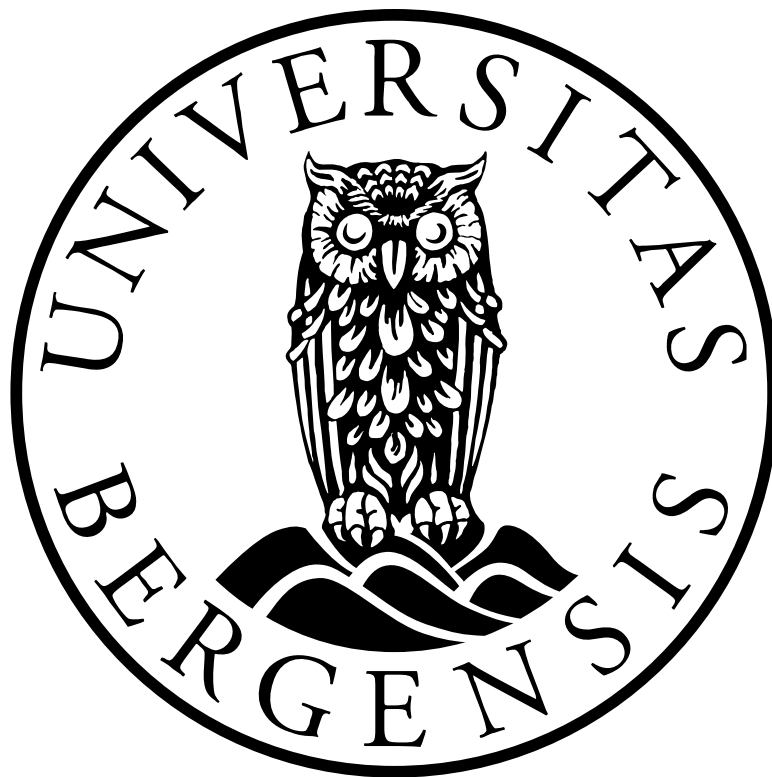


# Producing Desire: South Korea's Neoliberal Economy



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## Introduction

I became interested in Asia early in my undergraduate studies. I did an exchange semester in Hong Kong in 2012, and for a long time I prepared to conduct future fieldwork in Beijing, where I would study the role of style in contemporary processes of individualization. I did my undergraduate thesis on the social and economic aspects of choosing an apartment in Beijing. The move away from China and towards South Korea grew out of personal contacts, influences and interests outside the realm of academia. I had made several Chinese friends throughout my studies, and to my surprise they all spoke with warmth of them having visited Seoul. They described it as their shopping paradise, which was full of diverse products and often of better quality than China. They also spoke of love for Korean music, TV shows and the styles portrayed within these mediums. These were aesthetic styles for hair, clothes, rooms, buildings and consumer goods. More than superficial decorative forms of color and shape, these were also new styles for living life; they were new shared imaginary constructs for situating and formulating personhood, identity, relationships, culture and social existence. This reverence and awe for things and persons coming from South Korea was also continued on the internet and it intrigued me. I thus started to read up on and explore possible direction for a change of fieldwork to Korea.

Originally, I proposed the study of beauty ideals and how a subject becomes crafted and created through the use of modern music, clothing and gestures amongst South Korean youth. I was interested in studying subcultures so as to undercut what I perceived to be pervasive inaccurate constructions of homogenous South Korean society. While I have kept strong elements of my original desire to study young adults and the creation of a self, I have moved away from the topic of subculture. Instead, I have allowed my ethnography to change my focus to what I now believe to be a more striking and pressing issue, namely that of subject formation in an ever more flexible economy. My focus has become contemporary processes of individualization and subjectification in relationship to how the economy is lived in social and cultural terms. The change in focus came as a result of meeting students, part time workers and freelancers who, in varying stages of their lives, dealt with increasingly “flexible” working conditions. These involved primarily the lack of permanent employment, places of work and fixed work hours. Informants had great ambivalence about all of this. At times, they praised it as way to be free and autonomous. At other times seeing it as a source of great frustration, that interrupted their abilities to plan and form stable relationships and thus was also a source of loneliness. Throughout the following chapters, I will

highlight and explore the different social and cultural aspects of this experience of ambiguity, which confronts those who have just entered the contemporary world of paid work.

The topic grew more or less out of my discussions and conversations with a number of young '*Seoulites*' who sometimes were just my informants, but often also my friends. Time, as I would learn and will make clear here, is indeed a precious resource. It was this restriction on time; how it was being encroached upon, controlled and reclaimed that seemed to be a constant preoccupation of those whom I lived with and interviewed. They were constantly studying and working as part of the process of becoming young professionals. More specifically, those who became my informants often aspired to be in or actually held positions in what has been termed the creative industries. These are industries that in some sort of way have commodified culture and this can range widely from advertising, designing consumer products, tourism, art, photography, online homepages and music. The list is long and flexible and in fact some of my informants moved between these different forms of specialization which itself increased the time pressures on them.

Meeting sleep-deprived students who had seemingly spent the night working in the university just before they went off to their part time job quickly became commonplace. I wanted to explore how such an environment came to be not just normalized and accepted but also internalized. What sort of experiences, discourse and meanings lay behind people pushing themselves so hard and what sort of consequence this has for their personal lives. I realized halfway through my fieldwork that always lagging behind in one's studies or having to work overtime – often just because the boss was still at the office and not because of a high work load - resulted in my informants not seeing their closest friends and family, and having to postpone starting a family. They lived to some extent fragmented, or perhaps more accurately increasingly atomized and individualized existences. Sometimes, as much as half a year would pass between close friends meeting. They would maintain contact in the time in between by using social technologies, such as mobile phones and social network technologies (SNT). Thematically, I want to explore how leisure time becomes ever more occupied by work. The home, coffee shop and park become new sites of production. This was both imposed as a new working condition upon young informants, but they also often embraced it as a love of work and as a desire to improve reskill and better themselves. The relationship was often ambiguous. At times, the encroachments that blurred the boundaries between work and leisure were rebelled against, but at other times they embraced as involving practices for self-actualization and self-realization. This ambiguity had to do with the creative nature of much of my informant's

work, which carried different kinds of rewards for employers and employees.

In this thesis, I will analyze this kind of ethnographic detail by using the works of Bourdieu, Deleuze and Foucault. Though they are very different thinkers who worked on western society, all are interested in the creation of new regimes of power and control in modern societies. Moreover, they are interested in how those regimes of power and control are internalized, either as: a habitus, the creation of desiring machines, or pastoral practices for caring and reflecting upon the self. While other theories will be used when relevant to discussing particular topics at hand, these three authors will provide the core analytical framework. Using French theorists on Europe to analyze ethnographical material from South Korea might seem problematic, due to cultural differences between the societies. However, all of these thinkers are interested in the cultural forms that knowledge takes within particular socio-historical formations and how this can change over time. Moreover, all of these thinkers are interested in how the self and the individual are not natural givens but have to be produced through social cultural practices that take a particular form in modern capitalist societies, which themselves change over time. In particular, they are interested in modernity and in the contemporary neoliberal forms, that modernity takes as an assemblage of dynamic practices, which are able to re-contextualize and assimilate modernity to the context at hand. For Bourdieu, Deleuze and Foucault, the economy is not just the circulation of goods, people and money but also particular ways of understanding reality that are bound up with new ways of controlling and producing subjects and subjectivities. This for me is crucial to getting to grips with the ambiguity of neoliberal capitalism.

Taking into account that several of my informants did not have nearly enough time to meet with their closest friends, it is no surprise that my fieldwork faced some logistical challenges. This however is something that became less of a problem because of my role as an outsider and anthropologist, in that they knew that I would be flexible and willing to meet with them at short notice. Therefore, I did get to meet my informants at somewhat frequent intervals, in different settings and at different times. I might not have held the status a close friend, but I was frequently invited out with them and their friends – taken to ceremonies and events, such as a wedding or family dinners, that would have been reserved for family. For my informants, my presence was often viewed as unproblematic as I was a foreigner and they were participants in my study. Admittedly, this was not always the case, and on two occasions I did breach etiquette in such a manner that further contact was terminated. These incidents took place at the very beginning of

my fieldwork. After having some unstructured interviews with a few students at the local Honggik University, I invited the female student who had been so kind as to arrange the whole session out for a coffee. Her rapid exclamation of “*Anio!*” (No! in Korean) and the rather quick, if polite, goodbye left me somewhat befuddled. My intentions had simply been to repay her kindness by buying her a coffee before she went back to her studies, which seemed appropriate for me to do considering the time she had spent arranging everything for me and the price of coffee at Starbucks, a cup costing more than minimum hourly wage of 6000 KRW (approximately 40 NOK). I would repeat the same mistake a few days later with a female student who had asked me to practice English with her. I was keen to make contact with new informants and I elicited the same response from her. Thus, I learned some of the intricacies of male-female appropriate behavior concerning visits to cafes. These are coded and marked ways of signifying interest in beginning a relationship of intimacy especially if they are just a couple without mediating observers and tacit chaperones.

Issues regarding gender roles and behavior seldom became a problem after the incidents described. I chose to engage with groups of people at the same time, especially if it included women who had not spent much time outside South Korea. I did not experience the same difficulties when interviewing women who had spent many years studying or working in western nations. I also found that I often was invited out on a one on one basis after the initial group contact had been made. There were however a few times where meeting had been ended a bit earlier than what had been planned, as a boyfriend or girlfriend wanted to spend more time with the person I was interviewing or discussing things with. I would learn there is a primacy when it comes to spending time with the person you are dating, often to such an extent that they would avoid contact with other friends for the period of a relationship. This led one male informant, Sang-Won, to exclaim that he was a free man anytime his girlfriend had to work in China. There is a demand that partners interface only with each other and this is part of the establishment of a nuclear family relation that stands in contrast to the group socializing among youth who have not paired off yet.

The ethnographic material here presented is mostly presented in a manner as close as possible to the actual event itself. The exceptions to this is when the topic at hand extended into several meetings, and at times information that was not available to me during the time of the described event is added to the material, it is marked having happened outside of the original event. This is

done to achieve thematic consistency, better readability and structure.

### Methodological approach

As with most anthropological fieldworks, I relied on the methodology of participant observation, using different methods at different times and trying to control my own role in such a way that I would not be in the way of ordinary behavior. For me this primarily meant switching between participating observer, doing the same things as my informants were doing whilst observing, and, at other times, just remaining a detached “fly on the wall” (Bernard 1994). When spending time with groups of informants, I would ‘hang out’ with them. I often supplemented this with unstructured and informal interviews which I also preferred for my data collection. Later I would write down my experiences, both in a diary and in the form of field notes. I would reread these and sometimes try to code the information as to provide ready access to repeated and related topics. The method of unstructured and semi-structured interviewing would be used frequently when informants had limited time, and there would go some time before we had the chance to meet again. I tried to always have my notebook at hand, writing clues and descriptions as memory aides that I could elaborate on in my notes later.

I experimented with recordings using a camera, but found that the informants became stressed by this. I attempted to mitigate this by using my cellphone as a recording device, and having it on the table and just letting it be there. Telephones are much more accepted as everyday taken background instruments. Much time was spent in public and semi-public spaces that had music playing, people talking all around us and a great deal of background noise such as from traffic and building work. Noise became a greater problem when it was necessary to listen to more than two people at the same time who would switch rapidly between conversations in English and Korean. People would jump in and out of multiple conversations and languages. In the beginning I relied on the ‘*Go along*’ method (Kusenbach 2003) so as to be introduced to areas of particular interest for my informants. Some people did not wish to be part of the research and I respected that. They were left out of the notes and the cellphone recording was abandoned at such times. This has, along with factors concerning language, resulted in few direct quotations in this thesis. Instead I have opted for focusing on accurately recreating the gist of what was said and the context within which it was interpreted.



## Aspects and reflections on language

I do not speak Korean and while I did undertake a month of a language course at the start of my fieldwork I never mastered the language. However, I did focus on learning a few words well and practiced the pronunciation as well as I could, in an attempt to maximize the impression given of a serious student of the culture. Some success came from this approach, as I would often get talked at in Korean due to the other person expecting me to be more fluent than I was. It was through this I first made contact with one key informant and also how I managed to build rapport with a few others. Outside of this initial contact phase, English was used to communicate. No doubt this has had a profound effect on the access I was granted, the sort of information I could gather and it effected the sort of informants I ended up relying on. English, as will become clear in the chapter on education, holds a special position among young South Koreans. People sought contact with me, partly to practice their English language skills. When amongst a group, they would at times change over to Korean, which made my understanding difficult especially if my translator was also deeply involved in the conversation. The English proficiency of my informants varied but most of them had spent quite some time abroad at universities in USA or the UK. A key informant had worked as an English tutor, while another had started working as a translator and guide for VIP tourists coming to South Korea for the Asian games. In general the level of English proficiency was high and conversations flowed freely. Dependence on English restricted my access in the field to those who possessed sufficient mastery of the English language, and these individuals often shared similar economic and family backgrounds that had enabled them to travel the world and study abroad. In short, I did not study the downtrodden or the super-elite, but more aspiring sections of the working class and lower middle classes. I do not claim that this thesis is representative of all the different socio-economic strata in Korea, which would be a massive research project to undertake. Instead, my thesis focuses on the experiences faced by those becoming young professionals who are experiencing new working conditions.

## The field as site, urban fieldwork and network

The field have a special place in anthropology and has often (Gupta & Ferguson 1997) been conceptualized and presented as a single site where the exotic and cultural lies waiting to be discovered by the anthropologist. In a cosmopolitan and urban environment, such a geographically bounded field is not to be found. Instead, it is shifting and moving around, yet containing some

shared frameworks and reference points – economic conditions, gender relations, youth culture, family obligations, etc. The shifting nature of field locations presented a set of challenges that required a mix of methods in order for me to overcome them.

The first challenge was to find a field location that held some relevance for the group of people I proposed to study. I looked at travel guides, online blogs and resources written by people who had been to Seoul to work out a suitable site that might contain the subcultural group that I sought. I studied maps and metro lines to find large transport hubs that led to locations visited by the sort of people that I might study. I ended up deciding to focus on the area of Hongdae, a university district known in South Korea for its music and arts scene.

The second challenge stemmed from urban fieldwork itself and this is particularly true when the environment is in the second largest metropolitan area in the world. Focusing on one district had initially seemed like a good way of limiting the field of study. However, when I set out to map the area during my first few days, it became very clear that even this one district would be overwhelming to grasp. Initially I sought to solve this by focusing on particular places that I had gained promising information about through online material and a few conversations. This turned out to be unfruitful as there was a great number of venues and the popularity of them had changed because my information was old. Shops and venues open and close at an incredibly fast pace in Hongdae.

The solution came when I relied more on my own personal network, both in Norway and internationally, so as to access people in Seoul. Using social media and Skype, I contacted friends and asked them if they knew any people that they could introduce me to. This was a great success as short letters of introductions were passed around and in a few days, I had several meetings.

When first meeting potential new friends and informants I always explained my reasons for being in Seoul and what I was hoping to study. A snowballing effect developed as some of these people introduced me to some of their own friends. I decided to limit, with a few exceptions, the number of informants to those I met through this second round of introductions. I mostly abandoned the idea of studying one particular district, opting instead for a multi-sited fieldwork that encompassed the relationships within which I was immersed. As such, the fieldwork took place all over Seoul, the two most frequent districts being Itaewon and Hongdae. Multi-sited fieldwork has faced some

criticisms as not being proper fieldwork. However I find myself agreeing with Kurotani that the people we study are themselves moving about and that they have the same on-off contact with many friends and relatives as does the anthropologist (Kurotani 2004). Even in remote village locations, villagers are often on the move to town, mission stations, high schools, remote garden locations, hunting areas, and the distant villages of relatives and exchange partners. There is good reason to argue that anthropology has always been multi-sited, but that the nature of these sites and their distance is being transformed and remediated through processes that require ethnographic study.

### The area of Hongdae

Hongdae is an area in the Mapo district, home to renowned Hongik University (which the area derives its name from) and borders the Seodaemun district, hosting Ewha women's university. The area itself is quite compact and can be traversed on foot quite easily. Walking from one end to the other would take approximately one hour. Having two universities in such close proximity makes the area ideal as a place for young adults to hang out. Hongik University is known for its various art programs and recently many of its former students have set up their own residence and shops in and around this area. This creates a cultural mix that includes a hip nightlife, various galleries and secluded residential areas alongside emerging high-rise buildings. The two universities have about 35000 students combined, providing income to the growing influx of small shops, restaurants and cafés that cater to the young, design and fashion conscious. When I first arrived in this area, I spoke with the owner of a nearby hostel that also had a bar, concert patio, record label and record shop. Our initial conversation was about on how Hongdae had transformed over the years. He himself had grown up in the more luxurious and high-end district of Gangnam. However, he had bought a large building and established his business in Hongdae, due to the number of musicians and artists that spent their time here. According to him, and later confirmed by another of my informants, film student Min-Hee<sup>1</sup>, the area had started out as a cheap and rundown area for people to live in. This is what made it attractive to young, up and coming artists. Being short on money and income, the earliest inhabitants of Hongdae had chosen this location for convenience and out of economic necessity. Today the area is undergoing processes of gentrification. Min-Hee pointed out that today the area is rather high-end in terms of property prices, and that the first

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<sup>1</sup> Min-Hee is a 26-year-old female film student, who spent 10 years living in Berlin, first with her family and later alone. Her father worked in Berlin for a Korean company, and she is today living alone in Hongdae.

inhabitants and owners of land in this area had made a fortune once it became popular to the wider public. The price of living in Hongdae is considered to be high and young people, workers and students alike, cannot afford to own their own or rent a place in this area. Those that do often have to share rooms and kitchen-bathroom facilities. Many choose to commute, and often came from quite far. Those who do not attend university or have a job in this area, but who work in the creative industries, still come to this area due to its reputation and centrality in art scene and its abundance of establishments for “play”. Play is used to describe leisure activities that can include the consumption of alcohol, primarily beer and Soju, and playing games such as darts and beer-pong. Many are also attracted by the price of food, drink and entertainment that is relatively low and partly directed towards low income students.

As the area turned popular, the number of big brand shops has increased. Now the area contains many of the biggest and most well-known, both locally and internationally, brand name shops, such as Nike and H&M. All of them catering to the young and trendy, and while not being the most expensive sorts of shops one can visit, their products still go for far more than those one find in markets, the smaller domestic shops and street vendors. This diversity of retail outlets has made Seoul into a shopping paradise for all kinds of products and this also goes for the Hongdae area. The main street is clustered with small independent shops, often having only one small room to show their wares and often spilling out onto the street. There is a trading culture of buying and selling where traders try to find new niches of specialization that can range from selling just hats, cigarette lighters, shoes, photographic frames and mobile phone accessories. This trading culture also has its creativity as retailers try to tap into it, but also create new fashion trends in clothing, shoes, food, coffee, etc. Consumption itself as de Certeau (1984) notes is also a site of creativity and identity, as people selectively choose different products to craft their identities, environment and relationships. The attractiveness of Hongdae has to do with dynamic and creative nature of consumption and the way it is related to these large numbers of independent retailers who sell mass consumer goods, whilst also seeking out new niches of consumption. It is this production of consumption as a creative act of producing desire that attracts artists and youth who are also experimenting with producing cultural products including their own identities and relationships.

## The foundation for a neo-liberal state

When attempting to grasp the lived reality of contemporary South Korean youth, it is necessary to explore the new social, economic and political processes that increasingly frame, define and create this reality. The lived reality of youth needs to be placed up against a background that gives context and meaning to individual actions and choices. The backdrop is shaped by the influence of other nations, economic forces and cultural influences that are often outside of South Korea itself, but with which South Korea is closely engaged. I will shortly explore how geopolitical strategic interests, global market forces and external institutions have influenced South Korea since the crisis in 1997, also known as the IMF crisis in South Korea. My aim in this thesis will be to explore how state structures, corporations, pedagogic institutions, and individuals come to employ particular regimes of power, what Foucault calls new technologies of power that install new regimes of governmentality. Using western societies, Foucault focused mainly on the emergence of institutions in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that used new disciplinary and pastoral techniques to create subjects and subjectivities. He is interested in how experts that are bound up with the hospital, mental asylum, prison, school and factory came to disseminate these new technologies of social control. I will explore how these new technologies have been to some extent de-institutionalized in the modern world. In particular, I will document how they are picked up, internalized, modified, disseminated and experienced by my informants. I wish to focus on how new intensified regimes of work come to be embraced and reproduced by those who are dominated by those regimes. I will explore the ambiguity in these regimes, in that they are affirmed as allowing greater autonomy and freedom for the self, whilst also imposing greater demands and forms of control on people's everyday lives.

Using the theoretical approach of Foucault and Nikolas Rose on neo-liberalism and governmentality will allow me to analyze how politics and regimes of power can use new forms of technology to create more intensified forms of work that are partly experienced as self-imposed. It is not direct institutional surveillance that creates and disseminates these regimes of power for this is still a territorial understanding of power that does not grasp the new forms de-territorialized form of social control that are emerging and growing. When Foucault speak about power, it is not limited to the power of the state or its institutions, instead he attempts to approach power as a concept that is something more than its materialization in the state. Indeed, he seeks to rethink the state as emerging out of and participating in wider regimes and technologies of power. He

justifies his lack of a concrete theory of state as deliberate because:

“The state is not a universal nor in itself an autonomous source of power. The state is nothing else but the effect, the profile, the mobile shape of a perpetual statification (étatisation) or statifications, in the sense of incessant transactions which modify, or move, or drastically change, or insidiously shift sources of finance, modes of investment, decision-making centers, forms and types of control, relationships between local powers, the central authority, and so on.” (Foucault 2008, p.77).

As such, this understanding of the ‘state’ finds semblance in post-modern understanding of new regimes of power based on a rejection of the social as “the sum of the bonds and relations between individuals and events – economic, moral, political – within a more or less bounded territory governed by its own laws” (Rose 1996, p.328). In short, the state and the social are historically contingent. They themselves are products of power, products of different interests that the state in turn may seek to govern. It can do so through the concept of society or as in the present neoliberal context by often rejecting society in favor of communities and individuals governing themselves. For both Foucault and Rose, forms of power are historically contingent and take on varying shapes and forms. They need to be analyzed as practices bound up with discourses, specialized groups and a particular kind of social order.

As a historically oriented philosopher, Foucault sets out to study the emergence of the *raison d'état* (reasons of State) for the state and how this discourse came later to be bound up with the growth of liberalism. The original discourse legitimized governmental practices, it sought to reinforce the existing state apparatus – arguing that one can only govern where there is already a state, by creating the state that should be. A state would in this perspective be a state that is specific and set apart from other states, focused on becoming strong in the face of those who would seek to undermine it. In other words; the state is an entity, a discontinuous reality that exists only for itself and in relation to itself (Foucault 2008, p.5). This is not to say that the state exists in a vacuum, devoid of outside influences, it is only a statement that the state in essence is an inward oriented regulatory-entity looking to strengthen itself. Governing in accordance with this *raison d'état*, means accepting that other states have interests as well, and that the states should seek to limit itself, not trying to bring all other spheres of life under its control, neither should it put itself in such a position as to be taken over by other states. It is this self-imposed limitation that is the most distinctive feature of the liberal *raison d'état* for the modern state which provides the

fundamental groundwork for the forms of government that followed, up until the neo-liberal system of today.

For Foucault, liberalism is the first divergence from this *raison d'état*. He sees it not as a radical break, but more as an expansion of the self-limitation of the state. The state stops seeking to constitute itself through its own internally generated sovereignty, it moves towards an agenda of frugality. In this new form of governmentality, the market plays a special and privileged role functions as the tribunal for government policies and decisions. Validating which policies and actions that are good, or correct, happens through letting the market price decide, meaning that if the actions taken by the state can be said to put forth the true price of items then it is a good action. Those actions that go against this can be seen as erroneous. How this came to be, or rather the reason for this is not clear and would be hard to find according to Foucault (2008, p.33). This liberal modern form of government, which dominated from the early eighteenth century, was influenced by the philosophical works of Adam Smith and the growth of the discourse of political economy, especially the concept that the realization of true prices is the work of government. This idea is a major part of Smith's *Wealth of Nations*. This new form of government is based on preserving and exploiting the "natural instinct" of self-interest, governing now becomes the act of managing interests. It is not a question of repressing or denying interests but of arranging them so that in the act of individuals realizing their self-interest, the collective interests of society are also realized. Interest also becomes more broadly conceived as not just economic but as including the interests of groups, the state and individuals (2008, p.44).

This definition on what power, the 'social' and state become in modern society, leads us to the next concept, that of governmentality. Foucault uses the concept of government in an older and wider way than we would normally use it today. He takes it out of its current pure political meaning so as to explore the link between power and processes of social control that are grounded in disciplinary practices and the process of subjectification (Lemke 2001, p.191). Foucault broadens government into a concept of governmentality that can be used to describe all practices that contains an element of exercising control. Such a wide take on government and 'governmentality' is also meant to include practices that create and control individual and their beliefs, values, attitudes and behavior. It is not government at a macro level but also the governing of individuals or perhaps more accurately governing through the production of individuals and individuality. Rose adopts this concept of governmentality and government when analyzing the

discursive shift in emphasis by authorities from the social to that of community understood as individuals and groups governing themselves and not reliant on society. For Rose this is the emergence of neoliberal forms of governmentality that emphasizes the individual governing him- or herself. On an individual level, governmentality operates through technologies of the self that involve self-discipline and self-surveillance. These are defined as technologies that allow for the individual, alone or with the help of others, to transform their thoughts, conducts and ways of being, in order to achieve a certain goal (Foucault 1988, p.18). The definition opens for an improvement of the self for reasons that can be intrinsic to the individual, but also via external technologies of power that seek to influence the individual to be more self-governing, more self-disciplined and more self-aware. I want to focus on how individuals' actively participate in their own self-government and the experience of ambiguity and ambivalence that can result. I will show through my ethnographic examples people willingly working 'after hours', as a self-imposed necessity that was coercive and pleasurable.

It is necessary to use contemporary South Korean history so as to situate the contemporary changes in regimes and technologies of power. Relevant here is the economic crisis of '97, which became the basis for tripartite negotiations, involving the government and chaebols<sup>2</sup>, the workers unions and their international organizations, and the international financial institutions, primarily the IMF. These negotiations saw a reduction in worker security as well as far reaching restructurings of the economy that involved the splitting of chaebols into smaller entities. There also emerged a leaner state apparatus (Oh 1999). These changes had such profound effects on society that the suicide rate skyrocketed. Reported suicide for males aged 35-64 (women experienced no significant jump) increased from 26.4 in 1996 to 44.3 in 1998 per 100,000 and fell back to normal levels around year 2000 (Khang 2005; Kim et al. 2004). In a spontaneous act of social cohesion many South Koreans donated their belongings and valuables to the state in order to help it get through these troubled times (Heikkila 2005). For Heikkila such actions come from the way economic behavior in South Korea is embedded in social relations, and those relations extend to the state in this case. This interconnectivity of economic and social is best shown in the role that friends and coworkers play in securing and developing each other's careers and professional skills. Something that I witnessed repeatedly. Though Heikkila rightly notes the Korean embeddedness of the economic in the social, he also tries to exoticify and prescribe a solution for a

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<sup>2</sup> South Korean form of conglomerate.



better South Korea, primarily through international focus, competition and not at least through a reinvigoration of the 'sunshine policy' (2005, p.43) that sought closer and better ties with North Korea<sup>3</sup>.

The economic crisis of the later 1990s produced a movement toward neoliberalism in South Korea. Neo-liberalism can be summarized as the process of withdrawing the state; leaving subjects with what often is seen as greater freedom to act. Individuals, families and communities must assume responsibilities that in other systems would fall upon the state. (Lemke 2001). The close ties with liberalism and *raison d'état* is easy to spot, as neo-liberalism is the direct result of these two in the way it posit forms of government. Neoliberalism is also noted for introducing and applying the principles of economic rationality to all social activities including welfare, the management of crime through punishment and indeed all areas of power. Neoliberalism was concerned not just with the circulation of goods and services but also with developing the attitudes, values and capacities of the self in a way that these can also become productive of something. According to Rose (1996), the transnational nature of economic activity has been a major factor in the reconceptualization of the social territory, as the field of thought and action, from being bound to the national state to the supra national. On a local level, this has taken the form of, as Foucault and later Deleuze point to, a retraction or a decline in institutionalized forms of control. This has occurred alongside the development of new possibilities for governing through the self and, as Rose argues through communities. There has not been enough ethnography on the way neoliberalism pervades and restructures everyday lives and the practices and subjectivities of individuals. It is to this that I now turn.

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<sup>3</sup> The sunshine policy focused on empathy and understanding towards North Korea. It was gradually abandoned between 2006 and 2010. Reasons for abandonment were repeated provocations by Pyongyang.

## Pretending to work and internalized control measures

*The Sketchbook* café in Hongdae is special in that it is located at the “wrong” side of the 8 lane commuter road, which is filled with constant traffic and which divides Hongdae into two parts. The café is located on the opposite side of this main road, away from all the small shops that litter the area outside of Hongik University. There is less of a crowd on this side of the street and subsequently less noise. The area is primarily a residential area, containing small mom and pop shops and the occasional chain kiosk. Family and the donated free labor of family members is often the basis of these small shops. It is also the basis of friendships where people work informally with each other’s projects and capacities. The quieter nature of the area helped *The Sketchbook* café along. It has many terraces and a rooftop lawn that is quiet and at times an idyllic place to hang out in a noisy polluted city. Their prices are steeper than other cafés, producing a particular sort of customer base that leans towards a more middle class employed customers.

This cafe also distances itself from what has become the norm in cafes, by choosing not to follow those who copy Starbucks. They have created a different sort of environment from those coffee and cake shops that try to replicate and copy the style and atmosphere of Starbucks, which they only manage to do in a partial manner. In those “copy-cat” cafes, there are seldom crowds of people that sit around working and studying like they do in the original Starbucks and like *The Sketchbook*. A cultivation of a culture of creativity, as is the intended purpose of *The Sketchbook*, requires particular forms of consumption, particular kinds of material environments, which continually suggest deviation, newness and originality. The menu, décor and character of the café are part of the crafting of identity for consumers. They are internalizing something along with their coffee, tea, cake and beer.

*The Sketchbook* with its own take on things manage to create an environment that caters to those who wish to spend their time by themselves, or in very small groups working on some project. This is accomplished through dividing the interior space into several small and single sitting spaces. There were many times I would sit and write my notes at one of their tables, preferring those in the back or in the corners. As I cast a glance around, quite often most of the people around me were working, either with a camera, Adobe software or drawing something. There were many diverse forms of work taking place; however, it seemed that most people who came to the café

were young men and women trying their luck in what can be broadly described as the creative industries. The place operated as a site for making contacts, exchanging information, and forging relations between like-skilled workers. It allows individuals to tap into each other's personal knowledge, skills and equipment. Most customers sought to be semi-skilled or aspiring professional in the creative industries, which relied not just on the strict application of formal knowledge, but on aesthetic skills. By this I mean tapping into an ability to create shared imaginary products, images that could be commodified. For the contemporary economy is not just selling material goods, but also images.

The space of The Sketchbook had a layout that was at the same time simple, indeed Scandinavian inspired, yet with its own random quirks. All the furniture and layout spoke of well-planned and thought out choices. Their mix between white walls and polished bare concrete enabled the space to function as both a gallery as well as a café. This allowed young artists, the sort who frequented the place, to display their work and sell it if anyone was interested. The lighting along the walls and throughout the establishment further established this place as a locale for displaying art. The atmosphere of The Sketchbook was unique in itself, but it is far from the only place that cater to this crowd of "creatives". Just cross the street lies a different café, *The Bookshelf*, going after the same sort of clientele, but not having the same sort of outdoor facilities. The use of English names for the cafés confirmed the educated nature of the customers they sought. Perhaps to compensate for its lack of outside facilities, The Bookshelf provided massive amounts of design, lifestyle and art magazines for its customers to use freely. The entire building housed books from floor to roof, along every wall and stacks of magazines littering the large rustic tables that stood at the center of spacious, but cozy, rooms. Here the books become décor and are aestheticized as beautiful, noble and to be hoarded. Korean books and magazines dominated, but there were French, English and a few German books and magazines as well. Topics were kept within the confines of the aesthetic, architecture, design and fashion. Even the hostel I stayed at catered to this sort of crowd. The bar downstairs saw a constant stream of locals coming in to play music, have jam sessions and just listen to music or browse the impressive collection of records that was available. The owner of the hostel ran his own recording studio and arranged frequent concerts in this very establishment.

Creativity is in these contexts something to be marketed and consumed. The décor and atmosphere seek to create an environment where creativity can be at home and fostered, indeed affirmed and experimented with. Creativity also has to be created through material practices that objectify, stabilize and internalize it. It is this production and sharing of creative practices that draws people to these kinds of cafés, bars, hostels and restaurants. They are more expensive and the customers are not really that wealthy or well off, but it is distinguishing forms of taste that are being celebrated. It was Bourdieu (1984) who argued that there is a noble sensuality, an aristocracy of taste as the basis of individuality that becomes part of class relation. It is how the middle class differentiates itself and naturalizes its culture by making it proceed for a more subtle discriminating palate.

Jung, a freelance graphical designer currently working for a Korean women's magazine, provided me with a good explanation of what was taking place around me on a day-to-day basis in places like *The Sketchbook* and *The Bookshelf*. I had noticed that quite a few young people spent their time staring into computer screens, books and sketchbooks. They seemed engulfed in their own activities, ignoring the world around them. Jung would frequent this hybrid gallery café on her own when she had time to spare. During one of our usual talks, I asked her what was going on with all these people around us, and why they all were focused on their own activities and not relaxing. During weekends, this sort of place filled with people who were being social and hanging out with their friends, while during the weekdays it was a completely different atmosphere, a more engrossed form of leisure that looked very much like work.

When explaining this weekday atmosphere Jung introduced the term 'pretend work'. She characterized those sitting around us as people who pretended to work, with the word pretense carrying the implication of copying and practicing forms of work whilst not yet fully participating in real work. People were playing at working, with this being a serious form of play that embraced work whilst not fully realizing it. She herself was no stranger to this, as she would come here during her off days, sit down and work on improving her skills, using the very same computer software she would later use when she returned to work. Jung would more often than not work on the same sort of material that she dealt with at the company, but instead of producing a result that she

would hand over to her company or client, she would experiment in an effort to improve her knowledge, proficiency and speed. This was important because Jung had no formal training in the field of design, where she currently earns her living. She knew a magazine editor from her days at the university- where she studied fine art. This connection got her a meeting and a job, even though the editor at first described her work as lacking and amateurish he saw potential for improvement. New employees who lack skills and who rely on promises of hard work and improvement need to deliver; they need to return back the gift that consisted originally of taking a chance on them. Work is often of this kind, made up of tacit gifts and moral obligations which means that workers transform their leisure time into work or at least pretend work. There is no real pretenses here but instead a very real pressure to train and discipline the self so as to make it more productive.

When I asked Jung how she had evolved her skill in the field of editorial design, she simply stated that she had spent her time in places like The Sketchbook. Granted she had received pointers and suggestions as to what to improve from the editor, but the actual improvement in skill had come from her sitting down and working with material that resembled the material she would handle at work. In the beginning her main focus had been on mastering the adobe software that was the industry standard. This was not unusual, many young employees spent much of their spare time mastering the standard software and equipment used at work, but the time and resources needed to gain these work skills were not paid for by their companies. Instead, many people had to rely on their informal networks and the cooperation of friends and relatives to help train and make them not just competent but well-versed and talented. Many young people impose quite high standards on themselves which they need in order to meet the high expectations of their employers. This internalization of intensified work regimes that is often worked out in the coffee shops and other leisure spaces is also intimately related to the new contract forms of work that now engage young people.

### [Connections brought forward through a national crisis](#)

In her new position, Jung was a freelance editorial designer. This was not a very well paid job, according to her. However, it still allowed her to rent an apartment in Hongdae, which is quite an expensive area. Her job gave her flexible working hours. One week might involve nothing but work,

while at other times she was free to do as she pleased. She immensely enjoyed and appreciated the flexibility that came with such a position, as well as the economic independence and freedom to live a relatively comfortable lifestyle. Jung had recently begun to set aside some money towards her personal project, teaching photography to orphaned children in Thailand. She had previously spent a year and a half doing this and now she wanted to go back. The project was unpaid and required her to acquire the necessary equipment, such as cameras, light meters, filters, tripods, lenses, and so on. She planned to solve this problem by buying some equipment and finding someone willing to donate the rest. Transporting the material was an additional cost that had to be paid. This philanthropic interest reflected a desire to travel and live outside of Korea, and there is a class aspect to philanthropy that involves cultivating a noble ethical self because one is more fortunate than others. There is also the subordinating of self-interest to moral ethical interests and the class aspects of this came to the fore whilst I was in the field in a horrific case that made headlines in the national and international mass media. It is also a topic of conversation in homes, bars, coffee shops and work places.

On the sixteenth of April 2014 a national tragedy occurred in South Korea. Sewol, a large Japanese built ferry, sank while going from Incheon (city bordering Seoul) to Jeju (largest city on the island of Jeju). On board the ferry there were 476 people and over 300 hundred of them were students from the Danwon High School. Only 172 people survived the incident, but later the Vice principal of Danwon High School committed suicide from the responsibility he felt for the deaths of his students. He was also shamed for being, along with the captain, one the first to be rescued from the sinking ferry (Jang & Park 2014; McCurry 2014; Hockings 2014). Such incidents reveal how work and positions of power are heavily coded with notions of ethical care, especially if they involve a custodial caring relationship as in the form of a captain of a ship or a vice principal of a school.

I first heard of this incident while standing in line at the subway waiting for the train to arrive. At the time, it was not immediately clear to me, or the people around me, just how big this incident was. In the beginning the news portrayed the incident as serious, but in a light that made it seem that it would be resolved in a timely manner. Images of rescue workers on route towards the ferry, helicopters in the air and calm commentaries reinforced the perception of control. This was not the case. Several news reports, all published shortly after the accident, pointed to negligence, slow response time and officials trying to cover up what had happened. National outrage led to the

prosecution of the crew and especially the captain who received a life sentence. This focus on personal responsibility took the limelight away from other issues such as overloaded cargo and the illegal redesign of the ferry to accommodate more cargo.

The days following the incident, South Korean media went into a frenzy. They reported the comments and actions of the government and the rescue personnel, families were interviewed and images of the ferry capsizing in the sea were shown on televisions in all public areas. The people in the city actually started to pay attention to these news broadcasts which contrasts with the way they often ignore new broadcasts about North Korean troop movement, military shelling and other border skirmishes.

The coverage of this incident was massive, and the catastrophic loss of all these young lives brought with it an intense search for answers as to how this had happened and who was to be held responsible. This public debate went on for months and it led to the suicide of the Vice-Principal, the resignation of Prime minister Chung Hang-won, the arrest of the captain and the crew, three separated investigations and public calls for the president to step down. This incident highlighted the murkier sides of Korean politics, showing the negative sides of the power of large corporations and personal connections. The Sewol was operating under a license gained through fraudulent documents, and it was regularly overloaded, sometimes carrying twice the legal limit of cargo. Many people were not happy with just the crew being arrested and charged. Several of my informants voiced opinions, which they kept reserved at other times that involved their distrust of their government. They claimed the incident proved that politicians and bureaucrats are just pawns in the larger games played by powerful moneyed interests. Public anger grew as it became public knowledge that there had been phone calls between the company who owned the ferry and the captain, where the company had told the captain and crew to hold off on calling it in as an emergency. Moreover, the crew had also told the students to stay where they were and not to move around to more accessible locations such as the top deck. This was done while they were one of the first to disembark and be rescued whilst many students became trapped below deck. These actions fueled conspiracy theories of the authorities and the powerful just protecting themselves. The incident produced a crisis of legitimacy for those in positions of authority that has yet to be fully allayed.

Public scrutiny and perceptions of bumbling incompetence over the rescue lead authorities to

attempt to produce an appearance of decisive action directed at clearing and cleaning things up. The highest levels of political leadership became involved. Both the Saenuri party, currently holding the presidency, and the Democratic united party, main opposition, sprang into action. Both had lost legitimacy from people losing faith and trust in politicians after the crisis. One of the first concrete actions taken was the arrest of Captain Lee Joon-seok, it came three days after the incident. President Park Geun-hye apologized on behalf of the government on three separate occasions – claiming responsibility for the accident, as she was the head of the government. The first high ranking official to make a public statement and meet the families of those missing was the former Prime minister. He had to resign as a direct consequence of public anger directed at the government (Kyungji & Kang 2014).

Other subsequent actions included restructuring the coast guard and a large-scale manhunt for the owner of the company that ran the ferry, Yoo Byung-un. It failed to find him, and this further fueled the conspiracy theories saying that the manhunt and other actions was all a show for the masses (Park & Kim 2014). At a more personal level my informants, who did not suffer any close personal losses, expressed great distrust towards all politicians and their close connections with the business elite.

#### Feeling small, the powerful play by their own rules

One evening, I met with Jung. We were sitting in a corner of *The Sketchbook* and we entered the subject of Sewol. I had asked if she had any news on what was happening and if there was any progress. Her strong initial reaction somewhat surprised me, as she was normally a very quiet and reserved person. She got all fired up and started telling me in a heated manner how this accident just showed how corrupt Korean society was. Her face became angry and leaning forward she started telling me how connections were everything. Business owners and politicians went hand in hand playing by their own rules. While people like herself had little to no influence over what took place in society, those with money and those who held office had all the power. She felt powerless when faced with the reality brought to light by the tragic accident, and the deaths of the helpless students became iconic for all kinds of discourses about Korean society. There was the public critique of high ranking officials and government contractors gaining their jobs through their connections and not their skill, in stark contrast to the struggle by those at the bottom to acquire skills at their own expense. There was also a sense of the expendable nature of those at the



bottom. In some accounts, the children had been ordered to stay in their existing places by the crew and their obedience and loyalty to authority, their trust in those in positions of power had cost them their lives. The children became sacrificial victims who had allowed adults and the crew to escape first. It is in their role as sacrificial victims that many identified with them. It is the loyalty of those at the bottom that costs them dearly, that leads to their suffering and that is exploited by those who feel no reciprocal loyalty.

This feeling of helplessness of the powerless and the conspiracy of interest of the powerful had also been expressed by Yoonsuh, a 25 year-old female student, while we were eating dinner a few days before my meeting with Jung. Yoonsuh claimed that the owner of the company, which owned and operated the ferry, was the brother in law of one high ranking member of the coast guard. This had allowed his ferries to be only lightly inspected before the accident. More detailed inspections would have revealed that the ferry had been modified to carry more passengers and cargo, modifications that were illegal and had contributed to the capsizing of the ferry (Bruno 2014). Yoonsuh gave this as an example of how people with the right connections did not have to work as hard as herself in order to attain the same results. The burden of work and stress is a form of class suffering that is often not acknowledged in everyday life, where it is necessary to pay attention to relations of dependency on companies and employers for contracts. It is in these exceptional events that individuals feel they have a right to say and unfold their own suffering within this context of national tragedy. Different forms of suffering become merged in that one becomes iconic or symbolic for the other. This is why the tragedy touched more than just the parents and relatives of the children, it touched at the very core of authoritative power relations in Korean society which demand loyalty, obedience and self-sacrifice from those at the bottom. It is not just the working class but also the middle classes who increasingly find themselves without permanent work, on contract, and continuously needing to reinvent and reskill themselves as they need to move into different creative industries.

Despite Jung being an obvious beneficiary of the job markets reliance on connections, she saw it as a big problem and an obstacle for young people wishing to enter the job market. She herself had felt, in the past, frozen out by other people's personal connections. The tragic accident had highlighted this problem in an unpleasant way. She did not seem bothered by the fact that she had used her personal contacts in order to gain a foothold where she currently worked, simply because she saw this as just the way society operated. This focus on connections and how connections are

perceived as a constituting part of business life has been explored and linked to the concept of Guanxi, by those studying managerial practices in China. In China, *Guanxi* is traditionally partly bound with the moral-social philosophy of Confucianism. It sees the production and maintenance of social order as residing in individuals accepting their place in a hierarchical social order that also involves mutual commitments, obligations, loyalty, and trust (Smart 1993). The traditional Korean form is termed *inhwa*. Some argue that there is a difference between *Guanxi* and *inhwa*, and that *inhwa* is more focused on the relation between individuals and does not in the same way as *Guanxi* focus on the group, nor does it make explicit reference to organizational or group memberships (Alston 1989). The latter part of this argument is in direct opposition to my own findings in South Korea, where reference to group membership is prevalent and often a requirement for belonging to certain circles. The Korean concept of *inhwa* identifies harmony with the stable order that comes from hierarchy. Social harmony is equated with social hierarchy and reciprocity of mutual care. This draws on the Confucian ideal that makes the moral commitments and loyalties between unequals the basis of a stable society. This involves respect, acquiescence and conformity by those at the bottom towards parents, elders, teachers, and other authority figures who in turn have their obligations of care and loyalty (Cho & Yoon 2001). What the ferry tragedy had highlighted was the lack of reciprocity, that the loyalty and respect by those at the bottom towards authority was not repaid with their ethical obligation to care for those who entrusted themselves to them.

To belong to a social group or circle in Korea is often on the basis of an already established relationship. Here kinship and family are being replaced and supplemented by other relationships such as those who went to the same school and university or worked in the same corporation. These new kinds of solidarities emerge in urban context particularly among people who are moving in professional settings. Here it is partly what Bourdieu(1986) calls social and cultural capital that are being reinvented. Social capital refers to the range and depth of the social ties or relationships that a person can call upon. This in turn is related to cultural capital defined as the forms of knowledge, values, attitudes and perceptions that contribute to social standing. Here we need to note that it is not just any high school or university which is important but the perceived rank of these institutions that create new forms of solidarity, new distinctions. This will become clear later when going into greater depth on education in Korea.

The consequences of the Sewol lay not only in the loss of life and the exposure of shady and

corrupt alliances, tacit agreements and illicit dealings, but also in the loss of faith in the political system itself. As Lee(2003) shows in a study on trust and compliance amongst South Koreans during the period of 82 – 95, these spectacular media events, such as Sewol, increased the lack of will for compliance. These large scale spectacles of incompetence and corruption occur alongside an overall decline in trust and compliance towards state institutions, which comes from a higher educated population with different set of goals and values than those offered by Confucian ideals merged with corporate forms of hierarchy. Patron-client relationships, systems of mentoring, and elite forms of solidarity are part of the organizing connections that seem to be quite commonplace. Yet this kind of social order stands in contrast to the amount of focus and energy that has gone into restructuring the education system according to principles of meritocracy. Slight forms of perceived injustice within education have historically lead to people protesting and creating a public relations nightmare for legislators (Seth 2002). How a dependence on having the right connections have slipped past public scrutiny, considering that it apparently partly determines what job a person might get, is somewhat a mystery.

### Working in the party area, all night

The case that is presented below, took place in the middle of my fieldwork, after I had already met and gotten to know a few members of the group. I received an invitation to attend a semi-formal event for the company *HiCreature*, involving administrative personnel, as well as other artists. The invitation was extended to me by Kim, who is a 27 year old pencil artist, focusing on creating magic realism involving humans and animals interacting. He works tirelessly at work and at the café. His nonpaid work include the learning and practicing of English and work on several personal projects, that include a Korean poetry book with illustrations that highlights the meanings of the poems. I first came in contact with Kim while I was studying the Korean language sitting at a table in The Sketchbook. Kim was at the time bustling about, putting up several of his works on the gallery walls together with his friend and colleague Jae. Kim apologized for disturbing me, at the same time he took an interest in my language study, and this led to us exchanging contact information. I later checked out his online portfolio and made contact, which in turn led to several meetings, visits to galleries and a few evenings out. While I did not get a chance to meet with the administrative personnel of *HiCreature* again, I felt that they were forthcoming with information on how they operated and what sort of benefits they provided for their employees.

Kim, the group's connection maker, led the way and had arranged it so that people outside *HiCreature* would be joining us a bit later. The place they had chosen was a Korean food court, with benches and long tables that provided seating for a large number of people. Throughout our stay, there would be a constant stream of people coming up to us, some stayed and some left, but the core group of colleagues and friends remained. Most of the people coming up to us were the friends of coworkers of my informants. The company *HiCreature* focused on designing and selling accessories for cell phones, computers (mostly protective casings) and pillow casings. The company itself is a relatively small one, yet it has quite a few artists working for it, just shy of 20. It does not boast large offices or a dedicated space for its artists and the work is done wherever the artists find space and whenever they find time. This saves on cost and in effect moves the cost of production into the private residential spaces of homes and the semi-public space of a café. In effect, this blurs the boundaries between the private and the public, or the corporate and the personal. This seems to be a recurring feature of the new economy and its reliance on creative industries. A feature of companies in this industry is that they often cannot afford to invest too heavily in offices and equipment for their own corporate existence is contractual and uncertain. The blurring of boundaries between leisure and work, public and private, along with the economic uncertainty only served to intensify people's commitment to work, their commitment to preserving their corporation and augmenting their skills.

Kim explained to me that he tended to work at home most days. He subjects himself to a demanding business schedule, showing strong self-discipline by constantly declining to do non-work related things during what he consider normal office hours. Kim attempted to manage his working hours so as to maximize the time he could spend with his spouse.

*HiCreature* provides an online marketplace for its merchandize, and the website is available in both Korean and English. It has options for international shipping at an additional charge. Individual artists get their own computer-generated space on the website, which features the products they have provided designs for. This allows them to attach and share a simple web-link with potential customers with regard to other things they may be selling such as their art. These links feature on social media applications and sites as well as on the business cards of the artists themselves. Jae was exceptionally good at promoting his store and would often send me in there to see his latest creation. Kim on the other hand varied his self-promotion more, mixing it in between his declarations of love towards his spouse and being most active when he had recently created

something new. The use of individualized online marketplaces means that the company can monitor and track the individual artist's performance, it can reward and endorse them individually. *HiCreature* has thus geared itself around individual incentives.

During the dinner with *HiCreature*, I talked with one of their administrative staff. I quizzed her on how the payment system worked, and according to her, the artists got 10% of the sales value of the products they had designed as well as help to establish themselves at galleries. This was in addition to a fixed monthly salary which varied between the artists. Kim and Jae was not forthcoming on this detail, but frequently complained about not earning enough. The minimum wage in South Korea at the time of my field research was set to 5500 KRW (33 NOK) per hour. So far, *HiCreature* had not arranged any gallery showings themselves, but there was one coming in the near future. I later checked their online store to get more information and an idea on what the price range was for the products they sold. Focusing on what the administrative person that I had spoken with had claimed to be their most popular item, the cellphone casings, the listed price for one of these was around 30,000 KRW – the approximate equivalent to 180 Kr. Double the price of the same sort of items sold by street vendors. The items differ from the mass produced goods found in large shops, being part of craft culture that the middle classes enjoy. Despite this they had to sell quite a number in order to achieve earnings significantly higher than minimum wage. Among this group of my informants minimum wage was the norm. Kim had not been so forthcoming with details on the subject of wages up to this point and just sporadically claiming to be a starving artist and that his spouse was supporting him. How much truth there was to this statement is somewhat hard for me to determine, they were both very careful with money and would not spend large amounts when out. They would often go to some of the cheaper places for dinner, and once there she would often pick up his part of the tab. At the end of my fieldwork, they had bought an apartment together, for which Kim, with the help of family, had provided the initial payment. The apartment was located outside of Seoul proper and was something of a refurbishing project.

According to the administrative staff, the company gallery exhibition by *HiCreature* was going to be different to their other sales formats. Here the artists would be able to specify the price of their work themselves and keep the sum in its entirety. The gallery showing would be a first in several ways, not only because it was the first large exhibition that the company had done, but also because individual artists would cooperate on a single piece of work. Administrative staff had put

them in pairs, as an attempt both to create better solidarity amongst a highly individualistic group of artists and so as to facilitate the development of their art in the direction of producing a more diverse product catalog. This pairing of artists meant that, the price of individual pieces and the potential profits would be divided amongst the two cooperating artists. Having to create something new together and being forced to step outside their own area of expertise and familiarity put a lot of stress on the artists and the administrative staff, as was revealed to me during this dinner. For the administrator and organizer the stress consisted of an increased workload, she had to arrange renting space for the gallery, putting together compatible teams and making sure that they managed to produce something together. Kim and other artists had complained that there was a lot of stress involved in working together, no longer just beholden to their own schedules they were now forced to find time that would fit the schedules of their assigned partners. Let us now move to the direct aftermath of the dinner.

#### [Learning, teaching and connections](#)

Dinner and socializing with colleagues done, the group headed into the streets of Hongdae. The streets are filled with people in fashionable clothing and in high spirits. While walking most of the conversation at this time was in Korean, and like so many other times Jae (digital artist, colleague of Kim and the oldest male member of the group) ended up as the butt of their jokes. Kim translating a selected few of them, involved teasing and calling Jae “Pig-man” and other similar terms because of his weight and love for pork meat. Alongside this, they all talked excitedly and I had the impression that the group was now heading out to enjoy themselves and blow off some steam. This was not to be the case. Having picked up Jim, a professional photographer and acquaintance of Kim and Jae, we sat down around a few tables at a small non-distinct café. Only a few of them ordered anything, most just kept the conversation going. More out of a feeling of duty towards the shop owners than an actual need for coffee, I bought one for myself and gave Jae one of his much beloved chocolate beverages, as he had nothing to drink at the time.

It soon became apparent that this was going to be quite a long stay, as one of their younger members had missed his last train and had to wait until 6am before the trains would start running again. As I was wondering what they would do to pass the time, they started pulling up their computers and a few DSLR cameras (digital system cameras). The camera equipment was professional grade and beside Jim, the professional photographer, who brought his own, a few of

them had borrowed the equipment from their old university, even though they had graduated some time ago. This led to interesting discussions on the equipment itself, as well as how to use it. I got a quick introduction on how to use these cameras, and what role this sort of equipment played in the making of art in their specific fields. Interestingly this borrowed equipment played a crucial role in the creating of their commercial work, further highlighting the extent of which they as workers were left to take care of themselves and provide their own means of production.

Seon, a young woman of 21, was with us. She was a budding photographer and the reason why Jim had joined us. Jim had seen her work and online portfolio, and now he wanted to find a project that would allow them to collaborate. This was their first meeting so they held off specifics, and talked about photography in general. Seon had no formal training in the field and is entirely self-taught, financing this part of her life through working as a web designer – a job she later claimed to hate. While sitting in conversations with others and in general just observing I noticed the change that occurred between Jim and Seon once the initial formalities were gone, and their interaction took on the form of student and teacher. Seon asked questions and was very much the attentive pupil, leaning forward and obviously hanging on every word being said. They ended up withdrawing from the others, if not physically, it was obvious for everyone that they wanted privacy while discussing, teaching and learning. The others respected this separation, as they cast glances on them to look if they were approachable and deciding against butting in.

A few weeks after this meeting I would ask Seon what they went through and if they agreed on a second meeting. She told me that they had discussed the use of light and flashes as a way to improve portraiture; Seon, who had so far only relied on natural lighting and not flashes in her work, had enjoyed the short lesson. The evening had set the stage for them to meet at their own initiative, and they had in fact scheduled a meeting where she would join him as an assistant on a job. Seon and Jim's interactions in the café, the way they transformed it into a place of learning how to work, was indicative of what the modern work place has become for many workers. We are used to seeing capitalism as the discipline of mass factory production or of an open office, but capitalism also taps into other kinds of relationships and places, whether it be kinship and the family home, or modern friendship and a coffee house culture of creativity.

## The workplace in a Neoliberal society

There is a new way of organizing work that move away from the old Taylorism of maximizing profitability through the scientific control of workers at specific places and times. Today's owners of corporations are no longer owning or controlling the means of production as they would in the traditional sense or even an office building. Instead, what we see is a flexible approach of colleagues and friends getting together in order to engage in activities that have a direct relation to what they are working on in their job. Even if the majority of the people in this ethnographic case describe themselves, and more importantly see themselves as artists, they are all engaged producing commodities. They work for a company that transforms their products into highly specialized and stylized consumer goods that are then marketed and sold like any other online product. The exception being that the marketing is also, to a large degree, left to the creator of the product and the shop itself is not a physical space, it only exists in the virtual space of the internet.

There is also a culture of creativity that makes work part of people's identity, part of their individuality, their self-worth, dignity and distinguishing characteristics. This culture of creativity also contributes to producing people who want to work, who discover and affirm themselves through work, who are not alienated from what they produce, but on the contrary discover and realize themselves through their creative products. It is true that many of my informants are doing the job for the money, but there is also something else occurring in this way of organizing labor relations by tapping into structures of identity and desire. For it is not the company directly but the individual who experiences him- or herself as needing to control their own interest and desire to work, who push themselves to work harder, more skillfully and efficient. This is not to say that the wage is not of importance to the worker, or to the employer, as the latter does discipline the former using strong incentives and control – one worker, one online shop address, and piecemeal rates.

Neoliberalism has sometimes been associated with the movement of psychological discourses into the managerial positions, which then experiments in getting the worker to work for something else than their wage. There is an attempt to make work a part of self-realization in order to increase productivity. As Rose put it; "Through Striving to fulfill their own needs and wishes at work, each employee will thus work for the advance of the enterprise; the more the worker fulfills him or herself, the greater the benefit for the company" (1991, p.56). Whilst acknowledging the



importance of this process in other contexts, I do not think the transformations of work among my informants has been of that institutional kind but more the diffusion of a discourse of self-realization in society. Informants did try to find other meanings that were outside and preferably alongside monetary gain, such as pleasure, joy and deep interest in both professionalizing and experimenting with their creative activities. The social act of getting together and learning to do creative things, had a value in itself. It gave a person like Seon new skills and an opportunity to open new doors so she potentially could escape a job that she claimed to hate. It also, as I shall show, allowed Jae to transcend the position of being made fun of, to that of commanding the respect of others.

Jae was a digital artist who focused on creating vector drawings, that is computer generated and scalable drawings. These were mostly of animals in human positions and situations, which is ironic given that he was teased as being a pig-man. His friends were trapping him in his own art products and were finding a humorous teasing animal caricature that they could pin on him. Jae told me that he treated the camera as the first concrete step in creating a specific artwork. He would have a friend or a model pose for him in various positions, often quite scantily clad since skin tones were according to him easier to work with, but also because I suspect it was the possibilities of the human form that he was experimenting with. The resulting picture would be imported to Adobe Photoshop where he would replace the body and face with that of his vector drawings. To illustrate his method, Jae pulled out his laptop and showed me some sketches of unfinished work. The scantily clad body is here the site for art and at the same time, it is transmuted into other designs incorporating into them a latent eroticism. The animality of the vector drawings serve to extend upon the implied animality that is bound up with sexuality and the naked human body. Here, the public nature of the phone casings, the most popular product, restrict the display of explicit eroticisms that would be deemed vulgar. It is a tacit sensuality and animality that is being explored in relationship to culture for the bodies are still for the most clothed with suits, leisure attire and other ways of culturally encasing the human form and human activities. Still the body is a site for sensual play, but transformed into colors, geometric shapes and other life forms. Its sensuality inhabits them. This is the sort of creative labor which is the basis of the new economy and the consumer goods it produces. There is a construction of desire that needs to be tacit, it cannot be too overt. Hence it needs to be processed through camera angles, software and lighting.

Production and the play of desire in these forms will become apparent when I show how beauty

ideals, ideas of cosmetic surgery and the regimes of the body operate. Even in cases such as these, the mediation through the virtual plays a role, and here it is necessary to explore the concrete practices that create, circulate and share virtual forms that take over the human form. It is partly the human form becoming an animal but that is also too simple for both are being virtualized, made into abstractions of color, light, shape and character that make them amenable to being merged and juxtaposed.

Some parts of Jae's finished drawings would have been prepared beforehand; using the 'pen tool' on a picture of the animal so as to incorporate its virtual form into the final artwork. Jae would create one drawing of an animal's head – using the actual head as a guideline - and another of the human body freehand. The result was an animal or more often than not a composite of two different animals in the pose of a human. Asking Jae about the meaning behind the works he explained that he used the animals to express longings he himself felt very keenly. For example, an image of alley cats in human form was his commentary on freedom at the fringes of society. Showing ambivalence when it came to explaining the thought process behind their works was quite common among informants. Kim and Jae would only reluctantly go into details in front of other friends. Jae became shy whilst Kim deflected the questions. Yet Jae and Kim were using cultural assumptions and meanings in their creations, but this knowledge of theirs was tact. Both of them are great fans of the latest superhero movies, which feature a half-human or trans-human protagonists (Batman, Ironman, the Penguin, Robocop, the Terminator, Spiderman, The Hulk). In such movies, the animal or technological part of heroes and other characters serve to provide a commentary on the human possibilities of the self. The animal-technological features serve to highlight the possibilities of desire, beauty, emotions and violence. Humanizing the animal makes it a metaphor for the possibilities of the human, and so does the becoming animal of the human form<sup>4</sup>.

Jae's approach was by far the most technologically advanced approach of all those shown to me. It was also the quickest way to produce a new hybrid image. Jae had made himself a sizeable library of vector drawings from animal heads and bodies. While this had been time consuming due to the sheer number of details and shadows that each drawing required, it nevertheless also allowed for

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<sup>4</sup> There is strong traditions, both outside and inside of Korea, of blending the animal form with that of the human as form of commentary upon social and cultural praxis. In Korea and in this text, the myth of Hwanung and the she-bear is an example of this. In contemporary context this is being reinvented and mediated through the use of technology.

their reuse in modified forms in new projects. His skill with computer software and the use of the 'pen tool' was quite impressive to behold. When I, under his guidance, tried to copy what he did, it took far longer and I lacked the practical skills and accuracy needed to create good vector drawings or outlines. Jae was very much at home in this sort of production environment that Adobe Photoshop provided. To achieve such dexterity and familiarity with the tools of his trade and the learning of this craft had required many hours of practice. Whereas previous forms of craftsmanship built up their practical skills in terms of woodworking, metallurgy, stonework, lead lighting, needlework, tapestries and painting etc., this craftsmanship has now expanded to include computers and both the creation and use of specialized software. As Richard Sennett (2009) points out, mathematics, science and physics, and the realm of computer software also requires its own forms of knowledge and dexterity, it is a form of craftsmanship. The mind and the body have to be made to learn new skills in the way they handle information and in the way they move around the new mechanical objects that read and translate the world. A kind of skill emerges in organizing and using digital input/output devices and in adjusting lighting, color and shape. None of this just comes out of the computer program. It involves a new kind of corporal knowledge that is also governed by a new kind of aesthetics that is largely tacit. This aesthetics is incorporated through examples and practice, and cannot be easily verbalized by its practitioners. This software revolution changes perceptions and offers new ways of seeing and knowing that are still grounded within cultural codes that are often implicit and that are acquired through copying.

My conversation with Jae generated some interest by the others around us, especially the younger ones in the group, those who had yet to finish their university education. They often injected with questions of a technical nature about the digital tools being used, shadowing and how he scaled the different images. Responding to their complements and interest in his work, Jae showed some of his other techniques. Though he was addressing me, it was quite clear that Jae enjoyed showing his work and the process of its creation to others. Contrary to the fun that had been made of him earlier this evening, it was clear that the others respected him for his work and saw him as someone they could learn from.

It is also necessary to be aware that not everyone shares their work and skills like Jae. Kim often stayed in the background and let his friend and colleague have the center stage when explaining and illustrating software techniques. Unlike many of the others, I never observed Kim create his drawings or work on his creative side projects in a public context like the cafe. He very seldom took

out his sketchbook or showed them around, always preferring to hand out finished works in the form of postcards, digital reprints of his pencil sketches, or his finished art work hanging in various galleries. When asked about how he worked and how he went about creating the drawings, he stated that the process itself was quite quick, he seldom spent more than a few hours creating and finishing each piece of work. He interpreted my questions just to mean the actual execution of creating the drawing and not the time and practices spent on preparation and the formulation of ideas. Jae had the same working pattern, spending relatively short amounts of time actually completing one single picture - even shorter than that of Kim. He also included discarded ideas and drafts when reciting how much time he spent on each image. The relatively short amount of time spent on the actual execution of any each piece did not translate into more merchandise in their respective web-shops. A cultural notion of art as a spontaneous original act of creativity perhaps reinforced this model of aesthetic work (Sennett 2009). Both Kim and Jae hand out business cards, which carry the title artist before their names. They sought to feature the creative aspects of their work and to some extent saw their autonomy over hours and conditions of work as part of fostering that creativity.

This group enjoyed the opportunity to teach and learn new skills in an atmosphere that was a mixture of relaxation and work. They spent 5 hours straight handling the same sort of work they would do on a regular basis at the office or university. The difference being that they here had more time to engage pleasurably with the others so as to sharpen their skills in a context outside of formal supervision and evaluation. It is the surveillance regimes of the workplace and employers which are being avoided for they would hinder the learning process, and might provoke experience of shame and humiliation over mistakes and inexperience. The shifting of professional learning to an informal café context amongst friends also allows people to learn outside of a disciplinary context where they can learn through their leisure activities.

In his book *The Craftsman*, Sennett has a description of software developers who work in an environment that in many ways resemble that of visual designers and artist, in that they are individualistic, highly skilled, creative professions. They are often young people with fresh ideas and this is idealized so as to further promote their creativity. Sennett tells of how software developers try to build up what they see as an internal armory of skills and knowledge that they think will be transferable to many other jobs. They hope that this armory of skills will separate them from the many youngsters entering the business and the others who apply for the same sort

of jobs (Sennett 2009). The cafe becomes a space for developing but also sharing this armory of skills between close friends, it is a gift that they make to each other that ties them together. The cafés are more than complicit in the development of this new work-leisure culture with its pretend forms of work.

The cafés cater for a new kind of intellectual elite, not a high class academic elite of tenured professors but a lower middle class group of workers who aspire for better income, employment, stability and better skills. These groups also enjoy playing with knowledge and the cafés caters to this sort of crowd. They double as libraries, galleries and charging more for drinks and food as a way of keeping some out and others in. Each beverage costs roughly an hour of work at the minimum wage. Customers came because they were not paying for just the drink, they were also paying for the space and atmosphere they used and the inspiration it was supposed to give. Once people sat down, they would stay there for hours, oscillating between working and then having a chat with friends. For some, these cafes were their office where they could work productively within a supporting network of friends that was different from the supervisory surveillance and disciplinary regimes of an office. There is a complementarity of interests here, where employers have an interest in getting rid of the economic cost of office spaces and their management, whilst employees also have an interest in the autonomy that comes from working alone away from direct supervision. This means that employees have to be self-motivated and self-disciplined. The culture of the café produces this mixture of pleasure and discipline, leisure and work, play and seriousness, pretense and reality. It creates subjects who police themselves, who make themselves efficient, self-motivated and self-disciplined. There is no need for costly panopticons, supervisors and electronic surveillance when piecemeal rates and temporary contracts can ensure that workers police and produce themselves. It is also the nature of the creative industries that requires these kinds of subtle self-policing regimes of power. It is difficult to organize creative industries around coercive forms of repression that might generate resistance in the form of refusing to create or to create badly. There is a desire for more productive forms of powers that are not directly coercive but that rely on people dominating themselves. These more productive forms of power also tap into the informal relationships of care, gifts and knowledge that individuals and groups create amongst themselves.

The case of Jung is an example of all of this. She had finished university with a degree in fine arts, and no knowledge of the computer software used in the design industry. Yet, she was hired

through personal connections and in the hope she would provide a fresh perspective. Her lack of skills were a disadvantage, and she was advised to go home and practice. Both at home and at the café, she developed her armory of skills, her knowledge tools, and she ended up getting hired to do the job.

The competitive culture of many workers means that individuals feel like they have to work even in their leisure time. This was the case with Hyun-Ok who was a fashion design student at a nearby university. While we were planning a trip to the movies, to watch the newest Hollywood superhero blockbuster, she spoke of how she seldom felt like she could take time out to enjoy such activities. Always in the back of her mind, there was this feeling and nagging thought that would tell her that she should be working or studying instead of wasting her time watching movies. This feeling and voice came even when she was spending time with her friends. Sometimes she did not see her friends for several months. Pretending to work and having a voice inside of you that tells you that you should do something productive, is described by Sennett and by Kunda as new forms of internalized social control. Both writers analyses working life in the 'new economy'. Gideon Kunda is interested in the managerial aspect and how concept of culture is used as a control tool inside large tech companies, he did fieldwork among an American west coast high-tech firm. He shows how people are constantly told how to succeed through internalizing the company values and ethos. The engineers, managers and hired contractors (security guards, interns and so on) tell different stories about how they experience this internalization process. Taking the company culture into oneself is regarded by both managers and technical staff as the road to success in the company. It is not enough to work hard and be there all the time. You have to make work into a lifestyle, become part of the company, a process that according to Kunda show large similarities with belonging to a religion. The contractors, especially the security guards, talk of their life on the margins where they observe the 'members' and their daily routines. People streaming in and out of the office building at set hours, yet also working while they walk to and from their cubicles. The growth of information technologies have facilitated the change from one fixed space for the office into anywhere at any time and this in turn have led to changes in how those in the creative professions work.

There are clear similarities to those findings done by Kunda at high tech companies and the observations I've done throughout my fieldwork. Those who are still students among my informants had to concentrate both on the set tasks that were in front of them, as well as

preparing on their own for the future based on imperfect information on how to get a job or get considered for a job. This preparation includes undergoing and passing formal training outside of the school system, such as certificates in certain areas of skill – ICT and TOEFL being some of them. More importantly the cases I've presented so far have shown that in order to succeed a person needs to spend time outside of the formal schooling system in order to advance his or her skills to such a level that they can be marketable, and that this self-motivation and self-discipline required to improve the self requires not just the internalization of knowledge but particular attitudes, perceptions, passions, appetites and it is these that are also being measured by employers in interviews. In effect the subject takes upon itself the obligation to train and mold itself according to the ideals and needs put forth by corporations and government. This is the essence of neo-liberalism and what Foucault (1988) is speaking of when he talks about technologies of the self. People become self-monitoring so as to improve their skills and capacities, their armory, in order to be better prepared to take care of themselves in this ongoing struggle. There is something else being produced alongside commodities and that is particular structure of subjectivity that demonstrate not just obedience and loyalty but they create creative practices.

Internalizing this culture of work and creativity is also the creation of a certain lifestyle. It is the creation of an around the clock occupation, where work becomes the all-encompassing sphere for framing desires and pleasures. One of the consequences of this intensification of work, of marking all of life subordinate to the perfection of work, is that burnout can often result. Kunda discusses this in terms of workers having to constantly police themselves and perform to high standards within a system that can constantly monitor their activities. This led to several engineers losing their capacity to work anymore. Many of them had to take long periods of time from work through being sick. Some of them were not able to come back (Kunda 2006). With respect to contemporary Finland, Funahashi noted the same tendency and identified the same work patterns. In the post-crisis economic period of the 1990s, individuals developed a tendency to constantly think about having to work and they were unable to put work aside but constantly took on new tasks until they reached breaking point (Funahashi 2013).

With regard to my ethnography, there is a question of what sort of community that is being partly self-generated, by voluntary participants, existing outside the boundaries of the corporation. It includes individuals who share the same sort of interests and to some extent the same work place, *HiCreature*. This company also has an interest in creating a community of employees who can

cooperate closely with each other. In the contemporary world, communities are also mediated and created through virtual mediums, as I will show later when exploring the role of social media, technology and consumption. The creation of a community can be interpreted as an attempt to foster solidarity and relations of care, oblation and exchange between community members –who can also be coworkers. As such, community is, in Rose’s sense, a form of governmentality that seeks to create incentives for the employees to work harder and at the same time provide a sense of belonging to something concrete, removed from the abstractness and formality of work.

Nikolas Rose discusses how communities were initially defined as nothing more or less than the networks of allegiances, which one identifies with, without any calculated self-interest (1996, p.334). Such a definition puts too great a weight on the aspect of selflessness and self-autonomy. Rose argues that our allegiance to a certain community is something we need to be made aware of by educators and narratives. For Rose, community is not just a territory of a form of governmentality, it is also a means, an instrument of governmentality (1996, p.335). Rose primarily looks at larger social forces, such as national welfare structures, but I would like to argue that the same thing is happening not just to corporation but also within them. Large corporations are dividing up their tasks and allocating them to small units which allocate them to smaller units that functions as communities. Smaller corporations like *HiCreature* are efficient and effective in fostering a sense of belonging that again seeks to create loyalty, creativity and increase productivity. The form taken by these new practices of governing at an individual level, or rather at the level of the subject, will be explored in later chapters, which will focus on the subjectification processes evoked by societies of control.



## Militarized male, beautiful female and education

This chapter focuses on how gender roles influence and define opportunities and strategies in the labor market for young South Koreans. I will first explore how modernization through the military and obligatory military service helps to create a gender segregated labor market, as well as functioning so as to move young males into adulthood. I will analyze this process using two ethnographic examples and the work of Seoul born sociologist Seungsook Moon. In her book *Militarized Modernity and Gendered Citizenship in South Korea*, Moon analyses the effects of militarization on gender roles and the constitution of citizenship in South Korea. Military conscription influences young men's possibilities in the labor market and their experience of themselves as willing workers. It also forms young men's views of women, and especially of female workers as potential rivals. Later in the chapter I will explore how women, and to a more limited extent men, see the enhancement of beauty as a tactic for bettering their work opportunities; both the process of getting hired and promotion in the workplace. Lastly I explore how education, especially knowledge of English, functions as a form of symbolic and cultural capital. It is used to enhance job prospects, but it is also a form of self-realization. Informants also used English to enrich their lives, by participating in a cosmopolitanism imaginary that understood citizenship and personhood in transnational terms

### Militarized gender

South Korea is still officially at war with North Korea, and has one of the largest armed forces in the world. Most of the personnel are reserves and temporary recruits made up of young adult males who serve an obligatory two years of military service. After this period, they are kept on call and will routinely have compulsory (re)training. Every year, South Korea also performs joint military operations with USA, which has a large military presence throughout the country. The most well-known military base is in the district of Itaewon, which has obtained informal status as the international quarter in Seoul. It also attracts foreign civilian personnel along with Koreans who want to engage in business with foreigners. Today Itaewon is one of the few districts where street merchants often speak English and shops and services are directed towards foreigners. The military personnel and foreigners are often from all over the world. The district is part of old Seoul and so its streets are small. There are only a few high rising buildings, and almost no buildings over

five stories, which is part of the distinctive charm of this district<sup>5</sup>.

It was in Itaewon that I first met Sang-won, a 28 year old male statistics student. Initially, we spoke mainly about his stay abroad, and then of his time in the armed forces. This first conversation took place in a Nescafé coffee shop next to and overlooking the main street of Itaewon. There were few customers at the time, which meant people could have private conversations without being overheard. This was the first time we had met face to face. Previously we had contact through various social media that involved mutual acquaintances sharing their experiences. Sang-won had been to Norway and had spent time with friends of mine so our chat went easy and we hit it off. As we overcame formalities and started to know more about each other, Sang-won told me that he had lived here in Itaewon his entire life. There was the exception of one and a half years abroad, which he primarily spent studying in New York. His parents had previously run a snowboarding shop and a small pharmacy in Itaewon. Now his father worked for a large pharmacy just outside of the district. In many ways, Sang-won represents middle class Seoul. His father was a professional, who with his wife ran a small successful business that required specialized knowledge. This had allowed Sang-won to study abroad and to continue to do so even after he had gained disappointing grades. However, Sang-won did experience some difficulties financing his stay abroad. In New York, he had run out of money and could not receive help from his parents, because at the time their pharmacy was going bankrupt. Sang-won had to rely on himself and the help of new friends. He ended up asking people he hardly knew if he could borrow money for food. He described this as a somewhat shameful act, but the options was to terminate his studies and go back home. Sang-won then described how his time in the military had transformed him. Its discipline and ordeals gave him the motivation and the psychological outlook to do what he saw as necessary. In his opinion, being a soldier for two years was a life changing event that allowed him to go from being a dependent young boy and to become a grown man who could make uncomfortable choices when required. Throughout our conversation, he kept pointing out that he intended to pay back his creditors, and that the earlier act of asking for help had actually solidified his relationships with his friends.

In this story, military service operates almost as a rite of passage. It helps move Sang-won from a

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<sup>5</sup> The US military base is the primary reason for the lack of tall buildings, wanting to keep the skyline clear.

person dependent upon others (family and friends, even borrowing money to survive) to a confident man able to take care of himself and so gains a new independent identity. He acquires new forms of motivation and self-perception as a capable man who has autonomy and the ability to achieve what he wants despite it involving suffering, privation and hard work. His new view of himself as a resourceful man willing to endure uncomfortable circumstances came from the military. It gave him a new masculine identity, but also a masculine outlook for he spoke about his formative time in the armed forces alongside discussions about gender roles and work.

South Korea does not rank high on the gender equality rankings, number 111 according to the global gender gap report (Forum 2013). Asked if he had any thoughts on this, Sang-won claimed that women spent way too much time talking and bickering to be good workers. Supposedly, men had a better work ethic due to their time in the armed forces where they had learnt how to follow orders and do what they were told by their seniors. In his view men would do what they were told even if they did not like what they had to do, because of their military training. Having to spend weeks in the bush, eating and sleeping in tents, made Sang-won less picky about the things he had to do. This was different from how women reacted, they would become upset when told to do tasks that they did not want to do.

Sang-won had told me all this at a time when I tried to discuss how beauty ideals might form, or alter, a person's chances in securing a good job. He avoided this topic and instead wanted to talk about how the military had affected him. Both of us were from a country with mandatory service for men, even if it is somewhat deluded in Norway, and so we talked about what sort of gains could come from fulfilling this duty. I told him of the compensation that recruits in Norway received and he told me about the point system of the Korean military. From his time in the army, an individual receives a point that will go on their resume and count towards their total university, or school score. This would give the former recruit an edge over those who had not served. In effect, the single largest group losing out on these extra points would be women who are not eligible to serve in the South Korean military. Beside women there are others, classified as: unfit, undereducated, of mixed blood (often meaning the children of American soldiers and Korean sex workers) and individuals holding a different sexual orientation than the heterosexual standard (Moon 2015). Sang-won spoke of those with unorthodox sexual orientation (cross dressers or transsexuals, and homosexuals) as having in recent time been classified as having a mental illness.

In her book, Moon documents this medicalization of perceived forms of sexual deviancy which become likened to serious mental illness and mental retardation (Moon 2015, p.127). Here the discourse of moral stigmatization is reconstructed within the language of science and its effects was to legitimize the exclusion from the military. In terms of those deemed undereducated and exempted from military service, the groups who fall within this classification have changed across time according to the need of the military (Moon 2015). Sang-won noted that to be exempt or to avoid military service can have dire consequences. It can involve harsh legal punishment for those without proper exemption and even then it can involve informal punishment from employers. It can severely affect future job opportunities. Employers expect to find in a resume the military service period, alongside previous job experiences and education grades. According to Moon (2015) there have been legitimate forms of exemption from ordinary military service, for craftsmen working in the energy sector and students at the Korean advanced institute of science – KAIST for short. However, these craftsmen and KAIST students would later be required to work at a state designated company for 5 and 3 years respectively.

Sang-won was not alone in this view, that the military makes real men – Kim, the artist that I met later in the fieldwork in the area of Hongdae, shared this experience. Being out with Kim and his friends at a local bar and having a snack, Kim and me ended up in a somewhat secluded conversation while the others were busy discussing something related to their cellphones and Kakao<sup>6</sup> talk. We came in on the topic of the mandatory military service when I told him that Norway also practiced this and that this was a similarity between our countries. Kim told me how he had spent time at the northern border at one of the many bases there, and he seemed particularly proud of being stationed here, as was Sang-won. Kim went on to say that he was serving in one of their Special Forces regiments. He took pride in this as he had been one of the people selected for extra military training, while those stationed in other more southern parts of the country spent considerable time being involved in more civil service tasks. This is a spectacle that can be seen when one takes a train ride through the country side, as one do when moving from Seoul to Busan. Other civil service tasks that land on those drafted for the military are the roles of riot police and traffic wardens. Quite often when walking around Seoul, I would stumble upon 18-20 year old police officers directing traffic or keeping an eye out for correct pedestrian

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<sup>6</sup> Most popular mobile application in South Korea, messenger application used to communicate with friends and family. Opens for group conversations, image sharing, video conversations, games and life stories (slide show with selected pictures). Has replaced SMS entirely.

behavior. There is definitively a hierarchy in place as to what is seen as proper and good military service. Those serving in the police were seldom spoken highly of, especially when older persons where stopped in traffic one could see them argue very loudly with the younger police officer/recruit. These sorts of incidents hints at problems accepting the younger officer's authority by the elder, as it goes against how Confucian ideals organize society.

The Korean military system has several distinct streams of service, and there has been a strong class divide on where and what sort of tasks that have befallen upon individuals. In recent times, some of the public and especially the younger generation, have a more negative opinion towards military service. Those from a background of privilege have used their connection and economic means to avoid having their sons complete the standard 23 months service. They have been exempted for medical reasons or have served a shorter period of time doing administrative tasks, and avoiding the hard regimes of discipline and privation that can sometimes be part of regular service (Moon 2015).

Both Kim and Sang-won talked about their time in the armed forces with pride. They had served their full time and had been in the "real" army, stationed at the North Korean border. According to Moon this is the type of service that is most often given to those from lower classes, who in turn embrace it for the symbolic recognition it returns. These forms of symbolic capital have declined recent partly as the result of increased globalization and the end of cold war tensions. The previous point system has also been largely dismantled by the government as it was deemed unconstitutional. This caused a public outcry, especially by those groups who previously had benefitted from it in terms of enhancing their prospects of social mobility.

Moon describes a long history of conscripts for the military being involved in work normally done by civilians. For the South Korean government, who was working towards modernizing the country after the Korean war, this was a way to handle excess or surplus young male conscripts, whilst also supplying a selected few chaebols with specialized workers for heavy industry and chemical work (Moon 2015). For some young men being part of the military was perceived as negative, with the image of the soldier being associated with the colonization by the Japanese between 1910<sup>7</sup> and

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<sup>7</sup> Korea was a protectorate of Japan from 1905.

1945. During this period, Korean men were drafted into low ranking positions for the Japanese. Before this period of colonization, the general view on the military had been greatly influenced by Confucian ideology, which placed manual work and military service well below the ideal of the Confucian scholar. Moon argues that even after the U.S military government had pulled back and left control in the hands of South Korea, the military was still perceived as headed by the same people that had served during Japanese colonization. These people, now in top positions, kept up the same sort of doctrine that had been common during the colonization process. Hard physical punishments and grueling work were piled on the recruits by the higher ranking officers. This made families reluctant to send their sons into the military for normal service, and the middle and higher classes used whatever loophole they could find (Moon 2015).

In South Korea, modernity took the form of rapid processes of industrialization and militarization, which injected young male conscripts from the military into the defense and heavy industries. This had the effect of strengthening and reinforcing old notions of men as heads of family and breadwinners. The channeling of male manpower into industry, where there were often relatively high paid and had secure jobs, gave men a certain advantage that still persists. Though heavy industry is no longer the center of the economy and gender equality is on the rise, there are still strong notions of men as the primary breadwinners of families and that women should want to find a solid man with a good job.

### [Confucianism and gender roles in work and study](#)

South Korea have traditionally been a society based on principles from Confucianism and Mahayana Buddhism. Confucianism was revived in 1650 by the Joseon dynasty as state ideology, even though the ideology had existed in some form for two millennia (Park & Cho 1995, pp.118–119). Despite its pervasive influence, Park and Cho argue that few Korean families define themselves as following Confucianism as a religion. In their statistical material from 1991, most people identify themselves either as Buddhist or as not religious (1995) and Neo-Confucianism<sup>8</sup> has not been the official state ideology since 1910 when the Japanese colonizers abolished it as

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<sup>8</sup> The prefix Neo- refers to the revived form of Confucianism that came to Korea through the Yuan and Ming dynasty of China. Neo-Confucianism is, in short, a stronger separation between Confucian thought and that of Buddhism and Shamanism (Berthrong 2015).

state ideology. However, Neo-Confucianism does still operate as a code of ethics in Korean society.

Neo-Confucianism has shaped Korean family life and it has legitimized and kept the state afloat in times of crisis. Neo-Confucian ideology takes the family as the nuclear structure for society as whole. Rhetoric based on analogies from family life are common in corporations, schools, community organizations and state agencies. Operating as an ideal type, the stress is on obedience to the patrilineal head of the family, the father or grandfather, the man at the top, with wives and daughters obeying (Park & Cho 1995; Cho 1998). Female children fall at the bottom of the hierarchical ladder, not being prioritized when it came to receiving education. Larger organizations adopted this model of hierarchy and take a paternalistic approach to managing, for example, workers or citizens. Neo-Confucianism favored men over women when it came to allocating official positions and public tasks. According to sociologist Kim Myung-hye, who studied family ideology, Confucian dictums declare that only a man whose wife works for the domestic wellbeing may rise in rank (Myung-hye 1993). This does not mean that women were without power or influence. They had means of accomplishing goals and were seen as valuable members of households, but their value and means of accomplishing goals were subordinate and tied to male family members. Neo-Confucianism and family structure is a large topic beyond the scope of this text. The influence of Neo-Confucianism is still being debated amongst intellectuals (Koh 2008) and it can be used in all sorts of ways. For example, it can be invoked as protection against gendered exploitation (Janelli & Dawnhee 2002) and as resistance to globalization (Mee 2001). Neo-Confucianism co-exists with and has been influenced by Mahayana Buddhism as well as shamanism. Sorensen(1988), an American anthropologist studying Korea, show how these three ideologies blend in Korean myth, popular stories and film. The practice of shamanism has been an exclusive field for women in Korea and provides a telling image of how gender roles for women can be ambiguous and subverted at times.

Sorensen analyses the myth of Princess Bari<sup>9</sup>, also known as Karma or the cast-out child. The myth shows that the space left for women inside religious practices and rituals are that of domestic practices and that the high ranking positions are reserved for men. It is held by female practitioners of the shamanistic rituals known as *Kut*. This term is used to describe many sorts of

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<sup>9</sup> Princess Pari in original text and in Bibliography.

shamanistic rituals. The name of the particular ritual where the myth of Princess Bari is most frequently used, in central Korea, is known as *chinogwi kut*. This particular ritual centers on the transportation of dead souls to the 'western pure lands'; paradise according to Mahayana Buddhism (Sorensen 1988, p.404). Without going into too much detail about the particulars of the myth, it centers on a king who by breaking forewarnings made by the shamans ends up getting only seven daughters and no sons. It is said that the king rhetorically asked if he had done some great misdeed in his previous life in order to be so cursed. The myth goes on like this, the unfortunate king and his queen break with the spirits and the shamans, which results in them incurring ever more misfortune. The story reaches a climax when the king and queen lie deathly ill and end up being saved by the very same daughter they abandoned at birth, she had come from the land of the dead in order to save them (Sorensen 1988).

The myth articulates the role women have traditionally held in Confucian Korean society, namely as bridge builder between families, especially between the natal and the marital families. The myths amplifies this mediating role by including also mediation between the world of the living and the dead. Misfortune comes from ignoring the spiritual side of life and not paying proper respect to what one already has. Long ago, Malinowski (1984, p.204) theoretically noted how "[...] myth is not only looked upon as a commentary of additional information, but it is a warrant, a charter, and often even a practical guide to the activities with which it is connected.". Sorensen follows Malinowski's understanding of myth as social and moral justification for everyday practices and inequalities. Korea has a strong tradition for patriarchy and a gender division of labor.

Anthropologists Janelli and Dawnhee (2002; 1993) studied a large chaebol in Seoul during the late 80s. In their first work they studied the new middle class, defined as those who engage the labor market with more than their raw labor power, as partly made up of male white-collar workers. (Janelli & Dawnhee 2002, p.117). They later noted that in ignoring gender differences they had made a mistake as it formed a crucial part of structural differences in the workplace and the labor market. Their research found that the managers where all men, who would only hire those women perceived to be of immediate use and who required little extra training. This favored the men who invariably had extended periods of training and gained promotion after a few years. Women



started at the lowest pay scale<sup>10</sup> and had little promotion opportunities. Men were seen as more valuable than the female workers, which was connected to expectations of company managers that female workers would quit when they became married, and thus it was not worth investing in training them compared to men who would work for many years. Janelli defends the company to some extent by claiming that gender discrimination was not an explicit policy of the top bosses, but emerged from the practices and decisions of lower management. Increasing public outcry against this practice led to changes and more women were hired for managerial positions. This met with unexpected resistance, such as female cleaners refusing to clean the desk of a female manager due to her being a woman and so she could and should do it herself. The expectancy that women should quit once they were married stems partly from the Confucian ideology that positioned men as the breadwinners. Janelli's ethnography notes how women were seen as having no dependents and were targeted for dismissal during the 1997 crisis, while the men were kept on as long as possible.

Myung-hye studied how class-position was determined by the income level of the male head of the family and the level of education of all household members (1993, p.1). This importance of the male head of family in determining social hierarchy emerges from the South Korean system of *hoju*<sup>11</sup> – that emphasize moral political status of the head of family. The abolishment of this system was largely, according to sociologist Doowon Suh, due to women's movement groups, (in particular the KWAU – Korean women's associations united) uniting with the Citizens' coalition. These two groups managed to get political representation in the 2004 general election. For the first time in South Korea, 13% of the total number of legislators were women. These numbers were hailed as a success even if they missed the 30% quota for women legislators (Suh 2011). While the feminist movement did play a pivotal role in abolishing the *hoju* system, other researchers have pointed to increased globalization, new forms of work and consumption practices, and OECD membership as contributing to increased pressures for gender equality<sup>12</sup> (Mee 2001, p.13).

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<sup>10</sup> The women in Janelli's study start at level 5, while men started at level 4 and quickly rose to level 3.

<sup>11</sup> *Hoju* was abolished in 2008, though the ruling had been made in 2005. It was judged as incompatible with the constitutional (Koh 2008, p.3; Suh 2011), requirement (Article 10 and 34) for equality between sexes, both in citizenship and familial matters (Cho 1998, p.126).

<sup>12</sup> Eunkang Koh (2008) argues that there is no inherent inequality in Confucianism itself, and that gender inequality is more a product of historical practices. This is disputed by Taeyon Kim, who argues that the yin/yang and *ki* (life force) is separated by gender in Confucian scriptures and that women held the position as 'subjectless bodies' (Kim 2003).

Myung-Hye found that many women in his study who held college degrees still identified themselves as full time housewives. Myung-Hye explains this using a historical approach. He notes how the yangban class - the scholarly officials that served the dynasties preceding the Japanese occupation and which some families still identify with (Nancy 1997) - held the view that education was a good trait for a woman due to the social graces it provides (Myung-hye 1993). For this group being educated was preconditioning to being a successful housewife of a certain status. Myung-Hye argues that being defined as a housewife does not necessarily equal “no work”. Several of the women that he spoke with had important, if unofficial positions and roles, within their husbands companies and large responsibilities at home. The latter included taking care of their children’s education, for example with homework and getting them enrolled in the best after school tutoring programs (Myung-hye 1993, pp.73–74). Women were delegated the role of educational manager for their children (Park & Abelman 2004; Sorensen 1994, p.26; Janelli & Dawnhee 2002; Nancy 1997) and this includes a growing trend for more affluent families to send children abroad at an early age in order to acquire English proficiency. Sometimes the mother will travel and live abroad with the child, while the father keeps working in South Korea (Park 2009). Myung-hye points out that the practice of staying at home with a child and helping out with their education was often regarded at the time of his research as a position of privilege. It marked financial status and stability that was not shared by the women working in factories. Myung-hye stresses the historical emergence of a more egalitarian husband-wife relationship, they were ideologically grounded in love based marriages instead of the more traditional family arranged marriages (1993, pp.73–74). This transformation was reflected in the life history of my informants. The women who were around 30 years spoke of the difficult of juggling romance and starting a family with their own career ambitions. The younger women expected to be employed and working, and they strategized towards this. One strategy involved embracing a certain culture of beauty and even of surgical interventions to realize it.

Jung, who is a woman approaching thirty years of age and still unmarried, described some of the changes undergone by her female friends after they had married, and how she herself felt about marriage in the traditional sense. During one of our many discussions, she spoke of her frustration with a longtime friend who had been married for little more than a year. Jung was tired of having her friend calling her early in the morning or in the middle of the day just to talk about topics such as housekeeping and new kitchen appliances. These were topics Jung herself cared little for,

especially when she was doing her morning run or working. She could not understand how her friend had changed in outlook. She described her as an otherwise rational modern woman who had previously studied at university and had worked briefly in a design company. Jung was perplexed at how someone with a high education could choose to live her life as a full time housewife, catering to the needs of the husband. She spoke in the same terms with her friends about this issue which is indicative of new contested social roles and cultural expectations amongst more educated women. Jung and her friend were now no longer on speaking terms. When I asked Jung why she had this strong view against her friend being a housewife, she noted, with disdain in her voice, how her friend had been a resourceful woman who had worked hard and produced some nice designs, but now she spent her time talking to other housewives about kitchen appliances. It is the autonomy and creativity of women through work which was being affirmed by Jung. The fact that this was intellectual work resulting from a university education and involved the labor of creativity made it even more important to protect and affirm new models of the feminine. Feminism has become part of the politics of everyday life and rewriting its gender scripts so as to redefine everyday patriarchal gender relations focused on the family and the male breadwinner. The latter model is critiqued not just for subordinating women and making them dependents and focused around men, but also for limiting and confining the intellectual concerns of women. This is a strong element of cultural elitism in Jung's position. Her views on traditional marriage should not have come as a surprise to me, as she had previously admitted to breaking up with her partner, whom she had shared an apartment with the last 5 years. Their families had expected them to get married and Jung also felt the same pressure from her old friends; several of them had recently started families. The ambivalence towards family is also a perception of the way it can redefine women's identity, especially in a context where many educated are embracing and developing new cosmopolitan and egalitarian understanding of women's autonomy and dignity.

Diana, a 31-year-old English teacher, had similar experiences. In her case it was not so much her circle of friends who put pressure on her to get into a marriage, but her mother. Her mother would call her regularly and try in various ways to bring marriage and children into the conversation. There had been a confrontation between Diana and her mother because of this recently as Diana shared similar thoughts as those expressed by Jung, mostly being negative at the concept of being a housewife. Both of them place high value on being able to live by themselves and an independent lifestyle. They share similar traits, both of them having spent significant time living

abroad and both of them holding a higher education. Both of them have strong critical opinions on contemporary South Korean politics and patronage structures as well as gender. Indeed for them the two critiques were interrelated.

Diana and Jung are part of a growing phenomenon in contemporary South Korea that involves the emergence of single person households. Both remain unmarried and with no children. This existence of autonomous women outside of the controlling influences of family and husbands-fathers is still morally problematic for many. It also defies national planning objectives. The fertility rate in South Korea has dropped quite rapidly after a massive family planning scheme initiated by the government in 1962 saw an increased use of contraceptives (Park & Cho 1995, p.123). The fertility rate dropped from 6.0 to 1.7 children per woman in 1990. Delayed marriage play a major role in declining fertility rates. Indeed, South Korea had the world's lowest rates at 1.08 in 2005 before it rose to 1.19 in 2008 (Joo-hyun 2009, p.24) and in 2014 it was, according to The World Bank (2015), 1.2 children per woman.

When it comes to marriage in South Korea there has been a growing trend to leave the decision to the individuals themselves and not their parents (Park & Cho 1995, p.128). When it comes to single person households<sup>13</sup>, there was only approximately 661,000 households in 1985 according to the United Nations (1997, p.592). The UN points out that this number rose to over 1 million in 1990, and 3.1 million and 4.1 million in 2005 and 2010, respectively (2014, pp.98–102). Statistics show an approximately even split between the genders when it comes to single person households with the 25-34 age group being dominant. To sum up, there is currently a strong trend towards living alone, delaying marriage and having fewer children. This indicates that young women and men in contemporary South Korea have a stronger sense of individuality and opportunity to support themselves compared to that of previous generations. It may also be indicative of difficulties in the labor market, in gaining a permanent job, allowing for a permanent personal commitment to starting a family, which was the case with many of my informants.

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<sup>13</sup> People across all ages and genders registered as not belonging to any multi-person household.

## Enhancing beauty to get ahead

As with many other parts of the world there has been a rapid growth of cosmetic surgery in South Korea among the young. This is sometimes done to enhance job prospects when going for interview and also to create an attractive persona for people who are often involved in selling various products on a contract piece rate basis. The beauty ideal for many women in South Korea seems to focus on creating and enhancing delicate facial features. Procedures that focus on widening the eyes, double eyelids, making the nose pointier and crafting a V-line jaw (Holliday & Elfving-Hwang 2012; Stone 2013) are common forms of surgery among young women. Cosmetic surgery has become normalized. Creating a V-line jaw requires extensive and advanced surgery, it is expensive and often advertised as “correcting” certain Asian features. It is ethnic and racial identity which are being remolded so as to create new aesthetic versions of Korean identity that are partly mediated by the mass media. Some academics, most notably Ja and Park (2004; 2007), have seen beauty enhancement in South Korean as heavily influenced by ‘western’ beauty ideals of womanhood, However, I did not encounter a single reference to western ideal of femininity in the field. In fact, use of western models in commercials was rare. I am aware of analyses which relate cosmetic/plastic surgery to racial stereotyping. However, I want to avoid claiming that there is a latent Occidentalism in contemporary South Korean beauty ideals.

Yoonsuh and Min, two young female fashion and business students, met with me at their university after having spent all of previous night working on a presentation. It involved a gown they were going to show that very day. Yoonsuh and Min took me to the campus cafeteria and later for a coffee at the campus. The university was large and had a commercial office like feel to it. The cafeteria was located in one of the higher floors of the building, which provided a nice view of the surrounding parts of Seoul. Yoonsuh and I share a friend who put us in touch, so our initial conversation centered on Yoonsuh and her time in Japan, where she had met my friend. Min took a backseat during this part of the conversation, looking a bit tired, but making the effort to pay attention when we spoke. After this short phase of getting to know each other over food, it became clear that they wanted to discuss the topic of time and beauty.

They spoke of how young women needed to balance their university workload (its constant tests and assignments) with the demands of their families and friends. Yoonsuh had the most to say on this, for she still lived at home with her parents, as is usual in South Korea. Min had moved into a

small place of her own due to not having family in Seoul. Yoonsuh spoke of very long days, studying often more than 10 hours a day, but when she came home she was still expected to spend time with her mother and to help out with housework. As a 25-year-old student, she was slightly older than her other classmates. She had spent a year abroad, working in Tokyo at a boutique store and had changed her major once. Having already held a fulltime job at a fashionable clothing store, she spoke of family pressure through constant comparisons with her friends and with the children of her mother's friends. Her mother would claim that she was falling behind her peers and needed to hurry up and finish her university degree. The comparison with others by her mother, were with regard to education, but also on beauty and success in relationships.

We somehow came to the topic of plastic surgery and Yoonsuh was eager enough to speak on this. She claimed that an increasing number of men and women underwent cosmetic surgery. However, she turned a bit reluctant when I asked her directly if she had undergone any surgery. After a moment's hesitation, she admitted that she had her eyelids "fixed". At first, she claimed that it was done for medical reasons and explained that there was extra skin which interfered with her vision. But she did also state that it was a beauty enhancement. I was surprised when she claimed that she had to do it in order to look good so that she could get a job. Her friend Min agreed on this, saying that it was so common for women to "fix" their looks in order to look good because good-looking women had better chances when it came to getting a good job. Looks and beauty are perceived as part of their day-to-day competition with their peers over who will get the best job and who will succeed in life. This incorporation of beauty into the competition between peers put extra personal pressure on those caught in the 'race'. Yoonsuh looked tired and drawn as she exclaimed that it was draining to be in constant competition with peers and to have the competition fueled by the expectations of seniors and family. Competition is a central part of all young South Koreans lives, and I will explore it further when discussing the educational system.

Yoonsuh's experiences are not unique, young women have had to face this sort of beauty competition for some time. Korean researcher Sang un Park relates it to an important mythic story about Dangun, who in legend found the first Korean kingdom. It involves a she-bear and a tigress who pray to the deity King Hwanung Cheonhwang to become human, since they cannot find a husband. The king takes pity on them and tells them that they will become human if they live on the aromatic herb mugwort and 20 pieces of garlic while avoiding the sun for 100 days. The she-

bear (Ungnyeo) manages this and becomes transformed into a human. She finds no husband and prays for a child, which the King Hwanung grants by marrying her (Park 2007, pp.44–45). Here the transformation from dark animality into a civilized human female is through abstinence and self-discipline as forms of sacrifice. The story resonates with the strict dietary regimes which many young Korean women also adopt (2007). Park treats the myth akin to that of Malinowski(1984), as a charter for social action and as part of lived reality. The ideals presented in the myth, of making a sacrifice and working upon the self in order to be granted human wishes by the male deity, is an extension of Confucian gender ideals. The avoiding of the sun in the myth is a seclusion of the body and resonates with cultural clothing practices where women were to be covered (Kim 2003) in such a way as the minimum parts of the body are showing - the face, hands and feet – and most certainly not the more “animal” parts associated with biological functions.

Contemporary culture is not just passively mirroring these mythic narratives but also reinterpreting these mythic ideals of the body and its transformations. There is a movement away from the private secluded domestic sphere idealized<sup>14</sup> by the Joseon dynasty and an embracement of the project of visual self-management. The new challenges faced by women entering the workforce have been heightened by the competition of a beauty culture and the more so given that women are often placed in public relations positions in companies, manning sales, help desks, etc. The movement away from chemicals, manufacturing and heavy industry towards the service sector favors women, but it also makes women the public face of companies, that customers meet and negotiate with. The feminist sociologist Joo-hyun Cho, who notes the rise in women’s participation in the workforce since the 1997 IMF crisis, also notes how both genders face an increase in non-regular work (Joo-hyun 2009, p.16). The insecurity of this contract work and the need to continually re-secure employment, reinforces an increased focus on the body and beauty, self-care and self-management. These are essential tactics for women seeking employment and job security. Here I used tactic in de Certeau’s sense as:

*[...] a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus. [...] Thus it must play on and with a terrain imposed on it and organized by the law of a foreign power.” (de Certeau 1984, pp.36–37).*

The foreign power that the tactic of beauty is playing inside is the dominant economic system that

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<sup>14</sup> According to Taeyon Kim (2003), women were to be covered in such a way as to not show any part or form of the body.

favors men over women, and the changing nature of occupations and employment contracts. Dieting and seeking the help of modern medicine enter into the realm of technologies of the self (Foucault 1988). This is the process of constantly attempting to better one's self, in order to become the desired and required subject so as to secure their future. Here it can be added that, the act of becoming can sometimes take center stage over the result itself. The ideal result is the perfect body, but this ideal keeps changing and is never fully achievable, but what is being measured is disciplined pursuit of it and this is also iconic or a sign of being a disciplined worker. Ja (2004) claims that the effect and satisfaction with plastic surgery is not constant due to noticing other areas for improvements and aging, one surgery can fuel another. What is important is the act of self-surveillance, self-scrutiny and self-critique, fueled by a constant stream of images of idealized bodies (Featherstone 1982). Employers are not measuring the number of surgical operations as a measure of work commitment, but they do see slimness, dieting, and close attention to make-up, nails, skin-care and clothing as signs of self-discipline and commitment. They signify the ideal worker, one might even say the sacrificial woman, for it takes money, time, and self-discipline to realize this ideal. The culture of beauty is fundamental to the way women are judged in the workforce and this is something that women themselves are highly conscious of, especially those who work in particular parts of the workforce (service sectors, public relations, tourism, hospitality industries, the front of shops and office counters, and as sales representatives).

Economic capital plays an important role in the project of self-improvement, as is evident in the upper middle class area of Gangnam. It has all forms of beauty clinics and much local advertising of what they offer. It is widely known that the best clinics and the most expensive ones are located here. Some women go from clinic to clinic shopping for the best offers – an activity that is often shared between mothers and daughters around graduation time. In order to decide what are the best clinics, doctors and price, a certain kind of cultural capital is required concerning medical procedures, surgical possibilities, aesthetic styles and changing tastes. There is a demand put on the consumer to become familiar with all of these requirements, to know and understand the medical language and aesthetic tastes, and this knowledge is cultivated and unevenly distributed (Bourdieu 1984). Using statistics from 2001, Ja shows that out of a total number of 913 clinics in South Korea, 199 are located in Gangnam (Ja 2004, p.61). These numbers do not include skin care clinics located in shopping malls. Commercials for cosmetic surgery are not limited to wealthy



suburbs, for they are also encountered in other public areas and the popular media. While sitting with Yoonsuh in the cinema, waiting for the start of the latest Hollywood superhero blockbuster, we saw several commercials for plastic surgery clinics. The most graphic one showed how a normal looking woman joined a televised gameshow where the point was to undergo cosmetic surgery as part of a competition where the woman that looked the best post-surgery won. By the end of the commercial, the normal looking woman was no more, and instead she was a beautiful successful woman showering in blitz lighting. The mythic message of the she-bear (Ungnyeo) has certainly been rewritten through new ways of commodifying the body. Yoonsuh informed me how this was an older television show, which had great success, but it had created controversy. For there are also counter movements against the growth of plastic surgery which thought that the emphasis on enhanced beauty had gone too far. Here Yoonsuh noted how protest groups publish lists of what sort of cosmetic surgery a celebrity has undergone and some female bands and television shows will not hire women who have had visible work done.

Mike Featherstone has written extensively on the body in a consumer society. Inspired by the phenomenological Marxism of the Frankfurt school and semiotics, he has explored the disentanglement of the signified from the signifier within new forms of capitalist consumption (Featherstone 1982; 1992). The disentanglement of signifier/signified means that an object, which once derived its meaning from its use-value, can in these situations become defined and redefined by social groups and entities, who might wish to appropriate that object to their own symbolic ends. This creates a space where meaning is floating and unstable, and open for multiple and competing interpretation. Featherstone (1992) calls this space the aestheticization of reality/everyday life, referring to the process where flows of signs and images saturate every aspect of everyday life. He analyses this opening of meanings as incorporating the body as well, in that particular looks and ideals of beauty change with time as they become subject to new forms of commodification. Featherstone argues that the inner body has been subjugated to the outer body partly because the mass media “constantly emphasize the cosmetic benefits of body maintenance.” (1982, p.18) in late capitalist societies.

The subjugation of the inner body, only worked upon to enhance the outer body, emphasizes the need to create a marketable-self and the fact that beauty has become a commodity is evident through the increasing use of bodily products and procedures. There is also a management of the

body through commodities that involves a demand on leisure time: exercise, manicures, facials, steam-baths and the consumer educating themselves in the products and procedures they need. The management of the self as such requires an attitude of maximization towards consumption (Featherstone 1982, p.20). The consumer needs to be a “neoliberal homo economicus” (Joo-hyun 2009, p.20). Floating signifiers may not be purely negative, as they open up reinterpretations of established cultural objects and practices. I have already mentioned how cosmopolitanism, a global economy and international treaty commitments have helped produce increased gender equality. The detachment of the signified from the signifier can open for reinterpreting established objects of consumption, transforming consumption itself into production as it reappropriates the meaning of the original product. Consumption becomes a tactic for individualization and self-realization (de Certeau 1984). The forms and results of this tactic is not immediately obvious, as it can often subtly play on the dominant forms of beauty.

In contemporary Seoul, cosmetic surgery and other forms of beauty enhancement seems to have taken on a more subdued form, and while jawline operations might grab headlines, the ideal is natural looking enhancements of what is already there. The meaning of ‘natural’ is extended to include these subdued changes, with cosmetic surgery being partly seen as unnatural when it breaks with certain models of Korean femininity that overly adopt certain western idealized models of the feminine. There is a certain nationalism around the female body that is directing and holding in check the cosmetic surgery industry. In adopting more “natural” forms of surgery, this industry is seeking to naturalize itself, and to respond to criticisms of what sort of persons it is producing. The mainstream media has also become aware and adopted this critique with programs that feature plastic surgery gone wrong. There is also a culture of authenticity, of meditation and inwardness as a cultivated form of self-discipline and self-worth, which the plastic surgery industry needs to incorporate or at least step around.

Having one’s value and chances in life depend on the way others perceive you, as beautiful or not, has led to an increase in the number of young people undergoing cosmetic surgery to enhance their looks. Citing the Korean institute of Health and society, Kim claims that 40 percent of women in their early twenties and below have undergone some form of surgery to enhance their looks. Kim notes the high public approval of using such methods in order to improve job prospects (Kim 2003). He relates the body as a contemporary site of change and self-improvement for women to

Neo-Confucian ideology and the conception of them as subjectless that need to conform to disciplinary regimes and authority (Kim 2003).

*So common that it is not worth mentioning – Men as consumers*

The normalization of cosmetic surgery, especially for eyes, did not become apparent to me until near the end of my fieldwork, when I started asking people specifically about plastic surgery and the “fixing” of eyes. I did not realize that my informants did not regard having your eyes fixed as plastic surgery. Like Yoonsuh, many explained it as a helpful medical procedure. Thus Sang-won told me how he had recently undergone the eyelid “procedure” for medical reasons, after he went for laser treatment to remove acne. Both were done at a shopping mall clinic. Such surgery is frequently termed a “procedure” and thus not worthy of a specific medical label. The same goes for a nose job, which is also simply termed a procedure.

Researchers, such as Holliday and Elfving-Hwang, refute the popular view of cosmetic surgery as undertaken only by women. They challenge the common assumption that the women strive for a ‘western’ look as lacking. They argue that the ideal beauty is not western, but a globalized constructed image (2012, p.59). They note how cosmetic surgery is being increasingly undergone by men though not on the same scale or for the same reasons. There is a growing commodification of beauty enhancement products and procedures for men (Holliday & Elfving-Hwang 2012). Here young men often seek a softer image, with a defined and hairless body. Among older men, the ‘corrections’ of sunken foreheads is more common (2012, p.61). This normalization of a new culture of beauty takes many forms and is adopted by some corporations. For example, Korean Air had an obligatory cosmetics course for all its new stewardesses, including the male ones (Stone 2013). It is the composure of the self, its need to work upon itself for public presentation that is being displayed and aestheticized. Holliday and Elfving-Hwang dispute the ideological focus on women as subjectless, arguing it goes against Foucauldian perspective which also includes a focus on resistance as inherent in all regimes of power and control (2012, p.72). Cosmetic surgery is marketed towards both men and women as potential consumers in search of the right face that will bring them better futures. It draws upon and also feeds anxieties about beauty practices being evaluated by potential employees and marriage partners. The contents of this culture of beauty are, however, changing and are also being contested with individuals experimenting in ways of

crafting the self, including gender identities. These were not always accepted.

Among my male informants it was common to use derogatory gender label for a feminine man or manly woman. They would use these labels to describe, for example, the boyband members dancing and singing on a nearby television, who would be accused of being gay and feminine. The affirmation of gender difference exists in all organizations. It can be found in the military, where the most popular songs sung by recruits are about men becoming real men (Moon 2015). In the work place, there are ambivalences about women taking on men's roles and there is a widespread fear that men generally are becoming too feminine (Abelmann 2002). Holliday and Elfving-Hwang (2012, pp.60–61) trace the new softer male ideal to the new aesthetic forms that are being disseminated via comic books, boy bands, video clips, and television series. They are part of protest movements and lifestyles that contest and seek to reinvent gender identity. The homosexual community in Korea is often stigmatized and socially marginalized (Dong-Jin 2001). Acting in a way that is seen as too feminine, such as Jae from the previous chapter, will bring ridicule and laughter. Teasing, joking and the threat of gossip are the everyday forms that social control takes in a society where public face and shame are important

## Education

While the scholarly Confucian ruling class, *yangban*, might be gone, there is still a strong cultural focus on education and knowledge. South Korean students have scored high on international rankings when it comes to skills in natural science fields such as maths. This was a cultural field that, according to Sorensen, had never historically been a strong part of the South Korean Intelligentsia (Sorensen 1994). In the years after the Second World War and the Korean War, the educational system became more focused along other lines apart from the transmission of empirical knowledge. Ideals such as spirit, self-reliance and self-discipline, which have a strong presence in Confucian tradition were re-weighted and became part of the modern education system (Sorensen 1994; Chung 1994). These ideals exist alongside other ideals such as nationalism and anti-communism (Sorensen 1994). Indeed, they participate in those ideals in that spirit, independence and self-discipline become national objectives. They are embraced, valued and interpreted in ways that will South Korea to compete and surpass other nations that also embrace and nationalize certain cultural ideals and values, such as those of Buddhism and Confucianism.

The teaching of these values and ideals is part of the elementary school curriculum and has been at times part of the weighted curriculum for entrance exams (Seth 2002). The US military government, and the South Korean governments it later supported, went to great lengths to create a curriculum that taught ethics, cultural values and national identity. They also sought to limit student movements that were seen as too nationalist (fascist), anti-liberalist and leftist. Ideas, values and sentiments in the public domain were scrutinized and denounced, especially if they were leaning towards communism. The latter accusation became an effective way of policing and marginalizing critical students but also teachers. Those who engaged in public critique who held beliefs that deemed to be communist were met with negative sanctions, prison and suspension from work (Seth 2002; Nelson 2000). This was also a way of controlling the union movement and attempts by organized labor to expand a left wing political presence.

South Korea had most of its literate work force decimated during the period of Japanese colonialization. In 1945 only 22 percent of the population was literate, but by 1960 this number was 72.1 percent. By 1990 the number had risen to 96.3 percent (Chung 1994, p.499). This rise in literacy and in the number of people enrolled in the educational systems at all levels was part of state policies promoting rapid modernization. In particular subjects were focused on that which could contribute to the rebuilding of the nation and to resituating South Korea in a competitive and threatening global environment. It had an enemy to the north, which it is still formally at war with, and a former colonizer to the east, who began rapidly rebuilding and modernizing itself after the war.

Sorensen argues against regarding Confucian ideology as the main force driving the expansion and modernization of education in South Korea. He argues that Confucianism had previously been ascribed the opposite meaning, namely that it held countries such as China back from fully embracing modernity. Confucianism was dismissed as a rote form of learning that hindered modernization and prevented the acquisition of a scientific empirical attitude. Sorensen argues that the volatile changes that have occurred in South Korea have led to the old cultural elite, those schooled in Chinese literature, losing their dominance. They have been replaced by those who hold knowledge in natural sciences (Sorensen 1994). Replacing the old markers of distinction with new ones, fell in line with the US introduced liberal discourses that emphasized everyone having had an equal opportunity to get ahead if they worked hard enough. This liberal discourse has had a profound influence on educational policies up till this day. Policies of equality and meritocracy still

play a major role in constituting the life of young adults and students in South Korea. It underpins notions of national freedom that are juxtaposed to the prewar past, but also to the communist north where a party system is seen to be corrupt and to subvert the free pursuit of aptitude. Later in this chapter, I will explore the implications and how these policies are influencing and creating a demanding situation for young adults who paradoxically embrace the discipline of work as their individuality and freedom.

The content and focus of policies and processes of modernization has been shifting. When the Republic of Korea was first founded it set about improving literacy rates. It also changed the cultural focus of state pedagogy to include nationalist ideas, the development of spirit and citizen education, and a "movement to scientificize the whole people" (Sorensen 1994, p.11). For this latter educational project to be possible, the specific Korean vocabulary that was needed to discuss and teach science had to be invented, as there was little to form the basis for this.

The South Korean education system has at times been heralded as a very cheap and good system. It is celebrated for what it accomplished with very little government funds – most of the cost of education was born on the shoulders of families (Seth 2002). There is no reason to believe that this has changed. According to an OECD report published in 2014, using statistical material from 2011, the total percentage of GDP spent on tertiary education is approximately 2.6%, making it the third biggest spender among OECD countries. USA and Canada are the only two countries with higher percentage of GDP invested in tertiary education. The majority of this cost, around 1.7%, is privately (OECD 2014, p.224) financed, primarily through a combination of family and student loans. The quality of education is policed through entrance exams, for students to move to the next educational level. The focus on attending a good university has resulted in steep competition and a significant expenditure on private tutoring in the hope of gaining a sufficiently high score in the entrance exams. The cost of private tuition in 2006 equaled 2.79% of GDP, making it approximately equal to 80% of South Korea's educational expenditure for primary and secondary education (Kim & Lee 2010). According to Kim and Lee(2010) the total expenditure by families, in relations to formal schooling, has in recent years been reduced through government measures. However, at the same time the general cost of education for families has gone up due to the need for private tutoring.

Gender differences played an important role in the allocation of education in the early days of the

republic. Young males had greater opportunity to pursue higher education compared to that of young females. This was not the result of direct governmental policy, but more a consequence of lingering Confucian ideals and popular patriarchal values that made up the meaning of family, clan and kinship. The man were seen as the head of the family and had an obligation to take care of his own family and his parents if he was the oldest son. Women were seen as belonging in the domestic sphere and as having a responsibility to the husband's family. Only men had right to divorce and they could divorce their wives for failing to deliver sons.

The cultural superiority accorded to men came to be articulated in the type of courses that men and women selected at higher levels of education. Women had a higher presence in subjects such as household economics, which was one of the elective subjects for the entrance exams (Chung 1994). The sort of jobs that were perceived as appropriate for women after finishing education were those that required little technical understanding and where the work itself had a menial and tedious character to it. The best examples of this is the electronics and textile industry. These jobs were seen as more suitable for women due to their perceived greater tolerance of tedious jobs and nimble fingers (Chung 1994, p.495). The women, who were considered to be particularly lucky, were those who landed a job in a chaebol office. These positions, though not good enough for men, were regarded as far better than women's factory work. The funneling of young unmarried women into the electronics and more specifically the semi-conductor industry was also done for military reasons, especially during the period 1948-1987. However, nationalism also took the form of economic rivalry in the consumer electronics fields and this helped expand the opportunities and revalue the status of the work available for women.

Today gender segregation is still present in education. In their ethnographic work, Abelman, Park and Kim describe the Women's Universities located in and around Seoul as a backup for many young women who lacked the income and entrance score to attend the more prestigious universities. These women are often constructed as lacking in ambition, which is a cultural way of individualizing as a personal psychological failure what are often social differences in class income, education and cultural habitus which produce lower entrance scores. In their study of perceived university rank and status among young students, Abelman, Park and Kim give the case of a woman named Heejin who attended an elite college in Seoul. Heejin articulates a widespread view at elite universities that those attending the women's universities, which includes some of her childhood friends, live in a narrow worldview that is only focused on consumption and in becoming

stereotypically feminine (Abelmann et al. 2009, p.233).

As I lived and often met my informants in an area that hosted one such university, Ewha Women's university, I asked Jung during one of our coffee chats, if she considered this a good university. Her reply were simply to shrug and claim that they might be good at some subjects like gender and feminist studies. Her reply indicated that she did not consider this particular university to be anything special, not good enough for her to bother ranking it. It was considered as not teaching real and relevant knowledge that would help individuals compete and move up in the world in a way that would contribute to the nation competing and moving up in the world. There is a certain kind of nationalism within these forms of individualism that emphasize meritocracy and the maximum development of the individual's potential.

Speaking of education in South Korea one invariably comes across the subject of entrance exams. The system and ideology of meritocracy in Korea partly stems from the Japanese colonial period, when Japanese administrators imposed a system akin to the one in Japan at the time (Nelson 2000). Pupils were obliged to take an entrance exam for middle schools and above, with the students scoring the highest going on to attend the more prestigious schools, colleges and universities. The system of entrance exams has been changed and reformed a number of times since its inception. A number of reforms have sought to tackle the various problems that have arisen – most notably stress and pressure on young children as they and their parents seek access to the most prestigious schools.

School prestige is created socially and is often mediated by informal relations. Rankings based on social perception can sometimes be influenced by public newspaper reports that present "objective" statistical measures and the like, which often serve to reinforce the status of those schools already popular (Seth 2002). Seth's historical material shows that the universities perceived to be the best, and thus most coveted, were inside Seoul metropolitan area. In terms of the ranking of universities, the public ones are the hardest to enter and ranked as the best, with Seoul National University ranking the highest. There have been recent efforts to try to equalize the quality of education across secondary schools. This is done by the rotation of teachers, periodical bans on after school tutoring, lottery systems for who gets to attend what school, and the enforced mixing of pupils from different social strata. There have been restrictions placed on private schools and academies, so as to curb privileged forms of inequality. These are responses to



public demands for a system that provides equality and also due to a fear that new institutionalized forms of stratification are being consolidated. The success of these public measures has been limited.

There is still a strong emphasis to have pupils attend schools located within the Seoul metropolitan area and especially those located in the richer areas such as Gangnam. These schools have consistently scored better on entrance exams than other schools (Seth 2002). The role of the education system in the West, as a site for mediating and reproducing the cultural capital of elites has been studied by Bourdieu (Bourdieu 1986). He treats education as institutionalized sites for the reproduction of dispositions, of a class-based habitus. Bourdieu's work has focused on the reproduction of cultural distinctions and class relations through the educational system, where he shows that certain forms of pedagogic practices operate to reproduce relations of hierarchy. Bourdieu argues that the dominant ideology is the one that has the most influence on the pedagogic system, and this shapes pedagogic practices so that some are more compatible with middle class students whilst resisted or rejected by working class students. In this way education systems foster the reproduction of social classes and their culture. Those who already have embodied the cultural ideas and values, the appropriate habitus, through the socialization practices of their family, will possess the right cultural capital that most resembles those of pedagogic authority. They will attain better grades and position in the education system, for they are already attuned to the processes of learning. Bourdieu's analysis of the reproduction of class relations through the educational system could be applied to South Korea and it would involve mapping out how forms of economic capital are transformed into cultural capital via the private schools and the after school tutoring and coaching.

The focus on perceived educational status and ranking leads to private tutoring, which is a heavy extra cost born by the families of the student. Those with better income and resources can afford better tutoring academies or even private tutors, while those with less money have to settle for less personalized education, fewer hours and lower quality teachers. The cost and the percentage of a household's budget that goes into education vary depending on their economic capital and what sort of tutoring they can give their child. I will now turn to some of my own case studies to explore this issue.

Four years ago, Sang-won was admitted to Dankook University, which was located initially inside

the district of Itaewon in the middle of Seoul. However, this university moved outside of Seoul during 2013, which made Sang-won somewhat annoyed. During our first conversation about this, he cited the longer travel distance as why he was annoyed. However, it progressively became clearer that his real problem was with the perceived loss of prestige for his university and subsequently his degree. Sang-won would often claim that the university used to be good, but now it had taken a turn for the worse. This can be interpreted as the university losing the strong sense of modernity, cosmopolitanism and intellectual elitism that is closely associated with the inner city. The movement of Dankook University to outer suburbs was seen as it losing its exclusivity and it becoming more marginal and peripheral, it was less central to true academic life. The higher price of land in the inner city adds value to the inner city universities and so does the sense of participating in an intellectual center that tries to be global and cosmopolitan. The latter involves partly a focus on learning about other countries, their languages and culture. Their presence is much more evident in the city center whilst the peripheral suburbs are seen to be more provincial and backward in their outlook. It is also a certain cultural outlook towards the outside world which is being embraced and located in the inner city

#### English education and cosmopolitanism

The same concern that South Korea's fate and one's own job security lies in becoming knowledgeable of other languages, cultures and societies is also evident in the priority given to English education in South Korea. It often starts at the age of nine at, third year elementary school. It is one of the subjects that follows students throughout their schooling and into most universities. However the oral fluency of young Koreans vary greatly, from those who can hardly pronounce simple sentences to those who speak it at a native level. Among my own informants there were a few that had trouble holding long conversations. They had to be helped along by their friends when speaking with me. On the other side of the spectrum were informants who had a close to perfect command of the language. As Abelmann and Park show in their article on mothers' management of English education, the English language is not only valued for its practical aspects, it also has a symbolic value in the way it articulates status and identity (Park & Abelmann 2004). Indeed, proficiency in English is a practical skill and a symbol of cosmopolitan ambitions. Moreover, it is part of practices for crafting the self, part of what Foucault would call technologies of the self, for it is part of the creation of a certain kind of subject with a certain kind of subjectivity.

### *The case of Diana – English tutor*

Diana is a 31-year-old English tutor, who was among the very first people I made contact with when I arrived in Seoul. Introduced to each other through a mutual friend of ours who had previously worked in Seoul, we had exchanged information and laid the groundwork for our cooperation ahead of our first face-to-face meeting. Diana had spent a few years studying and working abroad. She holds a master degree from a UK university and has worked for a research program in Switzerland, funded by the South Korean government. The research she was involved in mainly centered on women issues in Korea. It was an attempt to transfer knowledge and policy from Switzerland to South Korea.

Our first conversation took place in a Greek restaurant, right outside the main street of the Itaewon district. This was close to where she currently lived in an apartment that she shared with a friend and the place she currently worked. Diana took great pride in her ability to converse in English, often using terminology found in academia. As we walked to the restaurant she had chosen, she spoke critically of “Anglo-Saxon research” and later noted “western imperialism” when we walked past the US military base. A Greek restaurant is something of a novelty in South Korea and I asked her why she had chosen this place to eat. She said she simply liked to vary what she ate and that it would be nice to eat something besides Korean food. She noted that she had missed Korean cuisine when she lived abroad, before she learned to appreciate different sorts of food. In choosing this restaurant, Diana was making a statement of how she was not only comfortable with western food, but she could distinguish its various forms. She had taste and welcomed diversity. She affirmed herself as cultivating an international hybrid sense of self.

Diana put a lot of weight on her experiences abroad, making it clear that she saw them as formative of her as an adult person. She described these stays and travels as allowing her to find herself and to develop herself as a strong and independent person. She also saw this as something that was lacking in many of the younger generations who had not had the opportunities that she had. Before starting her master degree in the UK, she spent a full year there in order to learn and study the language. She did this not by going to a university, but by relying on personal contacts and signing up for private language courses. Diana was lucky enough to receive financial support from her parents, who also helped her younger sister receive a degree in classical ballet. During

this time, Diana made several international contacts. In particular she had been around a group of Brazilians who had really tested her social limits. According to her, she had been an introverted Korean woman when she arrived, but she quickly had to adapt to the more outgoing and flirtatious Brazilians.

Experiences such as this, plus the learning she received in her courses, made her a more confident person. She also described it as broadening her horizon. She experimented with other models of the feminine that are not so common in South Korea. She started a process of recreating and changing the models and scripts for performing South Korean womanhood. The movement away from shyness, from the reserved model of female dignity, was part of her discovering new ways of locating and articulating her sense of Korean feminine. It is the globalization of the self and culture that is being lived in these practices for finding and realizing the self.

Diana put forth her experiences as somewhat akin to a cure for what she saw as the biggest problem with South Korean society today. The overbearing pressure and expectations from parents, schools and employers were inhibiting personal growth and denying what she saw as any real emotional development. She also believed this was a consequence of individuals not having enough time to cultivate their own personal interests, instead they were always having to chase towards the next qualification or goal, with the end result being emotionally shallow and childish adults. Diana went so far as to describe those who suffered under this system and who often had no wish to go abroad as lagging behind in their biological development. They were still children who had not become adults. Here biological processes of maturation, which transform individuals' experiences and knowledge of themselves so they become part of the world of adults, are the idiom for understanding new forms of cultural transformation that will make South Korea part of an international society. It is also the discourses of therapy and personal growth which are being used to authorize the new for cultural change and for new kinds of persons and subjectivities in South Korea.

In her experiences with employers, they often did not wholeheartedly support her vision of a more internationally influenced workforce. According to Diana, employers had very ambivalent feelings towards those who had studied abroad. The positive being the new understandings and cultural influences they brought with them. There was also the negative side which weighed perhaps even more heavily, namely, that those same understandings and influences went with particular models

of personhood that were not viewed favorably. For example, Diana found herself in conflict with the expectations of employer's that she should be reserved, shy and self-restrained, as was expected to be the norm for other female employees. She gave an example from her own life when she had worked on what she called '*the gender mainstreaming policy*'. She had been in the office of her project leader who at the time was speaking with her son on the phone, the son was at this time studying abroad in the US. The project leader had made several comments to him, including how he should look for a job at a US based firm as they were more flexible compared to the rigidity and demanding nature of South Korean firms. Diana felt this was an unfair and a contradictory statement to make in her presence as she was a Korean worker who was subjected to this same regime by her project leader who did not want her own son to endure these same work conditions.

Diana had in part chosen to deal with her ambivalences about the demanding coercive nature of work life by becoming an English tutor. It was a job that required that employees had spent time abroad and had gained a relevant university degree. Diana made a good living for herself by working part time, which she preferred as it gave her more free time. She did not want to give an exact figure on how much she made, or an approximation since it varied depending on what and whom she taught. The fact that she had time off in the middle of the day, and she had an apartment that she shared with one other person in the middle of Itaewon made it clear that she had a relatively comfortable lifestyle. The impression of her as having enough economic capital to lead a comfortable lifestyle became solidified during our next meetings when she spoke of her recent vacations. One had been a short trip abroad and one to a close friend in the southern part of South Korea.

#### *The case of Min-Seo*

Min-Seo was another young woman who had studied abroad and wanted to use her knowledge of English to move into a better job position. When we met, she was 22 years of age and still a visual communication student at university. However, she also worked part time as a designer at a small local graphic design company in Hongdae. She had grown tired of what she perceived as menial, low status work. When asked if this would change once she finished her degree, Min-Seo replied that the work she did was the same as all the other people at the company, and that this work seemed to be standard for the industry. The menial and low status work of designers was a topic

with many of my other informants. They complained about that design had become the entrance level job in the creative industry and had become, ironically, a job that offered little creative outlet for the person doing the work. Min-Seo had also grown tired of her major in visual communication and had started to formalize a transition into a course on tourism as an alternative major. This sudden change was motivated by her having landed a new job as a VIP guide during the upcoming Asian games. She was proud to have landed this job due to her mastery of English – which she had acquired during her studies in the US.

Despite being the youngest member of her group of friends, Min-Seo was regarded as having the best English. She had lived in the United States for quite a few years while attending high school. She returned because the financial costs were too high for her parents. Her dad was the sole breadwinner in the family. He held an administrative position in one of the larger *chaebols*, while her mother took care of the house and her younger sister. The first time we met, she was part of a large group of friends at one of the many beer warehouses (self-service beer halls with local and imported beverage) in Hongdae. Her friends immediately delegated her to be the interpreter between me and those present who did not speak English. Her skill clearly gave her some status within the group, as people would ask her how to say this and that as well as ask her to explain parts of the conversation that they could not follow. Her mastery of English gave her high scores on various English tests – most notably the TOEFL test – which is heavily weighted by employers when considering who to hire. Min-Seo used her mastery of a foreign language to move upwards in her work career. She moved from being part of a low status group of workers, designers, to a better paid job that had higher cultural capital and was less repetitive. The latter two are often closely associated in the minds of informants. Though she recognized she have to start at the bottom of the career structure in tourism, Min-Seo envisaged herself rising in the ranks through hard work and a new degree. For her, a job in tourism would fit in with her desires to spend more of her time traveling abroad, an activity she had not had the time and money to indulge in these past years. Min-Seo's new job is indicating an expanding service sector, which is also internally segmented into low paying menial jobs as in restaurants versus the more high paying jobs of interpreters. The latter command more income and also more respect for the international cultural capital within which they work and can access.

## Cosmopolitan strivings

Both Diana and Min-Seo are good representatives of a cosmopolitan perspective that was common among my informants. It articulates partly a desire to belong to a larger imaginary world citizenry. In the case of Diana belonging to this wider world takes on the dual form of belonging to a feminist gender-equality movement and a global leftist consciousness. She was part of gender equality projects in Switzerland and is very critical of patriarchal management structures in Korea, in the workplace, government and society in general. Her critique of cultural colonialism, of Anglo-Saxon ethnocentrism and American imperialism show that this is a leftist position, but with a concern for affirming a new kind of national autonomy. All of this is emerged and articulated though the therapeutic ideas of personal growth and development, that individuals need time and freedom in order to fully develop themselves and become reflected citizens. It is this work upon the self that is made the center of a political project for transforming Korean society, its gender relations, corporatism and provincialism. Here individualism, which is so much a product of modernity, is embraced as a vehicle for grounding an alternative social order

Sociologist Craig Calhoun has analyzed the history of the concept of cosmopolitanism, showing how it came to be used to rethink of liberalism. It was an extension of the ideal that there is one equally valued humanity, unbound by nation states, and that this movement could help solve social problems on a global scale instead of handling intolerance inter-societally (Calhoun 2003, pp.534–535). Cosmopolitanism is an outwards oriented ideal that seeks to reduce social hostilities through a greater acceptance of difference. Indeed, claims of special loyalty towards ethnic groups or nations came to be viewed with suspicion. Solidarity should come from the obligations each individual has towards others as members of a shared humanity. Calhoun cites the works of Martha Nussbaum as representative of this extreme position, quoting her critiques of loyalty towards particular solidarities (such as nation and ethnicity) as morally questionable (Calhoun 2003, p.535). According to Calhoun, this is one of the oldest and most problematic aspects with liberalism and its reformed varieties, the problem of explaining identity and belonging as markers for identity. Not having loyalties towards particular solidarities requires the individual to be able to choose the exact parts that should make up their identity. A position which is in essence a denial of social realities – specific social groups, culture and relations – become part of the constitution of the individual (Calhoun 2003, p.536).

A different take on cosmopolitanism is found in the work of sociologist Gerard Delanty. He presents the cosmopolitan imagination not simply as a result of globalization and the wider movement of cultural elements, but as situations where the social world becomes constituted and articulated in ways that transforms the 'Other' and the 'Self' (2006, p.37). Handled as such, the concept of cosmopolitanism does not get reduced to the transnational or globalized, instead it opens for local adoptions and variations accentuated by global movements of people, goods and culture. Delanty develops further the plasticity of the concept when he notes its relationship to modernity, for modernity is for him fundamentally constituted on the loss of "secure foundations for identity, meaning and memory" (2006, p.38). The cosmopolitan imagination is thus a form of renegotiation and self-transformation in an attempt to reshape the present in the image of the imagined. The English language and cosmopolitanism have a strong connection and indeed English is one of the first global languages to spread across the globe with the help of American and British media hegemony, as well as global finance and trade institutions. In order to function within the global institutions and commerce, mastery of English has long been a requirement and this has been fueled by strivings for class mobility, such as we saw in South Korea. English has in many ways taken over the role as a form of cultural capital within struggles for both class mobility and the consolidation of class relations (Park & Abelman 2004). English has partly taken over from the natural sciences, which Sorensen hailed as the new form of cultural capital for an emerging middle class elite that is moving away from Confucian values in the post-war period of intense modernization. Here, I would argue that the cosmopolitan imaginary does not obliterate the local and the national, instead it reforms them in the global milieu and it taps into local social relations, rivalries and cultural forms.

Those who benefitted the most from this shift in cultural ways of marking and affirming hierarchical distinctions, are mostly those that who already held sufficient capital to see this change coming and jump on it through embracing English education and sending their children abroad to study. Commitments that are very costly for South Korean parents. The turbulent decades that lies behind South Korea have not made the reproduction of class as straight forward as one might think. The yangban class, traditional Korean intelligentsia, might have had a distinct advantage when it came to being able to position themselves in the new economy, but it is hard to find clear examples of successful class-wide reproductive tactics and strategies. For there were also forms of downward social mobility. There are numerous examples of people who are only yangban in name and not in means, these are presented (Park & Abelman 2004; Janelli & Dawnhee 2002)



as people who failed to modernize, who remained culturally backward and who were opposed to growing cosmopolitanism. The general trend has been that those who lived in the Seoul metropolitan area have become decidedly better off than those living in more rural areas. There are class divisions in terms of residential areas and in where the best schools are located. In the Seoul metropolitan area, large investments in afterschool tutoring are heavily present in the Gangnam area compared to other districts. Gangnam is the area that exemplifies high end living for professionals. It is a relatively new district in Seoul and was the choice of settlement for those aspiring professionals during the modernization of South Korea after the Korean war (Seth 2002). In this area, the after school market has exploded. The nature of teaching is also different with there being more private tutoring and good hagwon<sup>15</sup> and less usage of worksheets (Park & Abelmann 2004). Middle class parents can afford and do spend larger sums on their children's extra curriculum activities. Investments in after school learning give the recipients a better chance of landing a job within the lucrative fields insurance, banking, service sector and teaching. Education is thus a means of reproducing class differences. To some extent the habitus of the parents is compatible and supportive of an education curriculum that includes embracing external cultural differences.

### Certifications

The one topic that always seemed to come up during my conversations with informants, was how busy their lives were. They always had to spend time thinking and preparing for the next goal, the next milestone they had to reach in order to have a perceived chance at a better for themselves. These goals were often directly related to university grades and the attempt to use those grades and the knowledge gained so as to get access to other kinds of certifications. Here *certification* refers to any form of test that a person needs to take outside the formal educational system in order to be able to apply for a certain type of position. One is the Samsung aptitude test, SAT for short, which must be undertaken for all those who wish to apply for a position at Samsung. The contents of the test vary slightly according to which specialized sector or subsidiary of the company the individual wishes to join.

Among my informants there were only two people who underwent this test, Seoyeon, a female

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<sup>15</sup> Hagwon is the Korean term for private academy, which have been the primary target for regulations aimed at the afterschool education market.

math's and statistics major, and Sang-won. Both of them spent weeks preparing for the test in hopes of landing a potential interview for a position at one of the subsidiary companies. Study preparations took place alongside their other activities and led to them becoming ever more unavailable to their friends. In Seoul, several thousand young and hopeful students take this test every year, in order to get a shot at what is considered one of the absolutely best companies to work for in South Korea. Sang-won and Seoyeon saw a position at Samsung as a sure way towards a financially good and secure life. Their annual salary would perhaps be much higher, the company had a reputation for paying out good bonuses to all employees before Christmas, and above all the company was secure and had prestigious social standing. As Sang-won was fond of pointing out, Samsung is Korea and Korea is Samsung.

A job at Samsung or any other chaebol would mean stable secure work as opposed to the temporary or piecemeal contracts which had become increasingly common for both young men and women. In the next chapter, we shall explore further this dichotomy between growing casual contract work and employment versus the desire and hope for full-time employment that many young people have lost and long for.

Alongside specific company certifications or aptitude tests, there are also the general TOEFL test for English proficiency and certifications for ICT (information communication technologies). All of my informants underwent testing for TOEFL, which is arranged by a private company. The English proficiency test is seen as a requirement for almost any kind of job, especially positions that requires the employee to hold higher education. Given that this test is administered by a non-government company and is outside the formal school system, this means that those who wish to undergo it will need to study and prepare for it on their "free" time.

Ironically my informants, like many others, saw the TOEFL test as far from adequate and not at all as synonymous with a good mastery of English. For them the TOEFL test emphasized the grammatical structure of sentences, which no doubt is important, but it did not make them any better English speakers. This is a sore point for many young people. Some sought to counter act this deficiency in teaching by joining in their church volunteer programs, where they would stand around on busy subway stations attempting to get hold of a foreigner in order to practice oral English. Sang-won complained that he had received a relatively low score on his TOEFL test, while at the same time he was one of the more fluent English speaking persons I met. On the other end

of the spectrum are those who attain close to perfect scores yet stumble in day to day conversation due to lack of practice. The TOEFL test, which is owned and administered by an international corporation, has to be retaken every two years in order for it to be valid. You never actually own the certification that confirms that you possess certain skills, it is just leased to you. The commodification of education and certificate leads companies to try to create permanent revenue streams for themselves through constant testing. This creates an enormous diffuse system of surveillance, evaluation and discipline around individuals

English education has taken on a special position as a marker for cosmopolitanism. It gives those who possess sufficient mastery a distinct advantage when it comes to lucrative new positions within the growing education and tourism sectors. Though Chinese and Japanese are important languages when it comes to business relations and foreign affairs, they're not perceived to provide the same amount of cultural capital as English. Both Chinese and Japanese are treated as having high practical value in that they can help make a career, such as through providing opportunities for work in transnational businesses or at the very least work emigration. However, it is English, which has more than practical value and has instead acquired high symbolical value.

All my informants expressed ambivalence towards the constant pressure of working towards small goals such as examinations and certifications, only in order to gain the possibility to work towards the next test. At the end of this incremental examination ladder they face the problem of securing a good living in an economy that is ever more based on temporary contracts and assignments. What is also growing as part of all of this is what is called a *carceral* society where discipline and surveillance have become part of a huge dispersed and diffuse apparatus of social control.

## Societies of discipline and societies of control

In this chapter, I will explore how neoliberal approaches to work has been gradually transforming, not just working conditions, but also the motivations and subjectivities of workers. Indeed, neoliberalism has become not an externally imposed coerciveness, but often internalized as self-motivated and self-imposed goals, values, beliefs and practices. I argue that a Foucauldian perspective on discipline of the body and technologies of the self is relevant for understanding this process. This perspective is taken forward in some of the work of Deleuze who undertakes a sympathetic reading of Foucault's work. While both of these theoretical approaches originated in 20<sup>th</sup> century France, their different but holistic treatment of subject, power and control primarily focus on life in capitalist society. Desire as a productive force and machine are essential concepts to be explored, which will add to the concept of technologies of the self. I will approach these themes primarily in the context of the ethnographic cases already presented, with a small additional ethnographic example featuring Min-Hee.

In his book *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault analyses the growth of institutional spaces of control and how these focus on the control of the body in order to produce desired types of subjects (Foucault 2014). From the eighteenth century, a chain of institutions was established that became a carceral. The person never stops moving from institution to institution and within these institutions, there are sets of rules that the person needs to obey and internalize so as to avoid sanctions. The subject is created through an engagement with these disciplining forces, often in the form of institutional rules and practices. The types of institutions, as we have partly seen, can range from the family, the educational system and the factory, to the total institutions of the military, hospitals and the penal system. The subject has little to no choice in whether or not to engage with these disciplining institutions and their practices for evaluating the self. The institutions work to normalize the self through practices that increasingly measure the qualities and aptitudes of subjects so as to position subjects competitively in relation to each other.

Foucault's analysis of the rise of modern disciplinary regimes in the eighteenth century explored how the desired production of subjects and subjectivities becomes possible through a new, minute focusing on the details of the body, treating it as a mechanical system that needed to be fine-tuned in its actions. Mechanizing the body forces it to reach its potential through relentless observation and division of space and time into fixed managerial sizes. These processes force the body to

constantly submit and in the end it begins to internalize the values, ideas and regimes of order that exist within forms of discipline. The best known theoretical example of this is the drill regimes of the army and the gymnastic exercise regimes of many institutions. Constant surveillance was also part of the new prison system modelled on the Panopticon, where one observer could potentially keep an eye on all inmates at any given time. While being physically impossible to watch everyone all the time, the possibility of being watched, leads the inmates to govern their behavior as if they were being watched at all times (Foucault 2014). Discipline and surveillance as forms of institutionalized governing are still found in major institutions, e.g. school and the military, and my focus is the new forms they take in managerial practices, for example, in the creative industries. There, individual workers are relied upon to constantly self-monitor and seek fulfilment and self-realization through work. According to Rose, this shift came about as the subjectivity of the worker emerged as a territory to be shaped through a complex assemblage of technologies. A focus of these technologies was the alignment of the subject's wants and wishes with that of the corporation and this gave rise to the incorporation of the psychological sciences into the workplace. Foucault (2014) points out that regimes of power became spread out through the social body. These pastoral and disciplinary forms of power operate through using individuals, families and communities to police each other. In effect regimes of power have been decentralized, they have been de-institutionalized with pedagogic projects and practices becoming diffused through society.

Bourdieu is concerned with the reproduction of class inequalities, where the educational system operates to consolidate class hierarchy through its pedagogic practices. The sanctioned culture of the school is created by the dominant class such that bourgeois culture becomes culture itself (Nash 1990), or in the very least it attains the rank of legitimate culture (Bourdieu 1984). The educational system will rank and classify the participants according to how well they perform within its sets of criteria. However, for Foucault this form of social control is not just class hegemony. It also has to do with the rise of other secular knowledge professions and their control of institutions, e.g. the doctor, psychologist, social welfare worker and teacher etc. They represent the rise of new forms of cultural hegemony that reside in institutions and in the work place, but have also become more diffuse.

The modern educational system is one of the central new mechanisms of social discipline, given the mass and compulsory nature that education has assumed in mediating and streaming

individuals into different sectors of social life. It is a system that every child born in South Korea has to go through for a set number of years, according to law a minimum of 13 years. Although this time is often longer as individuals undertake voluntary courses over the course of their lives. Thus people seek out vocational training or university degrees so as to enhance their career prospects<sup>16</sup>. At the end of their education, individuals will receive a certificate, that shows their accomplishments and level of skill which, as Bourdieu notes, is their set level of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984). These processes of certifications have become fetishized and pursued with diligence by individuals who need to demonstrate to employers not just a high degree of competence, but also a willingness to work upon their competence and skill and a willingness to work upon themselves for their employer's benefit. It is this subordination of the self that is also being objectified and measured in the pursuit of certificates, which was done by many of my informants in a voluntary way and in their free time.

It is important to note that the educational system is in an ongoing process of change that is determined partly by its relations to a changing economy. Moreover, in South Korea private funding (Seth 2002) has been a vital part in financing the educational sector. Education has become increasingly privatized and commercialized, with individuals needing to negotiate and be aware of the cultural capital that can be offered by these private education service providers. In South Korea, this is best exemplified by the privately run after school academies, *hagwon*. Other parts of education and family life have also been outsourced, such as childcare centers and kindergartens.

Institutions play important roles but they are no longer as centralized and easily identified. Instead, the functions and practices are more dispersed into a diversity of institutions. What is more, the processes of pedagogy, discipline and self-transformation are not just located within controlled enclosures in such a way as to maximize the desired impact upon the body. The pedagogic pastoral and disciplinary functions of institutions have become part of self-policing community structures where people train and work upon each other's skill in coffee houses, their homes, and other leisure spaces. This move away from easily identifiable, more or less fixed, locusts for power is what Nikolas Rose(1996) argues for. He sees the social as target for state policy and action as losing

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<sup>16</sup> Elementary education became compulsory and free in the 1960's, and attained 100% enrollment for both genders 1980 (Chung 1994, p.500). Today 66% of South Korean population, aged 25-34 have attained tertiary education, the highest percentage in OECD (OECD 2014, p.44).

its relevance and in its place we find communities that may take over the functions of institutions and the state.

Community based allegiances, pressures and forms of social control can operate at different levels. They can be either local or they can be de-territorialized and can even operate in virtual communities. They can take the form of subcultures such as those grounded in a cosmopolitan imaginary, that seek to share a common outlook, lifestyle and forms of consumption. Communities as increasing targets for practices of social control came about, according to Rose, as a result of shifting politics, as neo-liberal policies sought to wind back forms of control mediated by the state and institutions. Faced with the supranational, trans-national and individuals seeking out belongings in various imaginaries, practices of governmentality came to be territorialized. Governing at the level of communities and at the even smaller individual level became difficult for the state and it required more diffuse and self-policing forms of control to be developed (Rose 1996, p.353).

For Deleuze and Foucault, the subject moves from one institution to the next, being molded through disciplinary practices and pastoral practices where he must make his subjectivity into an object of inquiry to be worked upon in terms of its will, capacities and skills. This opens up the subject for constant change and flexibility. The subject is thus created and not a given from nature, as a Cartesian or Enlightenment inspired understanding of the subject would presuppose. This division of the subject, both within himself and in relations to others, happens through a system of classifications, according to what sort of role the subject holds in each of the institutions and in society. The subject does not stop being a subject when he/she leaves an institution, for the effects of power<sup>17</sup> in terms of training and inculcation keep on working even after the visible contact is broken. In his later work on ethics, Foucault focuses upon how the subject is made to create him- or herself (Foucault 1982) – through particular practices of self-inquiry, training and discipline; and these he calls technologies of the self. Here, the process of subjectification is produced and mediated by the surrounding social and cultural structures which require the subject to know itself constantly and in particular ways. Such technologies of the self expand in a neoliberal society where the state does not wish to have the heavy handed work of creating subjects and subjectivities.

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<sup>17</sup> Power presupposes action and action upon action (Foucault 1982).

Deleuze discusses new modes of governmentality that he terms societies of control. He takes up and develops further the latter part of *Discipline and Punish*, which is about a carceral society where power and control are no longer bound to the enclosed space of any given institution. For Deleuze, power and control becomes modulated, shifting into whatever form is needed in order to operate at maximum efficiency (Deleuze 1992). The modes of operation that Deleuze sketches out for this form of society take the Foucauldian technologies of the self one-step further. The main difference between technologies of the self and societies of control is at the level these concepts operate. Foucault focuses on how a governmentality becomes embodied and individualized, while Deleuze highlights that this has come to permeate all aspects of society so as to create new desires, skills and productive capacities.

In societies of control, Deleuze claims that the institutions that were taken for granted in societies of discipline will increasingly cease to exist in a recognizable form. Instead the spirit of the capitalist corporation will permeate them all so as to intensify and reshape their productive potential (Deleuze 1992). In the case of the South Korean educational system, military and corporations, the contours of this change can be spotted today. In contrast with societies of discipline, where a person would move from one institution to the next, societies of control extend the duration and limits of one institution indefinitely, and quite often far into what would be considered the realm of another institution and into everyday life and non-institutionalized contexts. Thus, the school or university exam that definitively ends a period of study and subordination has been replaced with more or less continuous testing. Here the pupils have to constantly perform in order to achieve a grade that is deemed well enough for the next level. Competition between pupils is encouraged through curved grading, where only a set number of pupils can attain each grade and where bonus points are achieved through active participation. This is what Deleuze means when he claims that the corporation has become the model for all other institutions. Competition and the modulation of benefits, be it salary or grades, are all hailed as healthy forms of rivalry (Deleuze 1992, pp.4–5). In the case of certificates, these even become owned and operated by corporations. The period of validity for the TOEFL was two years according to Sang-won, and the price was set to around 300 000 KRW as the fee for sitting in (approximately 2000 NOK). Military training is yet another example on how perpetual testing is used as means to control individuals, even after the two years of mandatory service, male recruits are required to attend yearly testing and field exercises. Within corporations themselves, such as the major



chaebols, there is a long history of modular salaries in order to foster certain behavior, often creating a competitive environment between different individuals and between different sections of the same corporation. Janelli and Dawnhee (2002; 1993) makes a point of this modular and competitive environment where managers pay and career depends on the result of their subordinates.

Richard Sennett has written extensively on the subject of work and capitalism, borrowing from the sociologists Scott Lash and John Urry. In *The corrosion of character*, Sennett criticized the new forms of control mediated by a rhetoric that presents change and flexibility as a good and as necessary. Sennett notes how the price of stocks in a company rise, in almost all cases, once the company has extended a press release saying that they are in the process of reengineering or restructuring their company (1998, p.51). He uses American, European and Japanese companies and systems of production as examples to support his argument; The three elements of the system of flexible power, *discontinuous reinvention of institutions, flexible specialization of production and concentration without centralization of power*. Together these create an environment where, contrary to expressed goal, companies become more complex and the workers becomes targets for more control and even suppliers are squeezed through goals too ambitious for them to reach. The increase in control is possible through the same technological advances in ICT that make working from outside the workplace a viable option. According to Sennett(1998) these technologies makes it possible for a few managers to overlook a greater number of workers at an individual level, and every bad day can be counted and registered. The workers become the subject of harsh surveillance and control, that stand contrary to other forms of work that he analyses in *The Craftsman* where workers' self-realization is through the control of the process of work and the creation involved.

My ethnographical examples show how having work waiting to be done and not having limits on where work, learning and leisure are located, serves to introduce new forms of stress in everyday life. The ethnographic case of work in a Hongdae coffee shop, with Kim and Jae, shows that this is not a purely negative experience. While both made numerous comments on how hard they worked, they were both proud of their work and found joy in showing off their skills, designs and art works. This was despite the fact that they were targets of control from their management through piece meal rates and how the web shop operated. Min-Hee is another good example on the positive sides of self-realization through work. During a meeting at the rooftop-terrace of *The*

*Sketchbook*, she was in a particularly good mood, as she had just finished filming, directing and editing two commercials for a contest by Samsung that promoted a camera. She had previously entered into a similar competition showcasing the latest Hyundai hybrid car, hoping to have her commercial as part of a large ad campaign. The commercials were all around two minutes long, but had required substantial work on her part, as she did them in addition to her studies and personal projects.

While Min-Hee received no pay upon completing these commercials, her dedication and other personal projects had gained some international attention for her as a director and filmmaker. She had a few weeks previously received a request to join an exhibition in Lisbon, Portugal, and she was in the process of considering if this was the right move for her. She would have to pay her own way to the exhibition and it would affect her studies and time with her fiancée, but she saw it as a great opportunity to promote herself and her work. Min-Hee was flattered that her hard work and passion had been noticed and had finally paid off. Such examples serve to inspire others and create almost a gambling culture where a few wins sustain massive numbers of losses; in this case - family time, leisure, relationships, health, sleep, etc. Following Deleuze and others, I would argue that the logic of the corporation has become widely accepted and integrated into the everyday level of individual practices, aspirations and goals. For Min-Hee, work is not only perpetual competition with her peers, it also involves national and international competition with other film makers and directors.

### [An alternative understanding of the subject and desire as productive force](#)

A more radical theoretical perspective comes when Deleuze in cooperation with Guattari breaks away from the Foucauldian approach, as they do in *Anti-Oedipus*. Here the subject is no longer beholden to being a subject of an external entity or tied to his own self-awareness and identity (Foucault 1982, p.781). Instead, they present the subject as part of an assemblage of machines, "Hence we are all handymen; each with his little machines." (Deleuze & Guattari 2013, p.1). A machine is the concept Deleuze and Guattari use in order to think about the connected workings of organs, people, materials and the immaterial. As an example, a man can be plugged into a car machine, the man and the car operate as a whole, a different machine than they would be if separated. These in turn can also be deconstructed into smaller machines. The man can be seen as an organic machine composed of smaller organ machines and for the car, this would be smaller

machines, like the motor or the window sweeper. Machines also channel, break and interrupt flows and every machine is linked to another machine and another machine and so on. This is where the use of assemblage comes into play – being a collection of machines and their arrangement.

The machines are not necessarily physical or material in their construct nor do they have to be permanent, they might as well be temporal and operate at a meta-level such as desire or paranoia. The cutting, breaking and interruption of flows that constitutes the machines does not make the machines the opposition to continuity, rather it conditions the continuity: it presupposes or defines what it cuts into as an ideal of continuity.

*“Every machine functions as a break in the flow in relation to the machine it is connected to, but at the same time it is a machine in itself, or the production of a flow, in relation to the machine connected to it” (Deleuze & Guattari 2013, p.51).*

When Deleuze and Guattari speak of non-physical machines they point to the interconnectedness of this non-physical with reality, how motivations, values, ideas and desires all influence the flows of the machines they are connected to. In short, the real and the virtual come together to create the actual.

Understanding the subject as machined requires an understanding of how Deleuze and Guattari see production. For them everything is seen as belonging in the realm of production, they reject the dichotomy of nature/society, production/consumption, for them everything is seen as a form of production and thus everything is in fact part of the process that creates. Production is the postulate of Anti-Oedipus, the essence of reality is production and this production is part of the total nature. A central concept for understanding how production came to be as it is *the body without organs* (henceforth BwO).

The BwO functions as the plane of existence that other machines, especially desiring-machines, are both attracted and repelled by. For our purposes it is sufficient to note that the BwO does not refer to any literal body, but a body of something, and that it is at once everywhere and nowhere – it is the surface that the subject wanders upon. As an example Deleuze and Guattari use capital, for a capitalist being capital would be the BwO. Building on Marx, they equate this BwO via capital as in opposition to labor and as a means to extract surplus from it whilst giving itself priority over all of production and arrogating to itself the creative productive work of the parts and the whole.

Capital thus becomes seen as the producer of itself and everything else is seen as a result of capital (2013, pp.20–23). This is the essential feature of the BwO, it becomes an enhanced recording and coding surface that falls back on itself and in the process of doing so, ends up placing itself as a taken for granted and making everything else seem as caused by it. In the process of falling back on itself, it appropriates and produces desiring-machines, making them seemingly stem from the BwO and part of its assemblage.

Desire fits into the postulate of production, in that it is not a representation or a theater, instead it must be understood as a producing machine that is involved in creating the real. Desire or desiring-machines produce through multiplicity, drawing in various partial objects from what is around before the partial objects become forcefully reassembled with other partial objects in the subject (Deleuze & Guattari 2013, pp.57–61). Deleuze and Guattari approach partial objects as asymmetrical and the pieces do not fit to only one puzzle so that they need to be forcefully put together, creating a schizoid end result (2013, p.57). Making the result different from a mere copy, new permutations are always being created. It is through desire machines that the subject is created, walking around on the BwO, the subject is constantly produced through the production of consumption. The subject moves through various stages, constantly evolving with the fluctuations of desire-machines. Constantly reborn as it passes through the various stages of consuming and consummating, the lived state coming before the subject that lives it (2013, pp.28–33). Conceptualized as such, the subject can be seen as a limiting recording surface, emerging after the desiring-machine have done their work on it and never becoming fixed. A subject is in this sense less enclosed and encapsulated than it would be in a Foucauldian understanding.

When the Anti-Oedipal understanding as sketched out is applied to the ethnographic examples earlier in the text, we can see that both belonging to imaginaries and direct action become part of consumption and production. Subjectivity and the individuals will be participating in a project of self-creation and self-realization through participating and enacting the flows of desire that surrounds them. The cohesion in society being provided by the BwO ensures a form of continuity, but the machined nature of it all makes room for constant renewal and reinterpretation. Originality and creativity involve interpretation and reassembling different influences into something new and unique, and this becomes the modus operandi for many aspects of society,

The consequence of seeing desire as a part of production, as a machine that actively engages with

the other machines that it is connected into, is that desire in itself becomes a social force that guides and influence the actions of subjects. As such, desire is both created and creating in that it engages and is engaged with through interaction. Desire is moved away from the real of the id and the unconscious, from the realm of the private to become part of systems of production that produce desiring subjects, which is subjects who desire in particular kinds of ways. It is the new kinds of subjectivities invested in systems of production which are being explored, where desire is no longer treated as an irrational or disruptive force but what allows a social order to be reproduced. In the new world of work that is based on creativity it is no longer possible to control people efficiently through heavy handed forms of external coercion. To tap their creativity requires having them on board. It requires their complicity and their active participation in policing and creating themselves into creative productive subjects. The production of creativity in the new culture industries requires also new non-institutional forms of power that can tap into leisure time and make it productive and this is reinforced by the fact that these culture industries are based on the management of leisure and desire more broadly. It is leisure that has become commodified, and part of the production of desire, and it is here that the work place seeks the creativity of its workers, there is an irony in this.

## Concluding remarks

In this thesis, I have explored how the subject is partly constituted through a distinct form of governmentality that relies on both external constraints and internal complicity. I have argued that the neoliberal forms of governmentality that operates in contemporary Seoul are both embraced and experienced as oppressive, at times allowing for forms of self-realization and at times situations of immense pressure. The material I have presented has shown how the modernization project of the South Korean government after the Korean War has been embraced and internalized into institutional practices that influence contemporary everyday life. The intense focus on modernization was accentuated through the late 90s with a rollback in welfare and worker security as part of tripartite negotiation that included major international institutions. The theoretical perspective of Foucault has laid the foundations for the other theories used throughout this text, as it grapples with the reformulation of the modern day state apparatus.

The ethnographical material show how work intrudes upon the space of leisure, and how leisure itself becomes transformed into work and commodified. The incremental increase in neoliberal governmentality takes the form of new technologies of social control embedded in communities and individuals, who are composed of increasingly shifting allegiances. The communities of allegiances, unbound by territories, have sometimes devalued the importance of the nation state, but the communities that exist are actualized, concretized and acted upon through the policies of the nation state. The creation and centrality of communities and maintaining has become a central task for my informants working in the creative industries. Partly a result of company policies, as in the case of *HiCreature*, where the workers and my informants are left to their own devices when it comes to learning and teaching. There is a resemblance to, as Richard Sennett (2009) points out, the workshops found in Europe during the enlightenment in the way they operate. However, instead of having access to a designated space for work activities, workers are left to find and set up temporary workshops wherever they might be.

The locations and facilities that are available for such activities are privately owned and commercial, thus requiring a monetary investment for the use of space. Cafés are the favored place for impromptu workshops and several shops have realized their attraction to this group of people and are actively targeting them as consumers. The Sketchbook has been used as an illustration of cafés operating in this manner. With its polished, bare concrete walls and gallery

style lighting, it position itself as a space for young, up and coming creatives, allowing both for exposure to likeminded people, exposure of their work on a periodic basis and space for work and leisure, all at the price of a coffee.

I have argued that these modern day workshops play an essential part in the lives of my informants. They provide a space for inspiration and facilitate learning through making books and magazines available, such as at The Bookshelf, as well as constant high speed internet access. In these locations Jung honed her skills in editorial design through hours of 'pretend work'. Due to her initiative, she was able to secure and keep a job in a highly competitive field where she now makes her living. Jung transformed her leisure time into work through engaging with the same sorts of material and tasks that she would meet on a daily basis during office hours. Initially, as several ethnographic examples show, mastery of specific forms of software and techniques related to these new tools occurred in these sites. Those working in the creative industries all depended on intricate knowledge of one or several pieces of software from the Adobe creative suit. These are highly complex pieces of software that take time, patience and skill to learn, and often manuals and instructions will be in English and require purchase. The software itself is commercial and requires a substantial one-time investment, or a monthly plan in order to keep using it. In the coffee shop, the act of consumption becomes a part of self-realization and of corporate production, but there are other things being produced here; relationships, outlooks, desires, skills, knowledge and pleasures.

Investments towards self-improvement are the biggest in regards to education, it is a generational project where the current generation sacrifices itself to improve the social position of the next generation. This personal debt increases the stress factor for students, who have entered universities and for those who have left it. Education in both its formal and informal aspects becomes a competitive field, with informal education sometimes serving to consolidate formal education hierarchies, but at other times having the potential to undercut them. The ideology of meritocracy has become strong and is embraced by hard working families that struggle against other families that try to convert economic capital into cultural capital through the educational system.

Competition and capital investment have major implications in Seoul. Seth (2002, pp.1–2) notes that even the property prices are influenced by the perceptions of neighboring schools. For a long

time education has been systematically underfunded by the government, requiring parents to spend large portions of their income to bolster the public education system and the competition drive families to splurge on private education. Competition and comparisons between students become ingrained in the individual and attending private afterschool education or attaining certifications becomes an attempt to rise above one's peers. The economic cost of achieving success in education is high and there are substantial rewards waiting for those who attain it. I have chosen to use Bourdieu's analytical approach, found in *The Distinction*(1984), to provide insight into how class becomes reproduced through this system, as those who hold economic and cultural capital have a distinct advantage in reproducing class distinctions. Exceptions are found as in the cases of the yangban who failed to keep their distinct advantage, relatively to the population at large.

I have argued that in the race to modernize, the government of South Korea have utilized Confucian ideals in creating a society that uphold family, fatherhood and gender distinctions. This can be seen in the military, where men must serve two years of obligatory service whilst women are exempted. This places an extra burden on families with girls who wish them to avoid the poorly paid and low status work of manual factory labor. The traditional Confucian ideal of working upon yourself in order to become better, has never been a viable option for South Korean women. Instead, they have had to rely on bodily attributes in their seeking towards better futures, and as I have argued improving the body is still a widely used tactic amongst women. Only in recent years have men had to start using this tactic in order to achieve success in their work. Gender equality is gradually getting better in South Korea, and while there are still ways to go, access to higher education and the focus on self-realization may just have a positive influence.

In the last chapter I pointed to an alternative theoretical approach, the machined subjectivity of Deleuze and Guattari. I firmly believe that this approach would provide good insight into studies on South Korean youth and be especially useful when applied to the topic of technology, social networking technologies, desire and competition. The productive nature of desire and the strong focus on the subject as operating in a constant process of becoming seems promising.



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