

South Korea

Hae Yeon Choo, John Lie, and Laura C. Nelson, eds., *Gender and Class in Contemporary South Korea: Intersectionality and Transnationality*

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In the field of Korean gender studies, there have been a few edited volumes or special issues of journals that center on gender as the key category of analysis. Works such as *Dangerous Women: Gender and Korean Nationalism* (Kim and Choi 1998), *Under Construction: The Gendering of Modernity, Class, and Consumption in the Republic of Korea* (Kendall 2002), and a special issue of the *Journal of Korean Studies* titled “Gender and Politics in Contemporary Korea” (Han 2014) have offered incisive analyses of gendered phenomena in modern and contemporary Korea. Each collective work offers a critical intervention into the discourses of nationalism, modernity, political economy, and material cultures.

Gender and Class in Contemporary South Korea is a welcome addition to this growing scholarship. As the editors note in the introductory chapter, contemporary South Korea has undergone a significant number of changes over the past two decades and thus requires new theoretical and conceptual approaches. In an attempt to understand

the “transformations in the class structure, gender relations, and terms of belonging and citizenship of South Korea” (7), the editors propose two theoretical interventions—intersectionality and transnationality. According to the editors, intersectionality is useful for examining the “dynamics of multiple and interconnected aspects of social hierarchies” (3). They offer no specific definition of transnationality; however, it can be inferred that for these scholars, transnationality provides a way to critique the presumption of Korean homogeneity and the prevalent nationalist orientation in previous studies. Centering on those two analytical angles, the book introduces some of the latest research studies on a wide range of topics, including representations of gender and class in TV dramas, commercialized postpartum care practices, housewives’ contribution to family finances, class (im)mobility, and the racial politics of citizenship.

The main merit of the book is that it offers a feminist analysis of recent socioeconomic and cultural phenomena that have rarely drawn scholarly attention before. One of the most significant changes in contemporary South Korea has been the increasingly precarious, neoliberal, hyper-competitive work environment, caused by a number of factors, including the Asian financial crisis in 1997. The gap between the rich and the poor is worsening, and the class mobility that was possible in the past no longer seems to be a realistic goal. In chapter 2, Jin-kyung Lee contrasts this reality with the stories of popular TV dramas, which consistently disavow the rapidly consolidated class structure by deploying the Cinderella and “switched-at-birth” plot lines that disguise the issue of class polarity.

Those who have no college degree face an even less hospitable job market, where “irregular jobs” (*pijŏnggyujik*) have become the most frequent form of employment. In chapter 6, Hyejeong Jo focuses on gender differentials in the narratives of those without college degrees, who must confront “an unguided journey to becoming adults with little educational support” (109). Jo illustrates that in a society where educational credentials are crucial to securing good work and a comfortable life, women experience more severe disadvantage from not going to college than men, who tend to consider their mandatory military service as an alternative to higher education.

The intense desire to maintain and enhance class status is manifest in bodily practices. Using the sites of commercial postpartum care services, Yoonjung Kang in chapter 5 probes the new ideal of motherhood held up for middle-class urban women. This new ideal is associated with being healthy, slender, beautiful, and disciplined. The serious investment in postpartum care services, Kang argues, is an example of class-based biopolitics through which women try to achieve “aesthetic health” and self-fulfillment.

In addition to body politics, women’s critical role in the “informal economy” constitutes a significant part of class formation in Korea. Myungji Yang’s chapter focuses on middle-class housewives, whose acuity in real estate speculation helped their families amass wealth and become upwardly mobile during the era of rapid economic development from 1978 to 1996. Yang also demonstrates how the public discourse on those enterprising housewives was critical, as they were portrayed as “subversive, undesirable, and even dangerous rebels who challenged social norms” that were gendered (57).

In the complex relationship between gender, class, and economy, chapter 4 by Seo Young Park revisits a familiar topic from a refreshingly new perspective, focusing on women garment workers. Female factory workers used to be viewed mostly as passive, powerless victims of the capitalist system and authoritarian state power until the 1980s.

However, Park attends to the voices of women garment stitchers, detailing their own discourse on “skills” that reveals “affective, material, and physical attachments to work and their aspiration for an immanent and enduring ability that will help them to situate themselves in the insecure and precarious economic landscape of the present” (63). In doing so, the author interweaves social presumptions about factory workers with those workers’ own narratives and experiences to bring out the complex interplay between structure and agency.

The last two chapters share an emerging research area that focuses on gender and racial politics emanating from Asian migrant women in South Korea since the 1990s. Chapter 7 by Hyun Mee Kim focuses on the exclusion and inclusion of ethnically mixed men in the Korean military. The military has been a symbol of “hegemonic masculinity” and the claim of “real” manhood. What is new is that with the rapid increase of migrants to South Korea, a small but growing number of ethnically mixed young men have begun to be incorporated into the previously “homogeneous” population. Here, the dynamics of gender and race challenge the normative ideal of the homogeneous Korean nation within the context of the rapid growth of “multicultural families” in South Korea. A further inquiry into “multicultural families” is taken up by Hae Yeon Choo in chapter 8. Attending to the rapid increase of cross-border marriages that challenge the myth of ethnic homogeneity among Koreans, Choo offers an analysis of Korean middle-class women’s volunteer work in helping migrant women assimilate to Korean culture and society. Conceptualizing this invisible and unpaid work as “maternal guardianship,” Choo sheds light on the intersecting structures of social, racial, and gender inequality in the age of globalization.

Overall, each chapter offers incisive analysis of societal, cultural, and economic phenomena that are shaping the fluctuating dynamics of gender, class, and race in an increasingly hypercompetitive and ethnically diverse South Korea. The book makes a great contribution to various fields, especially Korean studies, gender studies, sociology, and anthropology, and will be useful as required or recommended reading in both undergraduate and graduate courses.

REFERENCES

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