubai government sought to diversify its oil-reliant and trade-based petro-economy with large investments in domestic and tourism infrastructure while encouraging foreign investment (Davidson 2008; Kanna 2011).

As a result, Korean chaebols, such as the Samsung Corporation, won many lucrative contracts for these projects, such as Samsung's building of the Burj Khalifa, the world's tallest building. More recently in 2016, Korea Hydro and Nuclear Power, a subsidiary of the Korea Electric Power Corporation, signed contracts with the Emirates Airlines Nuclear Energy Corporation to assist in the building of the UAE's first nuclear reactor (Reuters 2016).

Such accelerated economic engagement and the establishment of direct flights between Seoul and Dubai necessitated a new wave of service-oriented female migration. This was

concomitant with the South Korean state's aggressive globalization bid to replace South Korea's poverty-ridden, provincial image with one that spotlighted the country's advanced, foreigner-friendly status. As flight attendants, Korean young women serve two functions: first, they attest to Emirates Airlines' (and by proxy of their service, also South Korea's) image as a global, cosmopolitan brand. Second, they provide a familiar (feminine) face to South Korea's (mostly male) "global" professionals—homesick amid Dubai's nearly ninety percent foreigner population.

Emirates Airlines first began hiring Korean flight attendants in the early 2000s when the Dubai government was seeking to enhance its local profile to a larger global public. In contrast to the cosmopolitan image of global tolerance espoused by Emirates Airlines, however, almost all Korean female flight attendants I met candidly described a cabin crew work culture steeped in racial and nationality-specific stereotypes. Given their crude and offensive nature, most stereotypical classifications were domesticated through the outwardly "innocent" field of jokes. For example, (white) Westerners like British and Australians were described as attractive and fun but occasionally arrogant. Asians as a general category were characterized as working harder but with important distinctions: Chinese were prettier but dirty; Japanese were precise but robotic; Filipinos were friendly but pitiable (and probably gay); Arabs, regardless of their nationality, were snobby and direct (although Emirati citizens were friendly but haughty); finally, Indians and other South Asians were almost unanimously demeaned for their fastidiousness, irrationality, and downright barbarism. Korean Emirates Airlines female flight attendants were motivated to identify with and situate themselves within this flight attendant racial-national classification system.

In line with a broader model minority image of Asians among Europeans and Americans as industrious yet passive racialized minorities, Koreans have made a positive impression within the working culture of Emirates Airlines. For example, several years after establishing direct flights between Dubai and Seoul, Emirates Airlines founder and vice chairman Maurice Flanagan declared in 2007, “Korean Crew? They are fantastic!” (*Chosun Ilbo*, 2007). According to Emirates Airlines spokesperson Sheba Koonan, Korean flight attendants, more than other nationalities, were more service-oriented, industrious, and active in training sessions. Explained Head of Emirates Airlines publicity Matt Howard, “Koreans accept different cultures more easily than the Chinese or Japanese” (ibid). Many others in the aviation industry I met (including pilots and ground staff) concurred with this view, although they sometimes applied this perception to all East Asians.

Not surprisingly, most aspiring, current, and former Korean Emirates Airlines female flight attendants I spoke with claimed that all women wanted to try, at least once in their life, to become a flight attendant. They insisted that, besides teaching, banking, and pharmacology, becoming a flight attendant was the only other occupation for women that held such undivided esteem in South Korea. More significantly, unlike these other less service-oriented but more supposedly professional occupations, the flight attendant position required fewer conventional requirements like elite academic credentials and high test scores. Of course, the latter occupation still was astonishingly competitive.¹³⁵ Arguably, the largest motivating factor was the level of

¹³⁵ Emirates Airlines does not require applicants to possess a college degree. All South Korea-based airlines require a minimum of a two-year college diploma. Yet meeting this requirement ensures little job security in contemporary South Korea. Although flight attendant jobs offer a chance for upward social mobility, competition is fierce. For instance, the general hiring rate for a 2017 employment campaign by domestic low-cost carrier Eastar Airlines was approximately 27 out of 9,208 (or 0.29 percent) (Chun 2017). To put this into perspective, the admittance rate

social prestige attributed to the occupation. This became apparent to me when Jeeyoung, a twenty-eight-year-old flight attendant who had been working at Emirates Airlines since 2007, explained the difference between Western and Korean flight attendants. She said, “In the West, you *only* think of someone who does service in a cabin. But in Korea, flight attendants have a much more refined image. People think of someone who is pretty and travels the world,” she explained.

However, Korean Emirates Airlines female flight attendants’ on-the-ground experiences were less clear-cut. Thirty-three-year-old Jihye had been working in Dubai since 2009. She prided herself on her brashness and bluntness—qualities at odds with the stereotype of the meek and delicate Asian female flight attendant. Having hailed from a humble economic and academic background in Busan, Jihye had had few experiences with foreigners when growing up, except for learning English from a white Canadian language instructor.¹³⁶ Consequently, her trajectory from what she lamented as a “sleepy suburb” outside Busan to bustling Dubai meant a dramatic life upgrade. Jihye described becoming accustomed to and even nonchalant about serving the world’s rich and famous. For her, meeting celebrities had become unexceptional. During one of our encounters, she casually showed me a picture of her standing next to a recognizable, albeit disheveled George Clooney. Her stories seemingly legitimized Emirates Airlines’ multicultural dream of jet-setting flight attendants of all national backgrounds hobnobbing with the George Clooney’s of the world—albeit only in first or business class. Although not the norm among my

for the incoming 2017 class of South Korea’s most prestigious university, Seoul National University was 963 out of 3,968 students (or 24.3 percent) (Newsis 2017).

¹³⁶ Despite being the second most-populous city after Seoul, Busan oftentimes conjures a “second-tier,” “country-fried” image among more Seoul-centric Koreans.

interlocutors, such encounters were not uncommon. But more common were the everyday realities of their lives as airborne service workers.

For most of these women, the reality of finding themselves no longer just Korean but now Asian women in a foreign country was a sobering, and sometimes shocking, experience. Jeeyoung described how her arrival in 2007 was especially difficult. “When I first rode the taxis the [South Asian] drivers were so scary,” she said. “Before when they saw an Asian woman, they would keep glancing strangely. Whenever I told them to take me somewhere they always would take me to a strange place. They lack common sense. And the smell was really bad. They were always dirty.” Jeeyoung’s talk of first encountering negativity due to her racialization in Dubai was tellingly linked to the Arab Gulf’s most commonly derided group, Indians. Minkyung, the twenty-six-year-old flight attendant who had been working for Emirates Airlines since 2009 made a similar connection when she derided Indian men while coming to terms with her own sexual objectification in Dubai. “Have you taken any taxis here?” she asked me once.

They’re kind of strange. When I say I’m ready to ride their taxi they don’t like it. They’ll say, “No, it’s traffic time!” In Korea, you just say “go,” and taxi drivers just go. Why would they complain [in Dubai]? An older female friend said this happens more to [Asian] women. So, I got so angry! Because things that are easy in Korea are hard here. Things that are normal in Korea are abnormal here [in Dubai].

These examples evince how the stereotype of a hypersexualized female “China doll/Asian prostitute” still lingered as a negative foil to the model minority global Asian worker. Rarely, if ever, addressed publicly by Emirates Airlines, this familiar image was common even among

other (East and South) Asians. Significantly, however, any negative opinions my female East Asian interlocutors expressed were reserved for individual South Asians rather than Dubai's broader unequal stratification of migrant labor along racial, ethnic, and national lines. In this way, Jeeyoung's description illustrated the limits of an idealized cosmopolitanism that lacked introspection about colonialism, imperialism, and the racial hierarchies both have produced (Shepherd 2017).

Additionally, these vignettes speak to the blind spots of a liberal cosmopolitanism confronted with the realities of everyday, increasingly globalized, racial logics. Due to their racialized status as *relatively* privileged East Asian migrants, Korean Emirates Airlines female flight attendants were forced to attend to the boundaries of a kind of cosmopolitanism-in-training, yet one whose graduation date never arrives. "Complimentary on its face" but "disingenuous at its heart" (Wu 2002: 49), the model minority stereotype that colored my interlocutors' jet-setting aspirations was a narrative emphasizing closure, uplift, and most significantly a subject who achieved and succeeded. Paramount to this myth was the docility it ascribed to its members as model minorities. Within this schema, Korean Emirates Airlines female flight attendant model minority migrants, rather than protesting, accepted the pressure that they model behavior for others—namely "inferior" minority migrants—to follow (Sohn 2014).¹³⁷

¹³⁷ The model minority myth emerged as a response to demands for equality by African Americans during the 1960s U.S. Civil Rights Movement. Reinforcing the myth of American meritocracy, the model minority myth shrouded structural racial inequalities (including a near ban on Asian immigration from 1921 until passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965) while pitting supposedly successful Asian Americans against African Americans and other minority groups. Variants of the model minority myth persist globally, as many scholars have noted (Lowe 1996; Parrenas and Siu 2007). Jin-kyung Lee has asserted that historically, South Korean development during the 1960s "soon became an example, serving as a model minority in

Thus, ultimately, whatever relatively raised position Koreans secured within Dubai's ethnic and racial hierarchy was fragile. Jeeyoung, Jihye, and Minkyung—as well as many other non-flight attendants, including non-Koreans—demonstrated this point whenever they talked about stereotypes about Koreans: their being exclusive, conceited, and the worst English speakers among Asians. Jihye explained how this sentiment extended beyond casual conversations. In line with Emirates Airlines' vision of a multicultural and harmonious work environment, she claimed that “culture sessions” were part and parcel to the yearly re-licensing trainings flight attendants were required to attend. During these multi-day trainings, flight attendants were re-evaluated on their service and knowledge of safety procedures. Becoming increasingly flustered as she retold this story to me, Jihye explained:

It was a very fun culture session. But the instructor was a [white] Canadian. Suddenly, she started saying so many bad things about Koreans. [Mocking the instructor's ridiculing voice] ‘Samsung, LG, Hyundai! That's all you guys [Koreans] always talk about!’ She was so snobby. So, I thought, is she crazy? Our company, Emirates, it's a kind of a multicultural company, so, they [instructors] should try to understand. This person was too open and frank, though, so my pride was so hurt.

Out of curiosity, I asked if there were any other Koreans in the room. Jihye said there were, but like her, they had remained silent. This silent humiliation was followed by more gross

the broader context of the United States' neocolonial ‘under-development and impoverishment’ of countries in Latin America and Africa” (2010: 29-30).

generalizations by the instructor. Jihye explained how the participants discussed safety scenarios, including one in which they debated whether to notify the captain of something unusual on the plane's wing right before the critical phase of landing. Jihye said she likely would contact a purser (a high-ranking flight attendant) first to get a second opinion. Afterwards, however, Jihye claimed that a white American flight attendant participant interjected, "I can't understand that! Why would you do that? Why not just contact the pilot directly first?" to which the instructor concurred, "An Asian can't think that. Western people like us think differently." Visibly flustered, Jihye rhetorically asked in front of me, "Was this instructor qualified to be working at our company? She continued, "She was belittling us so openly. This was an official session. All the crew were there. I couldn't believe it."

Nonetheless, Jihye later qualified her concern by saying that the incident most likely represented the actions of an individual "crazy" instructor. Unfortunately, Jihye did not comment on how this incident signaled a broader corporate culture of cosmopolitan intolerance. Instead, on the heels of what she confessed was a traumatic experience, Jihye said she became an unofficial goodwill ambassador of South Korea. "I became resistant, someone who had to explain everything," she said. "Regarding people's bad image of Koreans, I would say, 'Not all Koreans are like this! It's not true! They're like this and that.' I would tell crew members directly." That Jihye failed to extend this same open-minded introspection to the South Asian (predominantly Indian) migrants she so casually scorned also was a painful irony seemingly lost on her.

Above all, although sometimes critical, nearly all Korean Emirates Airlines female flight attendants I met espoused their employer's cosmopolitan vision. Indeed, many kept repeating that they themselves were hired for their unique "open-mindedness." Seemingly, this was a

cosmopolitan quality found only in a select few who were enlightened enough to truly engage with the world.

REPRODUCING GLOBAL RACIAL AND NATIONAL HIERARCHIES (AKA SURVIVING EMIRATES AIRLINES' COSMOPOLITAN CREW CULTURE)

As my dissertation suggests, groups like Korean flight attendants who uncomfortably straddle more established boundaries of a gendered, classed, and racialized classification feel compelled to reproduce global racial and national hierarchies in their bid to eschew negative stigmatization. Specifically, for my interlocutors, admitting that Emirates Airlines' work culture was steeped in race or nationality-based prejudices appeared to endanger the privileged, yet precarious, cosmopolitan status they had worked so hard to acquire. Consequently, uncritically participating in this hierarchical system was one of the only ways they could disavow being associated with other labor migrants deemed less desirable. As I suggest throughout this dissertation, this is a tendency reflected in the policies of Global Korea and its negotiations with the ideology of advanced country (*sŏnjin 'guk*) and backward country (*hujin 'guk*).

Still, these distinguishing logics on the ground often were subtle. Underlining the purpose of the model minority myth in elevating the status of its select members is the role of the latter to act as a model for other groups deemed in need of instruction. Hence, charity might be considered a critical means of figuratively enacting this function. As a result, not all depictions of South Asians by Korean Emirates Airlines female flight attendants were overtly derisive. For instance, Jihye described how early in her tenure, she had become familiar with the “second crew” that boarded the plane after a flight. Composed mostly of South and Southeast Asian older women, their job was to clean the interior of the plane within a very short window of time.

Remarkably, with rare exception, they did so without air conditioning, since the plane's engines were turned off after landing. With Dubai temperatures reaching as high as 113 degrees Fahrenheit in the summer, such labor was characteristic of more familiar narratives of migrant exploitation and oppression in the region.

Reflecting on this situation, Jihye described the heartbreak she felt witnessing this scene:

Those people—they make only maybe three hundred dollars a month. Even if they want to eat something they can't because things are so expensive in Dubai. For us Koreans it's even expensive. But for these people [South/Southeast Asians] how expensive do you think it could be? We flight attendants always make sure to leave water for them to drink on the plane. Not just me, but every crew member does this. And if there is leftover bread, chocolates, things like that on a plane, we leave them out, too. There's always so much leftover food on the plane. One day I saw another crew member just dumping all the food you have on Emirates Airlines' expensive serving trays into a grey bag. So, I asked them, "Won't all the food get mixed together?" She replied, "Even if you just throw it all in there like that they'll still just eat it." I was so shocked to hear that. My heart hurt so much. So after that, whenever I see those people after a flight, I make sure to leave things like juice. I think of God. Ultimately this is stuff we throw away, but if there's anything we can do for these people we should, full-heartedly.

The site of service (namely serving others from different racial, ethnic, and national backgrounds) seemed only to further develop or validate stereotypes that earlier might have only

been hazy and embryonic. Jihye elaborated, “I didn’t really have a reference point for stereotypes before visiting Dubai. But after living and working here and seeing foreigners up close, I realized that the stereotypes really were true! Everything flight attendants see becomes ordinary. In any case, those people you meet [in person] are how you form your images of them, not TV.” In another exchange, this time with, Minkyung, I received a more straightforward response. “I learned racism in Dubai,” she once told me.

One reason Emirates Airlines highlighted such a bright and glamorous cosmopolitan vision of Dubai might have been to counter the reality of it being a diasporic hub for South Asians who make up nearly sixty percent of the city’s population (Vora 2013). That South Asians so thoroughly dominated the optical landscape of Dubai (and Emirates Airlines’ passenger base) was a consistent focus of disappointment among my interlocutors (including Dubai-based Koreans, in general). This fact also likely threatened my Korean interlocutors’ own sense of high-class, cosmopolitan status. Consequently, the endless boasts of Emirates Airlines’ 140-plus nationalities cosmopolitan crew and Dubai’s ninety percent foreigner population resulted less in a “flowering of transnational solidarity” than what Shepherd notes as the new cultivation of a “specific class of people linked by taste, social status, and material security, which together shape a very specific (and hence not universal) culture” (2017). In the case of my interlocutors, borrowing a phrase from Abelman, the cosmopolitan dreams of Korean Emirates Airlines female flight attendants had a color: white (2009:16).

During one of my interviews, Minkyung echoed this sentiment. After being asked what the word, foreign country (*oeguk*) meant to her, she responded, “For me, when I say *oeguk* I don’t think of Africa, I think of the West. I think of developed countries. For me, the *oeguk* I’m talking about is very selective.” By the time I had met her in summer 2012, despite having

traveled to nearly one hundred countries, Minkyung had grown tired of Dubai and her occupation. For her, endless travel was not enough to overcome the drawbacks of being a flight attendant, including chronic fatigue, unruly passengers, and most importantly, little room for occupational advancement. She was referencing not only future career options, however, which were a real concern for ex-flight attendants who worried about how to translate low-skilled service skills into what Minkyung deemed “real” professional careers. Minkyung also was talking about advancement in a deeper, philosophical sense. “I want more knowledge and growth,” she said. “I want to learn things but this job doesn’t really allow that. That’s why I’m thinking of quitting after my contract ends later this year.” Notably, one incentive for staying with the job was her boyfriend, a white Spanish flight attendant co-worker. Of the many things she admired about him, his humanity impressed Minkyung the most. “With him, I can learn so much. More knowledge and growth. He’s always teaching me new things and is interested in Korea, so we both learn from each other” (ibid).¹³⁸

CONCLUSION

In the introduction to his book, *Cosmopolitanism: Ideals and Realities* David Held writes, “Until recently, the West has, by and large, determined the rules of the game on the global stage” (2010: 1). Later, though, Held counters with a rosier picture for the future:

¹³⁸ Minkyung and I remain in touch. She and her once-boyfriend are now married. Although she is no longer an Emirates flight attendant, he remains one. Currently, she has no job and lives with her husband in Dubai.

Today, however, that picture is changing. The trajectory of Western dominance has come to a clear halt with the failure of dominant elements of Western global policy over the past few decades. The West can no longer rule through power or example alone. At the same time, Asia is on the ascent... The trajectory of change is towards a multipolar world, where the West no longer holds a premium on geopolitical or economic power. Moreover, different discourses and concepts of governance have emerged to challenge the old Western orthodoxy of multilateralism and the post-war order. At the same time, complex global processes, from the ecological to the financial, connect the fate of communities to each other across the world in new ways, requiring effective, accountable and inclusive problem-solving capacity. How this capacity can be ensured is another matter (2010:3).

That Korean flight attendants respond to their uncertain cosmopolitan status as Westernized yet Asian, traveling yet laboring subjects, speaks to the complex global processes of reconfigured categories of race, ethnicity, and nationality that constitute contemporary cosmopolitanism. Arguably more than other global laborers, Korean Emirates Airlines female flight attendants' identities figuratively and literally exemplify modes of travel, tourism, and mobility. Nonetheless, their own emergent understandings of cosmopolitanism remain circumscribed within corporate (Emirates Airlines) and national (UAE) cultures. These larger cultural forces foreclose the meaning of "cosmopolitan competence" to seeking (high-)classed cosmopolitan sensibilities (i.e., global tastes in food, fashion, and tourism experience) rather than interrogating questions of inequality based on perceived differences.

Some former Korean female flight attendant interlocutors eventually became aware of this unsettling condition. I met most while later conducting fieldwork in South Korea. They told me that they eventually realized most of the glamour of the occupation was manufactured. Seunghyun, in her thirties, recently had quit after nearly ten years (2005-2015) as an Emirates Airlines flight attendant. I asked why she had chosen to end what for most aspirants was a glamorous, dreamlike occupation. Her primary reason mirrored that of Minkyung. “I don’t want to push a cart for the rest of my life,” she replied.

“Discrepant cosmopolitans” (Clifford 1992) like Minkyung could be considered the latest example of how marginal youth (in this case liminally-classed Korean Emirates Airlines female flight attendants) creatively have responded to the uncertain effects of late capitalism. On the other hand, many Korean Emirates Airlines female flight attendants like Minkyung eventually realized that the glamour that originally had provided an entryway into cosmopolitan travel wore off, revealing something decidedly more lowly and laborious. Many came to realize that, although surrounded by the trappings of luxurious world travel, they were merely laboring tourists (a.k.a. globetrotting servants). The toll of their racialized experiences as service workers for Emirates Airlines and sojourners in Dubai emphasized this fact. In this way, the sobering reception they received about the limits of their global ambitions suggested a similarly restricted path for a South Korean state and people longing for global recognition. On the world’s stage, Korean female flight attendants represented the product of the Korean state’s project of globalization (*seggyehwa*) since the early 1990s and later Global Korea in the 2010s. Although the results of the latter remain unclear, in serving the needs of their compatriots abroad, Korean flight attendants continued to produce, maintain and experience the unexpected limits of this ongoing national project.

CHAPTER 5: OFF TEMPO: GENDERED HISTORIES OF SOUTH KOREA

This chapter is about the unique qualities of temporality that are elemental to the Korean female flight attendant occupation. In Chapter 1, I contextualized the growth and popularity of the flight attendant occupation among many young Korean women in economic terms. Citing Hardt (1999), I contended that the occupation offered an uncommonly attractive incentive to join the workforce. Additionally, contrary to a Korean labor market that maintained considerable gender gaps in labor force participation, employment, and wages, the flight attendant occupation has sustained its reputation as an uncommonly female-dominated occupation that also promised sizeable financial rewards: high pay, good health and welfare benefits, and free travel. As I present in this chapter, however, becoming/being a flight attendant for my interlocutors went beyond the crude calculations of securing a kpb. I am mindful of Barry's critique of flight attendant originators as an elite, and therefore exclusionary corps of racialized and classed workers (e.g., flight attendants as a "fellowship of whiteness") (2007: 17). Nevertheless, analyzing how this seemingly Western occupational form has taken shape in South Korea also reveals the undertheorized role flight attendants historically have played in allaying Korean anxieties over its proper place and time within teleological accounts of modernity and progress.

Following Barraclough and Faison (2009), histories of labor and class in industrial societies always have been entangled with the development of modern expressions of gender and sexuality. The working class and wage labor are generally presumed to be male. Both categories, however, have "depended on female bodies, heterosexuality, and normative visions of the family for their articulation within social and political discourse" (Barraclough and Faison 2009: 1). Consequently, in focusing on the gendered narratives of now-retired former Korean flight

attendants, this chapter aims to uncover earlier embodiments and productions of South Korea's aspirational development and emergent globalism.

PIONEERING WOMEN AND EARLIER PRECEDENTS OF PRESTIGE

April 2, 2015. Gangnam District, Seoul, South Korea

I was nervous. I was to meet my mother and her long-term Korean friends from college, many of whom she had not seen in person for years. In anticipation of the gravity of the meeting, I had arrived early at the proposed venue. It was a fancy Japanese restaurant that felt hidden from the vast thoroughfares and spectacular skyscrapers that characterized South Korea's most expensive metropolitan region, Gangnam. Walking into the entrance of the restaurant, which was located on a lower level of a building off the main road, I noticed a small indoor pond inhabited by colorful, red and orange koi fish. The restaurant had little of the flash of many other fancy but newer restaurants in the area. Instead, it felt decidedly old-school, an assumption supported by the small number of other patrons, all of whom looked to be in their 50s or 60s.

Noting the contrast between the peace inside versus the noise outside, I was reminded of the emotiospatial (Milligan 2005) transition I often felt immediately while boarding an airplane. I tended to feel a shift in feeling after escaping the draconian experience of an airport security screening and the monotonous waiting at an airport gate. This was especially true for Asian airlines globally.¹³⁹ Within commercial air travel, the physical border between the cacophony of

¹³⁹ Although a somewhat dubious distinction, the category of "Best Economy Class" serves as a useful marker of overall in-flight service satisfaction beyond the confines of "high-class" business or first class. Among the top ten airlines listed under this category by Skytrax, the influential British-based industry rating organization, all are from Asia. Significantly, in 2016 Asiana Airlines (South Korea's other prominent airline, second only to flagship Korean Air) was first while Korean Air was third, behind Japan Airlines (Skytrax 2016).

a cavernous, busy, and impersonal airport terminal and a more confined, relaxed, and intimate airplane cabin was manifested by the jet bridge that separated docked airplanes from an airport's gate. More subtly, however, the emotional border between impersonal to personal was bridged by the gendered care labor of (usually) an air "hostess" (i.e., flight attendant). Like the "ornamental function" of early twentieth century Japanese women (Yamamoto 2017) that helped to visually please (and appease) an imagined masculine gaze, Korean women's emotional labor in these emotiospatial transitions was crucial in manufacturing such sophisticated serenity. My experience in the restaurant that morning was no different.

What separated me from the urban confusion of the second most densely populated city in the world outside was not just the physical border of a large wooden door. It was the domesticating presence of a gracious female hostess catering to any of my concerns and questions. In this regard, she was a borderland agent who separated (and, hence, helped to secure) my emotional journey from unwelcoming city to welcoming shelter. At the same time, as a borderland agent, she also helped to demarcate this class-inflected, manufactured border as well as who was authorized to cross it (Lugo 2008).

I could see that my mother, like me, had dressed up for the occasion.¹⁴⁰ Aware of my dissertation topic, my mother suggested that I meet two of her best friends from her alma mater, the elite women's university, Ewha. Both had worked as flight attendants during the early 1970s. One, Mrs. Park, had worked for nearly ten years for now-defunct, Minneapolis-based Northwest Airlines (NWA). As a flight attendant for "Northwest Orient," a regional division of the airlines'

¹⁴⁰ Although a long-term resident of the greater Los Angeles, California area, my mother was visiting Seoul that year.

post-WWII trans-Pacific market expansion, Mrs. Park was based in Japan.¹⁴¹ Mrs. Cho, my mother's other friend, had worked for a shorter period, approximately three years, as a flight attendant for South Korea's flag carrier, Korean Air.¹⁴² Like my mother, Mrs. Park and Mrs. Cho appeared especially youthful. Moreover, the two former flight attendants' fashion sense seemed distinct. Mrs. Park wore a chic black blazer uncharacteristic of styles I had seen worn by other Korean women her age. Mrs. Cho wore a cream-colored blouse with colorful jewelry to accent her outfit.¹⁴³

At the time, I recalled thinking how ironic it was that these two women who described having spent such a formative part of their adult lives serving others were now being served by others in such a deferential manner. As chit chat between my mother and her two friends started to dwindle, Mrs. Park who was the livelier of the two, took to the real business at hand. "You have questions, so ask them!" she declared with a disarming smile. As it turned out, most of my worries about following "Korean" protocols of decorum were unnecessary. As was the case with

¹⁴¹ In 2008, Northwest Airlines was absorbed by Delta Air Lines, making the latter the largest airline in the world until the merger of American Airlines-US Airways overtook this record.

¹⁴² A flag carrier refers to a transportation company that enjoys special rights and privileges by its host country's government. First founded by the government of South Korea in 1962 (as a replacement for "Korean National Airlines"), "Korean Air Lines" enjoyed and continues to enjoy considerable prestige in the country's travel imaginary.

¹⁴³ Aware of the thorny politics of making physical descriptions of Korean women as a cisgender, heterosexual Korean American male, I remain hesitant in my usage of visual descriptors. It is impossible to generalize the diverse group of aspiring, current, and former flight attendants. At the same time, over the course of my twenty-one months of combined (pre-and former) fieldwork I noticed among many a kind of cultivated "flight attendant aesthetic." Although just as easily explained by a broader fashion-savvy among young, "cool" consumer-oriented South Koreans, this sense of pronounced style in dress and makeup frequently was noticeable among my interlocutors, both young and old.

my favorite flight attendant interlocutors, with or without the help of being vouched by friends or family, Mrs. Park and Mrs. Cho were refreshingly personable and lighthearted.



Figure 13: Korean flight attendants performing service (staged) during the late 1970s/early 1980s¹⁴⁴

¹⁴⁴ From a 1982 Korean Airlines flight attendant memoir (Ko 1982).

Unsurprisingly, both Mrs. Park and Mrs. Cho described how even though it had been nearly thirty years since they had worked as flight attendants, the effects and affects of the occupation lingered on. The excitement and nostalgia exhibited by Mrs. Park and Mrs. Cho reminded me of a similar group featured in Yano's historical ethnography (2011) on ex-Pan Am Japanese American (*Nisei*) flight attendants at the start of the Jet Age (1958 to the present). As I described in Chapter 2, the women featured in Yano's book worked for Pan Am, the then-global airline leader. Yano observes how these Asian (American) women were able to realize their "airborne dreams" against the specter of multiple historic factors: "the racialized specter of the Second World War, Cold War confrontations in Asia, heated race relations, a burgeoning American and global popular culture, and [increasing] images of Asian women" around the world (Yano 2011: 179). Like these pioneering women, Mrs. Park and Mrs. Cho expressed similar pride in having participated in a sorority of South Korea's earliest globetrotting women, "weav[ing] bonds over the heady adventures that marked their careers, as well as to the company that traded on glamour in the air" (Yano 2011: 2). Mrs. Park's and Mrs. Cho's airborne dreams were actualized via two of the most prominent "domestic" and "international" airlines of their time, Korean Air and Northwest, respectively. Their experiences occurred against the backdrop of South Korea still psychologically reeling from civil war (1950-1953)—an ever-present Cold War clash materialized on the Korean peninsula that led to its eventual partition—burgeoning Korean emigration to the U.S. and labor migration to the U.S., Europe, and the Middle East, and increasing civil unrest under pre-1987 democratization, authoritarian rule. As noted in previous chapters, until South Korea's democratization, existing authoritarian regimes severely restricted civilian travel. As I had expected, these factors served to further enhance the prestige of the flight attendant occupation at the time.

Over the clamor of clinking silverware during a formal, multi-course Korean style banquet meal, Mrs. Park explained this point. “Leaving [South] Korea or traveling was so hard back then... it wasn’t like today where we’re [Koreans] all living so well. We [Koreans] had no money then, so we couldn’t even think of leaving... because of that the flight attendant job was incredibly popular and respected—just the idea of going to a foreign country as you pleased.

Although initially quiet throughout our interaction, Mrs. Cho softly interjected, “I went everywhere. Saudi Arabia, Europe, Switzerland, and Paris.” Given that there was only one Korean Air route between Seoul and Paris at the time, Mrs. Cho explained how it was not uncommon to spend up to a week in Paris (“always a Hyatt Hotel!” Mrs. Park added jovially). For the average Korean at the time, such travel was unthinkable. Indeed, the furthest reaches of an imagined travel map might extend only as far as semi-tropical Jeju island, a then-popular destination for newlyweds and an hour flight from the mainland. Mrs. Park’s and Mrs. Cho’s long listing of countries visited, experiences had, and connections made could be read as subtle boasting. On the other hand, I was reminded that these women had “served” so much in exchange for these cherished memories of travel. Over time, I found myself mostly charmed by their intimate knowledge of past times and places I could only imagine.

Alex: Where did you like to travel the most?

Mrs. Cho: I liked Hawaii. You could walk around all the time and the weather was always nice. They always had tasty things to eat, too. Paris, I also liked a lot. After visiting the U.S, I realized how much of a big difference there was with Paris. In the U.S. people wore these big, unattractive pants. But in Paris, everyone wore suits and chic clothes, especially the women.

Everyone looked like an actor but they were all friendly. And the men were handsome.

Mrs. Park: Paris, everyone was arrogant and mean. You'd speak English and they would hate that. They wouldn't even respond.

Mrs. Cho: (Gently disregarding Mrs. Park's comment) In Paris, you could buy makeup you couldn't even think about in Korea. You also could buy it cheaper.

Despite the hardships of the occupation (chiefly those I already have discussed in earlier chapters), both Mrs. Park and Mrs. Cho generally expressed longing and nostalgia for a period of their life both defined as a pinnacle in their lives. Mrs. Cho acknowledged the requisite difficulties of working at a big Korean company (*chaebol*) like Korean Air, namely rigid hierarchies and endless labor, which might have been one factor in her not working longer than three years. She did not elaborate, so I only could speculate. Mrs. Park, on the other hand, overall, was glowing in her praise of her Tokyo-based tenure at Northwest Airlines.¹⁴⁵ Again, in this respect, Mrs. Park was not that different from Yano's (2011) *Nisei* Pan Am subjects, many of whom worked around the same time (1960s to 1980s). In her book, Yano admits that what she found most striking among her interlocutors was how regardless of how long (or more often than not, short) a period they had worked at Pan Am, they remained the airlines' (and by proxy, the

¹⁴⁵ As noted in my previous chapters, this is a sentiment that endures within contemporary Korean work culture today. Although the trend appears to be changing, South Korea's work culture remains notorious for its rigid system of seniority, long hours, and adverse productivity.

flight attendant occupation's) greatest proponents. Many knew going in that the occupation would last, at most, a few years and was likely only a temporary affair. Yano explains:

What matters, however, is not the length of employment but the meanings that these women give to their Pan Am years... Clearly the process of “becoming—and remaining—Pan Am” was not contingent upon long-term employment... What “Nisei” stewardesses share with other former Pan Am flight attendants is the opportunity to work in a prestigious company, fly to different parts of the world, rub shoulders with the rich and famous, learn about service in exotic environments with exotic peoples, and do so in a period when the company was at the top of its form and could treat them very well. This kind of experience is difficult—some would say impossible—to replicate (2011: 165).

That the status of flight attendants during Mrs. Park's and Mrs. Cho's tenure (early to late 1970s South Korea) was enhanced by the inability of most other South Koreans to travel was a main theme of our conversation. The reason for this, both, as well as mother explained was the poverty-stricken, “undeveloped” status of post-war South Korea, a subject I now turn to.

COMPRESSED TIME, CIRCUMSCRIBED LIVES

According to Abelmann, whether South Korea's modern development was *the* most compressed is less the point than acknowledging that “the robust consensus that indeed something very dramatic happened in South Korea” (2003: 282). In popular discourse, such rapid industrialization from a “dependent aid-receiving” to “independent aid-providing” nation

within a generation, is encapsulated in the expression of South Korea as one of a few Asian “Tiger economies” to have experienced rapid industrialization while maintaining notably high growth rates between the 1960s to the 1990s.¹⁴⁶

Noted historian of (North and South) Korea Bruce Cumings untangles this compressed modernity succinctly:

Korea presents the Westerner not with a smooth narrative of progress toward industrial mastery, however, but with a fractured, shattered twentieth-century history. In 1910 it lost its centuries-old independence and remained an exploited colony until 1945. Then came national division, political turmoil, a devastating war, and the death and dislocation of millions—which only left Korea still divided and in desperate poverty. A decade later South Korea began to industrialize, and today it has a mostly democratic politics, but only after two military coups and several popular rebellions... So, this is another theme: modern, yes: whole, no. A related theme is the marginal beginnings of Korea’s modern effort. No Westerner imagined a modern Korea in 1900, none predicted it in 1945, and experts still did not envision it just a generation ago. Instead, Korea seemed lacking in everything that counted in the West: bustling commerce, empirical science, a stable middle class, a spirit of enterprise, innovative technology. How, then, did the Koreans do it?.. It might have been history that was overlooked (2005: 11)

¹⁴⁶ The other “Asian Tigers” are Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taiwan.

South Korea after the Korean War (post-1953 into the early 1970s), was a desperate time and place marked by material (i.e., collective and national destitution) and psychological (i.e., the “humiliation” of being passed from one colonial power (Japan) to another (the U.S.)) poverty. Likewise, postwar Seoul’s “odd pastiche of a real and symbolic economy of American goods, language, money, and influence” complicated static or simple understandings of class or social standing or national identity (McHugh and Abelman 2005: 5). The narratives of past flight attendants like Mrs. Park and Mrs. Cho reflect the social production and reproduction of maleness and femaleness,” particularly “women narrat[ing] the social and psychological circumstances that produce gendered traits, traits that in turn engender[ed] particular [circumscribed] life trajectories (ibid). Within this framework of South Korean history of development towards modernity emerged certain gendered tropes, chiefly that of the domesticated, caretaking woman and the enterprising, breadwinning man. These distinctions have been disproportionately negative towards women while favoring men (Kendall 2002: 35).

For example, as alluded to in Chapter 4, Korean male migrant labor in places as disparate as Saudi Arabia, Germany, Vietnam, and the U.S. were crucial to Korea’s dramatic economic development since the late 1960s. Most of this migration was male, with construction workers in places like Saudi Arabia, miners in Europe, and “soldiers for hire” in Southeast Asia. Notably, male miners in Germany were accompanied by a sizeable number of female nurses, many of whom later settled in Europe during the 1970s. Although still “back” in South Korea, young female laborers working primarily in the light industry factory work (Koo 2001), as well as the shadow economies of sex labor (Moon 1997; Lee 2010), were a fundamental labor pool to the growth of South Korea’s “miracle economy. This history has been overshadowed by popular

accounts that celebrate male migrant laborer's and male laborers back home working in more privileged heavy and chemical industries.

The narrative I obtained from another Korean flight attendant—a man—who worked for Korean Air at a similar time, the late 1970s, demonstrated this tendency. I met Mr. Kang through the friend of a friend. Mr. Kang's sole interaction with me one afternoon a few months after my focus group meeting with Mrs. Park and Mrs. Cho, reflected this social distance. Unlike the nearly three hours I had spent with my mother and her college friends, my meeting with Mr. Kang lasted a little over thirty minutes. Moreover, he was nearly half an hour late to our scheduled interview. Nevertheless, although a relative stranger, he was kind enough to meet me one day in early fall. Prior to our meeting, all I had learned about Mr. Kang was that he had worked briefly as a Korean Air flight attendant in the past and was currently the head manager of a prominent Western (i.e. U.S.-based) franchise hotel in central Seoul. Dressed in similarly formal garb as I had been when meeting Mrs. Park and Mrs. Cho, I waited patiently in the lobby. Although Mr. Kang was late, even after finally arriving and directing me to the dining area of the lobby where he asked "his staff" to serve me coffee, he appeared preoccupied. Whether it was sporadically stopping in the middle of our conversation to direct a staff member to do something or simply checking his phone for messages, it was clear that I was a low priority to Mr. Kang.

Mr. Park was relatively tall (approximately 5'10"), somewhat thickset, and dressed in a nondescript grey suit. As a former member of a laboring group so preoccupied with displaying its "beautiful" flight attendants (both from the standpoint of individual aspiring, current and former one and their corporate airline employers), Mr. Park's muted, almost anonymous style felt noticeable. In fairness, nearly forty years had passed since Mrs. Park, Mrs. Cho, and Mr. Kang had first become flight attendants. But even with the passage of time, how my mother's

university friends dressed, the physicality of their bodies but also the warm sentiment behind their stories, felt different. Throughout our brief conversation, Mr. Park drove most of the conversation, its themes, outcomes, and ultimate meanings. Unlike the communal atmosphere that characterized my meeting with Mrs. Park and Mrs. Cho, this felt more like a monologue than a dialogue.

Mr. Park had a boisterous personality, one at ease making humorous tangents or jokes during conversation. But, as was the case with many of my experiences with Korean men of older generations, including that of my own father, such boisterousness easily could veer into a subtle yet distinctive vanity, one more in love with hearing its own voice than that of others. This was the case during our brief meeting. After graduating from a college of foreign language studies in Seoul in 1977, which included three years of mandatory military service, Mr. Park decided that he wanted to study abroad in Taiwan. Unable to afford a ticket, however, (back when South Korea was so poor it “couldn’t live”) Mr. Kang described his motivation to find any job that he could “make the most money within the shortest period of time.” Giving himself a set timeline to meet what he revealed as an entirely instrumental initial goal, Mr. Kang settled on the flight attendant occupation. ““What is the job I can make the most money in a year?” I thought,” Mr. Kang declared. “Working in a Korean air plane was the most money, so that’s why I selected it. I didn’t even know what I would do.”

Despite the job connoting a level of prestige due to the rarity of international travel for average Koreans, Mr. Kang’s aggressive emphasis on the financial, rather than experiential or emotional aspects of the job (as initially highlighted by Mrs. Park and Mrs. Cho) seemed telling. Much of desirability of the flight attendant job—both to the consumer and the practitioner—lay within a framework that placed the supposed feminized domesticity of the job as a natural

accompaniment to the technological prowess of the male pilot (Barry 2007). In the context of Korean gender politics, prior to modernization (1953 to the present) dominant notions of masculinity were enacted by the absence of manual labor (against the presence of mental knowledge or academic pursuits). Later, the advent of gender hierarchy reconfiguration still associated domesticated labor (i.e., manual labor in the form of caregiving) with devalued women's work and overvalued men's breadwinning, office work (Moon 2002).

Mr. Kang's reasoning for becoming a flight attendant differed considerably from that of Mrs. Park and Mrs. Cho who described a feeling of serendipity rather than money in their desire to travel, experience new things, and gain a degree of unexpected social status. Mr. Kang, however, was forthright. "In 1977 in the first year if you worked at Samsung, Hyundai, or Daewoo [three of the most prominent conglomerates (*chaebols*) of the time] you could make a starting salary of 100,000 won (approximately \$90 then, \$370 adjusted for inflation in 2017) per month," he described. "But at Korean Air as a flight attendant, you could make 150,000 won (approximately \$130 then, \$530 adjusted for inflation in 2017) per month starting salary. For women, it was less. So, that's why I selected the job." What followed was a curious yet unprompted display of performative masculinity via narratives of technological knowledge, Korean historical expertise, and sexual desire.

Alex: So, after you became a flight attendant, how was it?

Mr. Kang: I didn't even know what I would do. As I mentioned, I selected it because working in a Korean airplane at the time for that short period of time—one year—made the most money. Korean Air had ten kinds of aircraft at the

time, turbo flight, turbo propellers, Boeing 707s, which had four engines at the time. But they don't have that any more.

Alex: Ah, I see.

Mr. Kang: These were old planes from [Germany-based airline] Lufthansa. You see, our country was so poor then. So, we got the planes they threw away. At that time, Koreans couldn't travel abroad because we were so poor.

Alex: Who could travel then?

Mr. Kang: Only people who worked abroad like businessmen. You needed special proof as to why you were leaving to go abroad. Immigrants to the U.S. Adoptees. Or American soldiers with Korean wives, they would get tickets to fly. Also [Korean] migrants to the Middle East or sailors. Everyone else was Japanese. Flights from Osaka to Kimpo [South Korea's main airport prior to Incheon International Airport] were very short and much cheaper than Japan Airlines flights. Most passengers were male. One day I saw a very pretty passenger, an angel, so was so pretty. So, this sort of thing was nice about the job. I wanted to make a lot of money fast, one year, but I had so much fun, I ended up doing it for a few years. You could always get stuff abroad, like chocolate. We were such a poor country at the time. American soldiers would give us Hershey's chocolate. It was a taste of heaven. Really, in my memory. Or another example, I would go abroad and buy things you couldn't get in [South] Korea like a special hair pin in Japan. You'd bring that back and you could get a woman easily in [South] Korea. Marlboro cigarettes. Typical people [in South Korea] would get

caught by the police in smoking those like marijuana today. But it would be okay because I would be abroad for a week and just smoke away.

Alex: How long did you do the job in total?

Mr. Kang: Three years. It went fast.

Alex: Were there many other male flight attendants at the time?

Mr. Kang: Not that many. On a typical flight, a jumbo 747 plane, you might have thirteen women and four men. That was the ratio. But at the time, they didn't give women responsibility. So, they were no female pursers [advanced managerial position within the flight attendant occupation]. At the time, flight attendant pursers were all men, no women.

Alex: Were you a purser?

Mr. Kang: I didn't work there long enough to become one, but I had purser-like duties. So, I guess I was a "vice-purser." Then again, maybe I didn't really want all the responsibilities anyway. How good do you think it was riding a plane? Making a lot of money at that time? Working with many women as colleagues. And many [non-flight attendant] women also thought of me well.

My conversation with Mr. Kang did not last much longer afterwards. About fifteen minutes of similar talk followed with Mr. Kang promptly, albeit affably, ending the interview. He was a busy man with a hotel to run, he joked.

What was striking about my interaction with Mr. Kang was the resounding sense that his three years as a flight attendant for Korean Air, the same airline Mrs. Cho had worked for, was a

clear stepping stone for something “better” in the future. Of course, like Mrs. Cho and Mrs. Park, Mr. Kang also waxed lyrically about the prime fringe benefit of the occupation, international travel, foreign consumption, and a measure of social prestige (even for men, he asserted). Mrs. Cho and Mrs. Park also were ambivalent about the occupation as I articulate below. But theirs was an ambivalence arguably rooted in a deeper sense of existential uncertainty reflective of most women in the shadows of South Korea’s modern development story. As Abelmann notes (2003: 133) this is a story “that has been largely deaf to women’s roles, backgrounds, and identifications, and to narrative and the ways in which people recognize themselves.” They weren’t exactly sure why they wanted to become flight attendants beyond a vague sense that it might lead to *something* better—but even if it didn’t, it would be okay. They already had “made it.”

Mrs. Park and Mrs. Cho shared a story that elaborated on this point. “I didn’t say I wanted to be flight attendant at first,” Mrs. Cho responded. Instead, still a student at Ewha University, one of South Korea’s premier all women’s universities, Mrs. Cho expressed general indifference to what her future might hold. Then one day, however, she saw a woman from afar. It occurred while she was shopping with friends in Myeondong, historically, one of Seoul’s main commercial and tourism districts—particularly for women.

Mrs. Cho: In college I would go to Myeongdong. There was always a woman there. My friends said that she was a Korean Air flight attendant. [Korean Air] was the only airline [in South Korea] at the time.

Alex: Was she wearing a uniform?

Mrs. Cho: No, she wasn’t wearing her uniform. But she was so pretty.

Alex's mother: (laughs)

Mrs. Cho: She would always wear red lipstick.

Mrs. Park: Ah, such a pretty woman.

Mrs. Cho: So, after seeing her and being so impressed, my friend wanted to try and become a flight attendant. I didn't think much of it but decided to take it. My friend failed but, oddly, I made it.

Mrs. Park later added to this motif of feminine beauty as a mark of the occupation's prestige when discussing a common occurrence at nationally televised "Miss Korea" pageants during the 1960s and 1970s. She explained, "When they would ask a contestant what they desired in the future [even after the possibility of being crowned], their desire was to be to be a flight attendant. They called it the object of envy of all women (*sŏnmangŭidaesang*), which is to say, it was more than a job. It was something special in terms of social standing."

Historical and cultural specificity help to contextualize the seemingly facile nature of Mrs. Cho's and Mrs. Park's equating feminized beauty with power and prestige. Public prospects outside the domesticated sphere of the home (Koo 2001) were not significantly more attractive into the 1970s with the advent of mostly rural-to-urban migrant women in South Korea's light industrial factories. Although instrumental to the country's economic and labor unionizing history, these women remained largely exploited and marginalized. Even after more entered the formal, white-collar workforce later in the 1980s, institutional devices favoring a gendered, dual labor market favored an almost exclusively male "kin group" of company owners and managers over a structurally underpaid and devalued female workforce (Koo 2001: 119).

Not surprisingly, even after South Korea's formal democratization in 1987, gendered gains were still nominal due to systems like patriarchal seniority and the requirement of women to terminate employment after only a few years of service, marriage, or pregnancy (Janelli and Yim 2002). Hence, the gendered narratives of Mrs. Park and Mrs. Cho also produced gendered traits like the mark of professionalism in a working woman being equated with physical beauty. These traits, in turn produced narrations that inadvertently produced certain life trajectories, in the case of these women, a reasonable expectation not to aspire for much more than what the flight attendant occupation already guaranteed. In the case of Mr. Kang, however, his gendered narrative consisted of a pronounced presentation of compensatory masculinity in the face of the potentially feminizing "threat" of the "female" flight attendant occupation. Thus, it also seemed sensible that his stated ambitions, coupled with entrenched structural inequalities across gender lines in South Korea's labor system, would propel him towards a "higher path" of senior hospitality management.

I bring up these past precedents of the Korean flight attendant occupation to introduce earlier sedimented histories upon which present-day understandings and imaginings of the occupation stand. But I also do so to explicate why some of its more problematic aspects—its propensity to reproduce gendered, sexualized, and racialized hierarchies under the guise of "superior" service—defy easy rectification.

TIME TRAVELERS: FIGHTING (COMPRESSED) TIME

Even after its supposed meteoric rise towards modernity, everyday discourse about South Korea continues to bemoan the fragile grip South Korea has on its advanced status. Popular phrases like *Hell Chosun* first introduced in Chapter 1 to explain alternative mobility strategies

for a growing number of twenty to thirty-year-old Koreans who have given up on the promise of upward mobility, social security, and happiness within South Korea's hellish and cutthroat society. Implicit in this national critique, itself a response to South Korea's pressurized growth and push towards modernity, were temporal and spatial mappings of a "better" future (free from South Korea's ugly past) "out there" (literally outside the claustrophobic, geopolitically vulnerable place called South Korea). In Chapter 1, citing Kim (2011), I referred to this national preoccupation with South Korea's status as advanced/undeveloped, modern/backward as the discourse of advanced country (*sonjin'guk*) and backward country (*hujin'guk*). According to Kim, South Korea's incorporation into the "Eurocentric world order" has resulted in a national sense of self read through a dominant interpretive framework of *sonjin'guk* and *hujin'guk*. This interpretative frame, Kim argues, has its roots in early modern discourses of *kyehwa* (enlightenment) and *munmyōng* (civilization) during South Korea's earlier, twentieth century response to colonial (Japanese) and later neocolonial (U.S.) influence. On the ground, this national ambivalence over South Korea's uneasy modern status was present in the narratives of my interlocutors. Yet, the older flight attendants I had met expressed little to no ambivalence about either the advanced country (*sonjin'guk*) and backward country (*hujin'guk*) status of South Korea or their own parallel, uncertain class statuses as former flight attendants.

Although the experiences and expectations of what the occupation could mean for their immediate and future lives differed along gender lines, Mrs. Park, Mrs. Cho, and Mr. Kang expressed little to no apprehension about a flight attendant's standing and home country at the time. For all of them, they *were* elite. Likewise, the certainty of South Korea's *impoverished* status in post-war late 1960s/early 1970s assured this. Echoing a comment I often hear from most

Koreans of that generation, South Korea prior to the late 1980s was collectively poor but everyone was “all poor together” (Kendall 2002: 29). Likewise, despite the service-oriented nature of the flight attendant occupation—a stigmatized industry today—during the 1970s and 1980s, less stigma was attached to a largely inchoate industry. Indeed, as evidenced in the remarks of my older interlocutors and related scholarship on 1960s rural to urban female migration, jobs related to the service-industry indexed a kind of clean and orderly “professionalism” (Freeman 2000). For many, this was an especially attractive occupational component unavailable to other gendered labor at the time, chiefly dirty and dangerous light industry factory work for young women.

The advent of greater work opportunities, modes of cheap travel, and forms of everyday leisure drastically have lessened this once obvious distinction. This apparent truth reasserted itself every time I heard “real” professional Korean women (academics, office workers, business women, etc.) characterizing the dreams and occupations of my interlocutors as lowly and “beneath” the former. Many young interlocutors I met who were interested in or already involved in the flight attendant industry told me they were aware of these critiques. How they dealt with them varied depending on the person. But throughout my fieldwork, I felt a strong sense of sensitivity over the uncertain status of the service mobility modality they had selected. These moments would happen when an interlocutor looked askance if I mentioned commonalities of the flight attendant occupation with other less glamorous care-giving occupations (i.e., domestic labor) or if I described the negative experiences of formal flight attendants to wide-eyed wannabees. Arguably, much of the prestige and advanced country (*sonjin’guk*) status of the Korean flight attendant occupation rested on how much more superior (i.e., “more modern”) its service standards were deemed from those in the West. At the same

time, within the context of commercial air travel today, the ability to respond to and contain perceived and safety and security threats remained another salient measure of a country's advanced country (*sonjin'guk*) status.

As I tried to demonstrate in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3, Korean popular opinion endlessly debates how modern South Korea is today. Implicit in South Korea's over-emphasis on a kind of superior service is that it can out-modernize a West regressing back towards backward country (*hujin-guk*)-ness—at least in the realm of commercial air travel—itself a hallmark symbol of modernity (Kimm 2010). Conversely, negative opinions (from both outside and inside the country) about South Korea's safety/security standards in the service industry contributed to Koreans' anxiety about its insecure national status under an ever-globalizing gaze. My younger interlocutors' understandings of their own anxieties about the condition of their present, future, and past were rooted in this broader national misgiving over “Korea's [modern] place in the [global] sun” (Cumings 1997). Their answer, beyond dreaming of a time outside of their present moment was also a place outside of their present space.

Jonathan Boyarin writes against the tendency to divide notions of time from space (1994: 7). The very notion of “progress,” of stepping forward in time, exemplifies how the metaphorical structures of our language betray that bifurcation [between time and space], displaying a tendency to borrow terms connoting spatial relations in our references to change over time. We have a notion of “progress” that metaphorically discusses temporal sequence in terms of spatial distancing and vice versa: we speak of distant times, we think of long ago places, if not in so many words. Boyarin goes on to suggest that the body can help to rejoin the relationship between time and space as a literal and figurative “rubric” or organizing analytic:

We move “through time” as much as we move “through space,” and this motion is not separated into spatial sequences on one hand and temporal sequences on the other.

However, this does not mean that the distinction between time and space is entirely arbitrary... We can call the body a “rubric” in which spatiality and temporality coexist indissolubly, in which their necessary unity is most clearly shown. When you die in time you dissolve in space.

Similarly, the language of time and space was ever-present among my flight attendant interlocutors. But it emerged within commentaries of the female body, namely expectations on and anxieties about how to maintain and manipulate it in the face of never-ending, literal, movement through time/space. Talk of worry and concerns over time and space became marked discursively and materially on these women’s bodies in the form of combatting body and skin ailments, attempts at making irregular time periods more regular, and fighting the endless onslaught of being tired or “out of time” (literally like catching a flight, but also metaphorically like finding a “better” career or getting married before it was “too late”). In making this point, I suggest that the effects of South Korea’s aggressive bid towards and response to advanced country (*sonjin’guk*) modern status via time/space compression continues to leave physical markings (i.e., aging) on the bodies of its most marginalized members, young, class-uncertain, working women.

Rather than viewing the physical ordeals these women experience as a proof of their absolute subjugation, however—a tendency among important yet overly militant feminist readings (Cho 2002)—I view the body labor enacted by flight attendants more as a form of athleticism. Here, I define an athlete as “a gendered subject who travels transnationally, yet

functions a symbol of the nation” (Joo 2012: 8). In her study, Joo explores how traditional “Korean” (including diasporic and biracial/multiracial) male and female athletes envisioned as physical embodiments of “pure-blooded” Koreanness work to intensify feelings of consanguineous kinship, identity, and community on a global stage. Korean flight attendants, I argue, produce similar affective yet invisible labor. At the same time, viewing flight attendants as analogous to athletes also can lead to alternative modes of envisioning forms of agency while simultaneously recognizing the extra burdens of physical labor expected from and performed by Korean women in the global aviation industry.

Discourses regarding care and maintenance of the face and body are ubiquitous within the world of aspiring, current, and former flight attendants. Although slowly affecting even the least body-conscious Korean male, physical maintenance (i.e., “staying beautiful”) largely remains a “women’s sport.” Throughout my fieldwork, talk of the body and face, how to maintain and manipulate them for the purposes of getting and later performing the flight attendant occupation, were ubiquitous. Given South Korea’s unsavory reputation as the plastic surgery capital of the world, as well as the country’s growing reputation as a trendsetting manufacturer and consumer of cosmetics and fashion, such talk is not unique. Flight attendant’s historic and continued role as “icons of glamorous femininity” (Barry 2007: 61) (in Asia, at least), accent the ongoing burdens of this gendered expectation.

Of the few aspiring male flight attendants I had met or the several I had heard about, none seemed especially preoccupied with their physical appearances. Most expressed a concern for meeting the basic requirements expected of them by airline interviewers, such as being tall and exercising a “masculine” yet personable demeanor. But what was more important, they stressed, were mental capacities, such as English language ability, the ability to lead a party of junior

flight attendants (perhaps as a purser since men tended to be promoted faster), the strength to lift and assist with heavy objects, or dealing with unruly passengers. Theirs was not a constant talk of nightly facial regimens, possible Botox injections, effective fitness routines, affordable beauty salons, and color-coordinated fashion outfits to appeal to interviewers—all topics of conversation I regularly had with my female interlocutors. To be fair, there was an element of agentive play and improvisation in these women's bids to "be pretty." Like the scene at the Emirates Airlines Open Day (*Op'ūndei*) in the Kuala Lumpur hotel (Chapter 4), many appeared to exhibit modes of agency, even resistance, in the face of a broader societal prejudice for their "lackluster" youth credentials. They did so through participation as consumers and through displays of heightened femininity (Banet-Weiser 1999; King-O'Riain 2006). Yet these agentive moments were almost always in tension with the accompanying burdens of these gendered, many might argue sexist, expectations.

CONCLUSION

In "Mediating Time: The 'Rice Bowl of Youth' in Fin de Siecle Urban China" (2000), Zhang Zhen describes two idiomatic structures of feeling (Williams 1977) that accompanied the end of the twentieth century in China: the expressions "plunging into the ocean" (*xiahai*) and "linking up with the [rail] tracks of the world" (*yu shijie jiegui*) (2000). Plunging into the ocean meant going into a risky world of business, namely becoming enterprising entrepreneurs. Linking up with the rail tracks of the world, writes Zhang, "spell[ed] out China's desire to catch the last train of global modernity, finally overcoming a perceived time-lag between itself and the West" (2000: 93). Both expressions were ubiquitous in China, particularly vivid metaphors that indexed a national anxiety over the country's being "late" to global modernity, stuck in time

during its “insulated socialist era.” In turn, an ethic of urgency and risk taking emerged as powerful driving forces among new classes of young, consumer-oriented laborers.

Up until the twentieth century, the figure of the rice bowl signaled the austere, albeit secure and egalitarian, lifestyle of socialist China. During the 1950s’ Great Leap Forward, the image of peasants and workers, old and young men and women, holding their state-sanctioned rice bowls and eating to their hearts’ content at communal canteens became an icon of “both the bounty and poverty of the socialist experiment” (Zhen 2000: 93-94). In contrast, the advent of the market economy radically shifted the symbolic power of this rice bowl image. A now stagnant state sector increasingly has pushed younger workers towards greater monetary and personal fulfillment in the business world. This is the figurative plunging into the ocean described by Zhen. Since the 1990s, the new figure of this “rice bowl of youth” (*qingchunfan*) has risen as a response to social restructuring’s increased emphasis on the marketplace. Popular culture now presents the past’s rice bowl as “rusty and broken.” The new rice bowl of youth refers to the urban trend of new, highly paid positions having opened. Most almost exclusively attract young women, primarily in service sector industries like bilingual secretaries, public relations workers, and fashion models. Zhen stresses how “youth and beauty are the foremost, if not the only, prerequisites to obtaining lucrative positions, in which the new ‘professionals’ often function as advertising fixtures with sex appeal” (2000: 94).

Considerable time has passed since the events described in Zhen’s work. Yet strong parallels can be seen in what is occurring in post-IMF South Korea among mostly young women. Today, they also seem to seek new and fashionable “rice bowls of youth,” a phenomenon I have described as service mobilities. Concomitant with broader distrust and dismay over older, seemingly more secure livelihood paths, Korean female youth increasingly reject their own

country's version of the iron bowl, or in their case, a "bronze spoon."¹⁴⁷ South Korea continues to report some of the highest rates of suicide and least productive and happy workers among industrialized countries. Likewise, a sizeable portion of its population describes the country as a living hell.¹⁴⁸ Against this backdrop, aspiring, current, and former Korean flight attendants resemble the "ocean plungers" (*xiahai*) and world [rail] track-linkers (*yu shijie jiegui*) described in Zhen's article. Not unlike the former, the latter appear to place their speculative bets on an occupation that, in its current manifestation, presents, at best, the possibility for individualized modes of pleasure, self-actualization and economic security.

At worse, their flight attendant bronze spoon promises diminishing rewards.¹⁴⁹ Zhen explains this dilemma when noting that metaphors of plunging into the ocean and linking to the world's rail tracks toward modernity are, in fact, dangerous endeavors. South Korean insecurities over its uncertain position as backward (*hujin 'guk*) or advanced (*sŏnjin 'guk*) have made anxiety—over the manner and speed of modernizing changes (i.e., globalization)—a central feature of Korean public discourse. These fears also signal, as Zhen suggests, an "underlying structural anxiety about time, in which feminine youth—fashioned as the timeless object of male

¹⁴⁷ Recent online chatter has produced the concept of "spoon theory." A critique of Hell Chosun, a "gold spoon" represents the wealthiest and most privileged sector (top 1 percent) in South Korea. A silver spoon represents a relatively wealthy sector (top 3 percent). A bronze spoon represents a relatively wealthy sector still comfortable within the top 10 percent. Finally, a dirt spoon represents the majority population who are or perceive themselves to be of the so-called working class (Yeeun 2015).

¹⁴⁸ Also, as noted in previous chapters, Hell Chosun referencing South Korea's earlier Joseon dynasty, has become a popular descriptor of life in South Korea where record unemployment or overwork are the national norm.

¹⁴⁹ The metaphor of aspirational flight rather than rail travel may be more fitting for the case of Korean aspiring, current, and former flight attendants.

desire (2000: 133)—is simultaneously the instigator and impediment of modernization and globalization. Ultimately, though, as caretakers of the state—embodied in and effectuated by their figurative management of broader social tensions (Martin 2006: 5), as well as their liberal catering to the (in-flight) needs of South Korea’s “true” traveling (elite and male) globalizers—Korean female flight attendants reconstitute an earlier, historical role of female laborers. Once again, they serve as burden bearers and custodians of the Korean state’s efforts to promulgate a favorable image of itself *to itself* and to the world.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION:

A MOMENTARY REPRIEVE FROM HELL¹⁵⁰

April 29, 2015, Plane School Study Space, Sinchon, Seoul, South Korea

When I arrived at the study space room that day it was empty, save for Eunjung. Her arms were splayed out with the side of her face pressed down on top of a white plastic table. I was not sure if she was sleeping or resting. But it was clear that she was exhausted. Even after I took a seat and settled in, Eunjung did not move. Now I could hear her lightly snoring. I knew about Eunjung's punishing schedule. She worked part-time for low-pay from 5 AM to 9 AM at a popular guesthouse that catered to the many foreign tourists in the area. Her work consisted of preparing the day's breakfast (a simple Western breakfast of toast, jam, and coffee), cleaning the main areas, and greeting new guests. Asked why she originally took the job, Eunjung said it was meeting people from around the world that she had desired the most. "What other opportunities would I have to practice English and meet non-Koreans?" she sometimes said. Although not a job (certainly not one that paid), leading and organizing the Plane School study group (*sūt'ōdi moim*) was a significant commitment of her time and energy. She was its originating member and, in many ways, the heart of each meeting. If not leading a session, then Eunjung was the first to arrive.¹⁵¹ As I got to know her over several months, Eunjung appeared increasingly tired whenever we met.

¹⁵⁰ My thanks to JB Kwon for providing this phrasing.

¹⁵¹ I never learned exactly what Eunjung did after our practice sessions. She claimed to have been working several part-time jobs simultaneously. But I inferred that she had been working a series of irregular jobs, mostly service-oriented, around the city. These included working as a barista, waitress, or cashier at a convenience store.

In the room, I had been quietly sitting for five minutes when Eunjung finally woke up. Groggy and grumpy, she asked if any other members had arrived. They had not. Putting her head down again she rested for another ten minutes. Looking down from the fourteenth floor of the tall glass building, I could see the neighborhood of Sinchon animate with buzzing cars, traffic, and pedestrians. But from our quiet and cramped room many stories above the energy and excitement of below felt miles away. Eunjung woke up again. “Still nobody?” she asked. “I’m afraid not,” I said. I asked if she was okay. Perhaps if she was too tired, we could just call it a day and meet up next time—hopefully, when more members would attend. “No,” she said. “I should stay. We already paid for the hour anyway.” Slowly waking up, Eunjung looked irritated. “Fucking members. They’re so unreliable sometimes. It’s like they don’t care.” Eunjung moved to the desktop computer provided for each room and logged onto the Internet. “What’cha doing?” I asked in Korean. “Just putting up another post,” she answered. Eunjung explained that this was how she had started the original group. Going onto the members-only portal, “Flight Attendant Network,” Eunjung began to write a new post. The subject line read, “Aspiring flight attendant study group seeking new members.” I asked what this meant. Did this mean the current core and new members were no longer welcome? “Aren’t you all friends?” I asked. “Friends?” she said. “I don’t know. They’re still welcome to the meetings, of course. But you just never know with study groups. These study groups usually last only about two to three months anyway. So, in a way, the fact that we still meet after all this time is unique. I might still stay in touch with Bora. But the situation is always changing, so who knows.” There was a look of quiet determination on Eunjung’s face as I saw her typing away. But she still looked tired. Hair disheveled and eyes somewhat swollen from sleep, she continued with her post.

In total, I maintained relations with the original Plane School flight attendant study group (*sūt'ōdi moim*) members for only around six months. During this time, I had learned that attendance was a revolving door of core and new members—in total, roughly fifteen people. New members usually came once or twice, later never to return. At first, the inconsistency of the group attendance felt jarring, especially since everyone seemed so intent to be friendly at the outset; at times, it resembled the assertive friendliness I had witnessed during airline job fairs described in Chapter 4. Typically, new members were met with congeniality outside of intense and serious mock interview sessions like those described in Chapter 1. Over time, long and intense practice sessions with core members translated into food and drinks at a local bar or restaurant.

After the first month, even I started to feel my slow entry into a new emotional borderland—a “vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary” (Napolitano, Luz, and Stadler 2015: 94)—somewhere in between myself as researcher and friend vis-a-vis my research subjects. But nearly as abruptly as I had established many of these relationships, they dissipated. Initially, I had assumed that it might have had something to do with me, personally. Perhaps I was not the best fieldworker, missing some social cue that would have enabled me better continued “access” to this most challenging “field site?” A gay male colleague proposed that I might have to deliberately be “more charming” to sustain the interest of my mostly female interlocutors—hence, exploiting what dubious sexual attraction I possessed as a fieldworker (Kulick and Wilson 2003). But I do not know if he was correct.

In retrospect, the fragmented and fleeting nature of the field was not unusual. For most of my interlocutors, it was a mundane fact of their service mobilities. An unforeseeable, even “unsafe” personal future was accepted. Hence, Eunjung’s seeming desperation to figuratively

and literally take flight from her ordinary (and, therefore, undesirable, even “hellish”) place-bound life held deeper meaning. Being of a place appeared to mean less to her than being part of no place in particular—at least *until* she became a flight attendant. Repeatedly, during my fieldwork, I met people in their early twenties (and sometimes their early to late thirties) striving to become a flight attendant. Most had little significant white collar, professional office experience. Instead, the majority had minimal to extensive experience within South Korea’s growing pink-collar service sector. In this way, for people like Eunjung, the flight attendant job meant an escape from what had become mundane in South Korea, and increasingly around the world: precarity, unpredictability, and the ever-present possibility of an undesirable life. But even the work of becoming or being a flight attendant—a career occupation and not simply a job, as so many of my interlocutors wanted to stress—ultimately, was fleeting. Many understood this condition from the beginning, rationalizing to me that even if it was short-lived, it still would mean everything to their lives. All had different relations to the occupation’s required care labor, but almost all agreed that the figure of the flight attendant was one they hoped to identify with. However fragile the actual glamour of the job itself, the occupation would connect them to an earlier national tradition of *distinguished* gendered and classed labor.

For many, being a flight attendant produced another unintentional, although equally significant, effect. Most flight attendants, especially women, seemed to work only around two to three years before quitting. Reasons varied, but a combination of mental, physical, and psychological exhaustion, marriage, or homesickness often were the reasons. A few stayed with the occupation (particularly men who tended to be promoted faster) going on to become long-term flight attendants or even pursers into their thirties and sometimes, rarely, their forties. But for the majority, being a flight attendant was unquestionably temporary. As Eunjung’s case

demonstrated, even the pursuit of becoming a flight attendant shared a similar fate. Although I eventually lost touch with her, I do not believe she ever became a flight attendant. Like so many others, by the time she had stopped responding to my inquiries, both as a researcher and quasi-friend, she had withdrawn from study group meetings altogether. Like several other interlocutors I had met who put so much effort in becoming a flight attendant only to be continually rejected, leaving the entire aspiring flight attendant community (or perhaps joining an altogether new one) was common. Their entry into this pre-flight attendant world felt as provisional as their possible freedom from it through flight as an actual flight attendant.

At the same time, for people like Minkyung, the twenty-six-year-old flight attendant who had been working for Emirates Airlines for three years when I met her in 2012, traveling around the world from glamorous Dubai made her homesick. Despite (or perhaps because of) having traveled to nearly one hundred countries, Minkyung's arduous performance of a care-working-cum-cosmopolitan became exhausting. Through the pain (and pleasure) of her occupation, traveling, although still appealing, held less sway. Like nearly every current and former flight attendant I met, traveling *while working* rarely was pleasurable (unless perhaps when read through the nostalgic lens of decades passed like those of the old-timers I met in Chapter 5). I would be reminded of this every time I asked a current flight attendant how they felt before working a flight to a city like Paris, one even I still romanticize. "Ugh... those are the worst," many would say. Surprised, I would ask why? "Wasn't a place like Paris, with all of its culture, sophistication, and romance, the apotheosis of their original flight attendant aspirations?" "As a tourist, yes," they would respond. "But as a flight attendant working, no. Seoul to Paris legs are the longest, almost thirteen hours, so you have to deal with the passengers the longest."

In this respect, Minkyung's most provocative comment, "I don't want to push a cart for the rest of my life," made more sense. Having to care for others, self, and (presumably) nation was a burden, one that she increasingly had grown confident *not* to care about. "Maybe I won't ever get married or get a fancy job," I recall a thirty-something Korean woman, Jesook, tell me. She had just arrived back in South Korea after years having worked at Emirates Airlines. Echoing Minkyung's sentiment that she quit because she had determined she no longer cared to be "service personnel in the sky," Jesook said she still had no regrets. For her, the job, even when stripped of its promises of glory and glamour, was meaningful. "I learned to become more confident in myself and what I want," she said. "I also learned that there were other possibilities out there. I didn't have to just get a 9 to 5 job, have kids, and all that like most women in South Korea." Self-assured, she explained after just finished working as a flight attendant for several years, "I don't know what I want to do now, but I am okay with that."

In this dissertation I have argued that largely academically and/or class disadvantaged young women have been able secure individualized modes of pleasure, self-fulfillment, and class advancement via what I deem service mobilities. In attempting to take flight from the limitations of South Korea's social class mobility, and as servants of South Korea's globalization, however, these women also revealed complex and contradictory gendered, classed, racialized, and nationalist subjectivities. The service mobilities of my interlocutors must be read against the historical backdrop of both the traumatic effects of the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, as well as South Korea's more recent neoliberal regime and discourse of Hell Chosun standards of living.

In this dissertation, I also have argued that enactments of soft, sanitized, and glamorous (*hwaryŏhada*) service have fueled the strategies and techniques behind these service mobilities while, inadvertently, helping to purify South Korea's earlier history of authoritarian rule, labor violence, and xenophobia. As a result, Korean flight attendants reconstitute the historical role of female laborers as burden bearers and caretakers of the Korean state. In making this argument, I hope to have illustrated the motivations and stakes behind the fraught and fulfilling path of contingent and compromised mobility.

Still, the case of Eunjung, Minkyung, and Jesook are varied and their meanings remain elusive and ever-changing—even, I suspect, to themselves. On the one hand, despite all her grit, Eunjung likely was unable to discover that “elite” (*ellit'ŭ*) feeling she had so identified with the flight attendant occupation. Instead the apparent hell of South Korea's Hell Chosun—not only its unfulfilled promises of the “good life” but also its rampant sexism and classism against class-marginalized women like herself—was becoming inescapable. Crossing the border between lowly care-laboring “migrant” flight attendant to glamorous globetrotter was not in her future. Alas, she could not even get passed the initial border inspection. Whatever the reason she lacked the proper embodied classed, gendered, racialized, and nationalist sensibilities to escape her status as an outsider. Likewise, Minkyung alerted me to a related realization. After she had returned to her hometown of Daejeon, South Korea's fifth largest city, she struggled to find meaningful work.

When I met her again in 2014 after first having met her in Dubai in 2012, she recently had quit working as an Emirates Airlines after nearly five years as a flight attendant. Recognizing my English aptitude, Minkyung oftentimes sent me her English resume to proofread for potential jobs, everything from the field of HR to English teaching. Scanning her documents,

I could not help but notice the modesty of her accomplishments. Not unlike several of the other aspiring, current, and former Korean flight attendants who also sent me their resumes to review, Minkyung had graduated from a university (in her case, in Australia) that I later discovered was low-ranking. Except for her years of experience as a flight attendant, she had listed only one other job: part-time work as a barista at a coffee shop. Among her list of accomplishments was a single award given to her by her Emirates Airlines colleagues for “excellent service.” Her English language ability was listed as “fluent,” although in practice I recall her sometimes struggling. Hence, we generally spoke in Korean, although my own fluency usually wavered. Most paradoxical, although she was among the most vocal contributors to “anti-Indian” sentiment in my presence, she still listed “intercultural and multicultural skills” as an example of her interpersonal expertise. I hesitate to pass too much judgment on her career specs (*sŭp'ekk'ŭ*). But if her repeated failure to pass the first stage of any of the many job interviews she applied to were any indication, my assessment of her *marketable* skills (or lack thereof), sadly, might have been realistic.

As such, the end of her service mobility trajectory seemed to follow a path I heard many times during my fieldwork: a return to “regular life” or the realities of real life in Hell Chosun South Korea. Of course, there were cases of ex-flight attendants rising the ranks to become pursers, and sometimes even higher positions. Several others maintained that they, or someone they knew, continued to be a flight attendant for years even after having children. Among the flight attendant occupation’s fringe benefits, its relatively generous accommodations for working mothers (*after* a woman was hired and had been working several years) was one of them. I heard how a select few eventually attended graduate school, some even becoming professors at select

“flight attendant” universities in the country.¹⁵² But these cases were always rare exceptions.

More often, most of the flight attendants I met who had retired found themselves on the fringes of the very conventions they originally had sought to escape—whether it was a more traditional gendered path of getting married, having children, and staying home, working a standard 9 to 5 mid-level office job, or finding irregular work as a “flight attendant consultant” within the privatized world of flight attendant training I described in Chapter 1.

In this respect, perhaps it was okay that someone like Minkyung was not able to translate the skills she had acquired—years caring for people, living abroad, and (despite some of her chauvinistic opinions) actively living a cosmopolitan life—into a “real” job. Her occupation was one few people would ever fully understand, and therefore appreciate. For people like my flawed but courageous interlocutors, it might have been enough to be a flight attendant at least once in their life. That in and of itself was an accomplishment, they would say. For former flight attendants like Mrs. Park and Mrs. Cho, the power behind their words when reminiscing their brief but meaningful careers might attest to this assumption. Likewise, Patricia, who first began this dissertation, was living her own life of personal dreams of travel, romance, and experience in Rome, despite the pronounced hardships that her condition as a Filipina domestic labor worker abroad produced.

As I try to conclude this dissertation, I am reminded about the personal struggles all scholars face over determining the meaning of the stories they write, as well as the role (if any) in their telling them. Ellen Moodie describes a similar feeling at the end of her dissertation, lending authoritative weight to the idea that I am not alone in this feeling. Writing about both

¹⁵² Oftentimes, these institutions actually are two-year technical colleges instead of four-year universities. Nevertheless, among my interlocutors, having attended one of these schools still signaled an internal level of prestige or perceived advantage in hiring.

herself—as [she] experienced and co-constructed people’s stories about violence within the context of 1990s San Salvador”—Moodie writes: “No word, no label, and no dissertation can fully encompass any experience (even while performatively producing experience) (2002: 515). As such, the conclusion of this dissertation promises little certainties—both for the so-called researcher and researched. Like Moodie, I question the meanings behind defining a certain of a group of people (in my case, my flight attendant interlocutors’ uncertain identificatory status). Like her, I ask, “what does such an act, a deliberate choice of academic focus, *do*?” (ibid).

Lauren Berlant might describe the indeterminant ambitions of my interlocutors against structural odds as a kind of “cruel optimism”—the “condition of maintaining an attachment to a problematic object *in advance* of its loss” (2011: 21, 35). For Berlant, the “vague futurities” that accompany normative optimism are cruel because they anticipate loss at the outset, a condition of structural inequality experienced most acutely by women like my interlocutors. However, these aspirations towards an unknown future are also hopeful because they produce “small self-interruptions as the utopias of structural inequality” (Berlant 2011: 35).

Some like several Korean white-collar professionals I met who deemed flight attendants’ career ambitions as too low might dismiss this viewpoint. But this assessment would be inadequate. As members and products of the precarious and ongoing effects of late capitalism, we all possess cruel optimism—disparate and disproportionate though they might be. Arguably more so than most, however, aspiring, current, and former flight attendants more profoundly know and feel the truth that “[w]hat is ‘inside’ or ‘outside’ of borders of difference and distinction (be they social, political, national, or emotional) are “not always clearly demarcated” (Lugo 2015: 117). They occupy the “vague and undetermined places created by the emotional residue” of unnatural boundaries (Anzaldua 1987: 3)—the borderlands within respectability/ill-

repute, servile/sophisticated, backward/advanced, and immobile/mobile. But these spaces, what we can consider “border void zone[s]” (Lugo 2015: 117) also can be spaces of creativity and unfamiliar resistance. They enable their inhabitants to become comfortable with uncertainty or to, as Minkyung aptly put it, “care less.” I suspect her meaning of care here could correspond to worry, as well. Through her service mobility trials, Minkyung, not unlike Jesook, decided to worry less about their having to know what their future *should* hold.

Part of the hell of Hell Chosun many Koreans expressed was the social expectation to have to perform at a particular level of social life. South Korea’s compressed modernity also engendered a pervasive ethos of pursuing success—a national obsession with keeping up with the Joneses. For most of my interlocutors, however, even after being preoccupied for so long with the arduous task of performing and identifying with care labor as self, including the latter’s gendered burdens of backstage and frontstage work (Goffmann 1956), caring *less* became an unexpected outcome of their endeavors. The members of the Plane School study group (*sūt’ōdi moim*) I introduced in Chapter 1 spent considerable time, energy, and emotion in cultivating the appearance of not caring but not of the passengers they imagined taking care of in their desirable futures. Instead, Eujung’s moment of backstage honesty—“Aaaak! Shit, I lost it!... Fuck, it’s so hard to smile like that! Fuck, fuck!”—revealed more than a momentary loss of control or personal frustration. It exposed the degree to which young women like Eujung were willing (figuratively and literally) to grin and bear the ongoing burdens of accessing South Korea’s fraught service mobilities, chiefly the flight attendant occupation’s prerequisite that one (appear to) care how one appeared to others.

In serving to secure their own aspirations for something better and “more advanced”—as well as those of a globalizing South Korea—these women encountered the latent “dirtiness”

behind such projects of self and nation. Like South Korea's own mobility story in a sea of so-called advanced countries, Korean flight attendants confronted the work required in maintaining the façade, if not reality, of Global Korea—one entrenched in histories of turbulent change, violence, and social dislocation. Some like Minkyung retreated to familiar national scripts that often elevated the status of South Korea and its people above a world it ostensibly sought to embrace. At the same time, having endured the unappreciated hardships of the occupation, former flight attendants like Jesook also discovered something new. They learned that they no longer cared (or, at least, cared less) about what the future *had* to be for themselves and others.

In this way, Jesook's aspirations toward an unknown future might have transformed from cruelty to compassion. Rather than striving for a utopic, cosmopolitan future so many aspiring flight attendants imagined, her goals had become less demanding. In the context of a flight attendant occupation and lineage of devalued, gendered care labor, this kind of response might have been its own kind of small resistance—one that shifts the “sensual space between pleasure and numbness (Berlant quoted in Song 2014: 82). Of course, not everyone was afforded the luxuries of such discoveries. Eunjung probably never became flight attendants but still held out a modicum of vague hope that things in her life could change for the better. I probably will never know if the desired change young women I met like Eunjung ever arrived. Might it arrive for them in the future? I hope it does.

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APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL LETTER

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

Office of the Vice Chancellor for Research

Office for the Protection of Research Subjects
528 East Green Street
Suite 203
Champaign, IL 61820



January 6, 2015

Nancy Abelmann
Anthropology
109 Davenport Hall
607 S Mathews Ave
Urbana, IL 61801

RE: *Flight Status Unknown: South Korean Flight Attendants and New Class Subjectivities*
IRB Protocol Number: 15215

Dear Dr. Abelmann:

Your response to stipulations for the project entitled *Flight Status Unknown: South Korean Flight Attendants and New Class Subjectivities* has satisfactorily addressed the concerns of the UIUC Institutional Review Board (IRB) and you are now free to proceed with the human subjects protocol. The UIUC IRB approved, by expedited review, the protocol as described in your IRB-1 application with stipulated changes. The expiration date for this protocol, IRB number 15215, is 12/28/2015. The risk designation applied to your project is *no more than minimal risk*. Certification of approval is available upon request.

Note: Please supply the educational training institutes IRB approval letter once obtained.

Copies of the attached date-stamped consent form(s) must be used in obtaining informed consent. If there is a need to revise or alter the consent form(s), please submit the revised form(s) for IRB review, approval, and date-stamping prior to use.

Under applicable regulations, no changes to procedures involving human subjects may be made without prior IRB review and approval. The regulations also require that you promptly notify the IRB of any problems involving human subjects, including unanticipated side effects, adverse reactions, and any injuries or complications that arise during the project.

If you have any questions about the IRB process, or if you need assistance at any time, please feel free to contact me at the OPRS office, or visit our Web site at <http://www.irb.illinois.edu>.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Anita'.

Anita Balgopal, PhD
Director, Office for the Protection of Research Subjects

Attachment(s)

c: Alexander Lee

telephone (217) 333-2670 • fax (217) 333-0405 • email IRB@illinois.edu