

College rank and neo-liberal subjectivity in South Korea: the burden of self-development

Nancy ABELMANN, So Jin PARK and Hyunhee KIM

ABSTRACT This paper explores the ways in which contemporary college students in South Korea inhabit new discourses of human development in the context of South Korea's neo-liberal turn and globalization. By using ethnographic methods, we examine the lives of college students across three campuses, a top-tier private school and two mid-tier schools. The college students who we introduce all aspire to and accept the burden of managing their personal formation for a changing world. We note that the individuated way in which they narrate and take responsibility for their circumstances and predicaments is quite new and resonant with discussions of neo-liberal subjectivity. We show, however, how the burden of self-development is borne variously, according to differences in the 'brand capital' of the students' university, gender, and family background. We argue that neo-liberal subjectivity, highlighting personal ability, style, and responsibility, works to obscure escalating structural inequality in South Korea.

KEYWORDS: neo-liberal subjectivity, college students, college rank, self-development

Introduction

Contemporary college students in South Korea are envisioning human development, particularly their own maturation, in ways that are dramatically transformed in a time of globalization. We argue that newly emerging subjectivities highlight personal ability, style, and responsibility and work to obscure escalating structural inequality in South Korea. We consider these subjectivities to reflect neo-liberal trends in South Korea and in the larger world. While it can be argued that inequalities have long been obscured in South Korea by discourses of personal effort and triumph over personal circumstances, we note that what is new are ideas of self-styling both beyond formal schooling and notions of personal character formation that are extended beyond long-standing South Korean measures of effort and hard work. In the body of the paper, we also discuss the specificity of the emergence of this character portrait for South Korea given the temporal proximity of its post-authoritarian liberalization (i.e. the call for personal freedoms) and its IMF era neo-liberalization. We make our argument about the articulation of these emergent subjectivities and structural inequality through the lens of South Korea's highly stratified higher education system in which college ranking is significantly correlated with real returns on education capital (Seth 2002). Although education stratification is long-standing in South Korea, the rapid embrace of neo-liberal restructuring and globalization by the education sector has accentuated differences in the 'brand capital' of universities.¹ Central to that brand capital is globalization itself, namely universities' differential ability to go global (e.g. the extent of study abroad opportunities, of English-language course offerings etc). It is in this context that we argue that while students attending South Korea's upper-tier colleges are the beneficiaries of the prestige of their universities, those at lower-tier schools feel the burden of taking on the

project of developing their human capital value on their own. As this paper's interlocutors will reveal, however, this burden is borne variously, and notably is inflected by gender. Our research demonstrates that the feminine is imagined to be domestic (in both senses of that word): limited and limiting in direct contrast with masculine images of free circulation on a global stage.²

We use neo-liberal subjectivity to index personal characteristics and proclivities that embrace the pursuit of active, vital, and cosmopolitan lives. We describe this constellation of attributes as neo-liberal to assert our agreement with the many scholars who argue that changed economic and political formations across the globe have led to powerful changes in ideas about desirable/required ways of being. More specifically, this literature examines the articulation of personal formation with, for example, the flexibilization of labor, the demise of job security, and the retrenchment of both state and corporate support for social welfare. For South Korea, these personal features distinguish this generation from earlier generations of college students. Today's college students are committed to becoming vital – people who lead active and enjoyable lives, people who 'live hard and play hard' and who aim to 'experience' the world to its fullest. Students are aware, however, that these are more than just matters of style and pleasure. They realize that this new mode of being is a requirement for leading a productive life in a rapidly transforming and globalizing world. A feature of this discourse on human development is its naked understanding of what it takes to succeed in the contemporary economy. That the *work* of embracing these new ideals can be onerous is, therefore, not unrecognized by students. Nonetheless, we appreciate a fundamental optimism to all variety of this developmental narrative; we appreciate, with the hindsight of the present, that some of this optimism might be waning as youth employment prospects grow bleaker and into an era of perhaps global fatigue, in which the call for the global has perhaps become so saturated as to lose all meaning.³

This new generation distinguishes this mode of being in a new and globalizing South Korea from the hardworking 'model students' of an earlier generation who were driven by familial pressures; those students simply achieved 'in the box' of formal schooling and through the well-recognized education management of their families (foremost their mothers). Today's successful student must necessarily be more than simply a hard working social conformist. In another vein, the new generation also see themselves as different from student movement activists who, although not model students, conformed to another sort of collectivistic pressure. Both of these earlier groups, then, are imagined as collectivistic subjects who were driven by either the external demands of families, in the case of model students, or their cohort group, in the case of student activists. In differentiating themselves from the past, they articulate a discourse of individuality, style, and self-fashioning. Additionally, this new persona refers to a person whose arena extends beyond South Korea in an age of radical liberalization and the globalization of all forms of capital; in a word, competition does not end at the boundaries of the state. Thus, the present college generation is deeply committed to a cosmopolitan ideal in which people are able to circulate in a wide and increasingly global arena. At the heart of this personal development project is English mastery and many students described English as a necessary 'base (*beisû*)' (Park and Abelman 2004; see also Crystal 2003).

All of this said, we appreciate that it can be argued that in some sense the lives of the students today are not so radically different from student cohorts in the past. We note this to appreciate that personal development of the educated in South Korea has long demanded considerable individual energy and vitality. Further family and other collectivities continue to assert considerable pressure in contemporary South Korea; indeed, it can be argued that neo-liberalization in South Korea – particularly in the form of the repeal of employer and state social support – has led to new formations of familism, namely the ideology of family as the locus of support and social welfare. As noted above, however, it is the way in which

people narrate and take responsibility for their circumstances and predicaments that we consider to be new. Thus, we argue that this generation's self-understanding and modes of narration must be situated at the juncture of neo-liberal social, economic, and educational reforms in South Korea today.

This paper is based on conversations with students in the summers of 2003, 2004, and 2005. We largely met students in groups on or near college campuses, and in some cases we followed up with solo interviews. In most cases the groups comprised departmental or college club cohorts that followed the snowball networks of our recruitment. In total, we spoke with circa 20 students. We have chosen four students to feature in this article: while we cannot claim that they perfectly represent the larger group or a generation at large, we were struck by the consistency of narratives about self-development. Further, although this research was not classically ethnographic, namely we did not participate in the daily lives of these students over an extended period of time, we were able to visit with students over a three year period and, because we spoke with students in groups, we had some sense of those topics and concerns that resonated across the cohort here. Similarly, while we do not argue that college rank, class, and gender would articulate with the new forms of subjectivity in the same manner for every young person, we do think that they would articulate in some manner. It is in this spirit that we linger with only four students so as to be able to follow the modes of articulation. In our discussions below, we have aimed to preserve the dialogic quality of these conversations.

The IMF crisis and South Korea's neo-liberal turn

This generation of students spent their childhood in an increasingly prosperous and democratic South Korea. In their early or late adolescence, however, they experienced the IMF Crisis (1997–2001). This marked for South Korea a period of economic uncertainty leading to a broad array of social and policy reforms that were broadly speaking neo-liberal in character. South Korea's neo-liberal turn involved a concerted critique of South Korean crony capitalism and led to the call for venture capitalism in a deregulated market. Creative, global, high-tech youth were critical to this reform project (Song 2003).

Intensified privatization, individuation, and globalization are the large context for the transformations of subjectivity we write of here.⁴ Increasingly, neo-liberal subjecthood demands that individuals become self-managers who 'produce [themselves] as having the skills and qualities necessary to succeed' (Walkerdine 2003: 240). We take particular inspiration from Yan Hairong who coins the term neohumanism to describe, after Marx, how human exchange value in China today has extended to subjectivity (Yan 2003). Specifically, she analyses the Chinese construct of *suzhi* or quality, arguing that '*Suzhi* is the concept of human capital given a neo-liberal spin to exceed its original meaning of stored value of education and education-based qualifications to mean the capitalization of subjectivity itself' (Yan 2003: 511; see Anagnost 2004).⁵ Of course, post-IMF South Korea and market-reform era China represent entirely distinct historical configurations, but the neo-liberal spin Yan describes is one that perhaps unites youth worldwide (see Comaroff and Comaroff 2000: 307).

Similar to other structural transformations imposed by external governing bodies, the IMF Crisis forced the South Korean state and corporate sector to become leaner and meaner. Unemployment skyrocketed in the immediate aftermath of the crisis. With radical corporate and banking restructuring as well as escalating transnational investment in the South Korean corporate sector, labor had to become increasingly flexible (Shin 2000). Today's youth face a transformed South Korean economy in which full-time, secure employment is harder to procure; state and local protections and services are curtailed; the reproduction of the middle class is fraught with uncertainty; and the vagaries of transnational capital

figure profoundly. These students face a reality that is ever more vulnerable and precarious, just as new models of personhood proclaim personal responsibility and authorship for one's economic and general wellbeing. Ironically, however, their deep-seated embrace of these new narratives of personhood appear blind to the structural transformations that have fashioned these new subjectivities.

Furthermore, in a South Korea that is becoming increasingly class stratified, or as many have argued polarized, we are particularly interested in how students do or do not take stock of their structural positions, registered here through college ranking.⁶ For South Korea and other recently democratized states, we argue that the trappings of neo-liberal personhood are particularly appealing because they stand for liberal democratic reform in which people can enjoy self-authorship, personal freedom, and self-styled consumption (see Song 2003, 2006). Thus, the ironic meeting of neo-liberal and post-authoritarian/collective liberal 'individuals' is such that young South Koreans can unabashedly celebrate what might otherwise appear to be so nakedly pernicious (Song 2003). As neo-liberal transformations are easily celebrated in the name of liberal values, so too are particular features of the authoritarian developmentalist education system, especially its egalitarian ideology and standardization, dismissed as backward historical burdens (Park 2006).⁷

South Korean higher education, along with South Korean mainstream K-12 education, has long been driven by social demand. In earlier decades, this was for equal access, and, more recently, for neo-liberal reforms, namely deregulation, privatization, diversification, and globalization. Although some charge that the state continues to lag behind consumer demand (*Hankook Ilbo* 2004; D. Lee 2004), South Korea today offers a case of state-managed deregulation of higher education in accordance with neo-liberal values of efficient self-management, productivity and excellence, diversification, and global competition (Mok and Welch 2003; Mok *et al.* 2003; OECD 2000).⁸ In other words, although neo-liberal reforms have been accelerated by social demand and global pressures in the aftermath of the IMF Crisis, as Mok *et al.* argue, they have also been highly orchestrated by the South Korean state (Mok *et al.* 2003).

The new model student is an autonomous student-consumer who is responsible for managing his or her own lifelong creative capital development.⁹ South Korea's elite university students have benefited most from the government distribution of national resources through the selective state support of higher education. Their coed campuses most deeply enact the new global human capital development that these students are well able to articulate.

This is the historical context in which contemporary college students are able to narrate their human capital development while obscuring the structural workings of college rank and family capital. The hubris of this new generation works against a more broadly social imagination because it acclaims individuals who do not conform to collectivist demands. We are intrigued to find young champions of flexibility when it is flexible labor structures that jeopardize the secure futures of young people and, in particular, young women. The meeting of liberal and neo-liberal values fashions a surprising virtue for the need for endless reinvention and frequent career changes. Indeed, a number of students, particularly women, looked forward to flexible work lives in which they can exercise their creativity, grow, and accrue experience. In this regard, we were struck by the absence of talk about the gendered constraints in this new labor market and of the burden that flexibility imposes on women.

This 'more radically individuated sense of personhood' (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000: 305) thus obscures class and other structural differences. The machine-like (*kigye kat'ûn*) students – the previous generation of model students who lived 'as they were directed to live' (*sik'inûn taero*) – were, ironically, better poised to recognize the structures that

constrained their futures. The burden today of 'living as one wants' (*hago sip'un taero*) renders invisible the forces that impinge upon one's choices in life.

We now introduce four students in greater detail: one from Koryô University, a top-tier private school, and the others from lower-tier schools: Myôngji University in Seoul, and Inch'ôn City University outside of Seoul. The designation of university level is complicated. For example, it is hard to put any university in Seoul on a par with those outside the city, or even more so with those in the provinces (*chibang*). Inch'ôn City University, which is located in a city not far from Seoul, is somewhat betwixt and between for it is neither a Seoul school nor a provincial one. Although the Koryô University student we feature below busily distinguishes herself even from her own top-tier university peers, she is nonetheless deeply invested in her university's reputation for vitality and excellence and in the status that it confers on her – in what we might call her campus capital. The students from Myôngji and Inch'ôn, on the other hand, articulate their projects of self-development against the grain of their campuses. They understand that precisely because their campuses are not easily identified with these neo-liberal modes of being, that they must shoulder the burden of their own human development. They thus articulate a vision of how to make the most of their college studies.

An elite college coed

'It is the feeling of *energy*, the motivation to continuously do something.'¹⁰

We met Heejin in summer 2003 and again in summer 2004. Each time she sported a baseball cap and sweats. We were struck by her boyish voice, androgynous look, unselfconscious mannerisms and laughter, and high energy. Heejin compared her current boyish, carefree style with that of her best friend in high school who ended up at a women's college and had transformed herself into a stylish and feminine woman who spent lots of money on shopping and body care. The contrast that Heejin sketched between her friend's narrow world focused on consumption and her own more gregarious, masculine, and vital mode of being was a distinction instantiated for Heejin by her chosen coed campus in itself. Strolls with Heejin revealed her popularity and her social ease on campus. And conversations with Heejin shed light on her cosmopolitan interests in being comfortable in the world at large.

Heejin was a graduate of a so-called special purpose high school (with a focus on foreign languages) and was very upset that then South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun threatened to repeal the college entrance advantages accorded these competitive high school graduates in the form of extra points assigned to them on the entrance exam.¹¹ Heejin called it 'a policy to undermine students with high standards' and spoke of her entitlement this way, 'I worked twice as hard as others to enter that school, and twice as hard to stay there.' Further, for Heejin, successful entrance to Koryô University had particular meaning because her parents had insisted that if she could not enter a top-tier co-ed college that she had better attend a women's school.¹² She had, thus, succeeded in avoiding a feminized space.

In 2003, we walked away from our meeting with Heejin with one phrase still ringing: 'self management (*chagi kwalli*)'. We had been surprised to hear the phrase so directly, and to hear so many other students offering similar narratives of what it takes to succeed in a transformed South Korea. Heejin dwelled on self management as a way of distinguishing herself from her close associates during her *chaesu* year, the year after high school when some students study to retake the college entrance exams to upgrade their college choices or, in some cases, to ensure college admission.

I probably shouldn't say this, but those of us here are at this level [and she motioned as if to include the campus around us]. Our society is led by people at this higher level. ... Frankly speaking, among my friends from my *chaesu* year [i.e. those who attended the same college

preparation institute], I am the only one who got in here. Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying they are bad. They all go to provincial colleges or ... We all used to hang out together, but when we parted at 1 a.m. I would go home and study until 3 a.m. before I went to bed. They just went to bed because they were tired. *So it was all about self-management.* ... It isn't that I look down on them. If I were to talk to them like this, they would think I was a different person. But I only talk to them about fun stuff. ... I have friends that I hang out with, friends I study with, and friends I consult with about the future. [emphasis added]

When we met Heejin a year later in her sophomore year, her position on self-management had hardened. Koryô University, she said unabashedly, was an elite school that should stand, metonymically, for students like her: self-managers invested in the kinds of new human development sketched above.

Heejin described a changed university that was a far cry from the one that her high school teachers had described: 'Hang in there, hang in there, once you get to college you can do whatever you want'. Instead, to her delight, Heejin found people who studied really hard. She told us that she had been 'moved' by the long line of students waiting to enter the library at 5 a.m. For Heejin, competing, self managing, and working hard made her feel alive and vital. She described the energy that comes from activity and achievement:

[If you have to study in college] you can feel that you have *achieved* something. ... When I was selected to be an exchange student [she hasn't gone yet], the feeling was amazing – the sense of *accomplishment*. When I got into college, into the department I wanted, and ... It is the feeling of *energy*, the motivation continuously to be doing something. [emphasis added]

Heejin was unfazed by the thought that this intensity of effort should be unending and that the point was not to arrive at one place or another. On hearing Heejin's litany of activities and credentials, her friend asked, 'But does this leave *you* any room for *self-development*?' Heejin's retort was quick and easy: 'But this is a part of self-development too'. We understand her retort as refusing to make a distinction between a private or personal self and a market-oriented or instrumental one. Minutes later, the friend pushed her again, 'You enjoy competition so that you can realize your dreams, right? It isn't that you want to compete forever, right? Do you want to agonize yourself with endless competition?' While Heejin's friend was keenly aware of the external pressures that demand neo-liberal selfhood, for Heejin this selfhood resonates with her sense of her own essence, a selfhood well-suited to the demands of the day and deserving of reward.

We spent quite a bit of time talking about the university's recently established English requirements for graduation, namely an 800 or above on the TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication).¹³ Even as we were meeting, the student government was busily campaigning against this change in graduation requirements and other features of Koryô University's aggressive globalization efforts. Heejin was quite matter-of-fact about the requirement, which she argued should be even steeper. Heejin posited that the social circles of future Koryô University graduates were ones that would demand English mastery. In passing, she remarked, 'last semester I saw more English than Korean [i.e. course readings].' Heejin was unabashed that the university should confer these *and many more* credentials upon its graduates. She described that she supports 'anything that asserts that I have achieved to *this* level [motioning with her hand].' She added later that Koryô University is her brand (*mak'û*) and hence she wanted the bar to be set high.

Heejin is a great defender of Koryô University's efforts to remake itself from 'national Koryô University' into 'global Koryô University.' She described the university's newspaper campaign, 'Now we have turned our back on our homeland and are marching toward the world.' She praised the university's efforts to be included in the list of the world's top 100 universities,¹⁴ in which currently there are no South Korean universities. She was also

well aware of the dean's motto, 'Let's make good on our [university] pride!' For Heejin, the march to the world, high levels of English acquisition, endless credentials, and ever-rising standards are the registers of self-development, not an 'end' as her friend prodded her, but as a way of life. Heejin's career goals encompassed this sense of self-development. She detailed her ever-escalating 'desire' for foreign languages: 'My major is English [literature]. But it is unsatisfying to work only on English. After all, everybody does English. ... Now I am learning Japanese, and I am continuing with Spanish too. And I also want to learn Chinese'. She described crafting a career through which she can use her English to 'contact foreigners'. Heejin thus imagined herself in broad circulation, moving freely in the world, facilitated by her mastery of many tongues, and acting as an agent who can help bring South Korea to the world. Heejin wanted to become an 'events director'; more specifically she hoped to orchestrate public events that would 'circulate foreign culture'. Heejin's description of the career synthesized her aesthetics of vital self-development, as well as her sense of the global.

I like to make plans and to act on them, to bring them to life. ... I'm the type who initiates getting together with my friends. I want to develop this side of me. I also like to deal with people. At one point I thought about becoming a producer, but I sensed that I would be constrained and that bothered me. ... A producer is confined to this country. Instead, I want to have a hand in circulating foreign culture.

Throughout Heejin's narrative, she was queried both by her friend as well as ourselves about those who might be left outside of her notion of vital personhood. Heejin insisted that, in today's world of nations, South Korea cannot afford to be concerned about socioeconomic inequality: 'It's too early, we are still at the point where we have to make students study more and more; all we do now is play'. Lest the reader imagine that this affirmation of individual striving for success might preclude national identification, comments championing 'competition' in such nationalistic terms were not uncommon. Heejin was not alone in asserting that South Korea could ill-afford more egalitarian policies in the face of its race for global standing. As many have argued, nationalism and cosmopolitanism often go hand in hand (Cho 2008; Park and Abelmann 2004; Schein 1998).

As for people who can't afford the private after-school education indispensable to upper-tier college entrance, Heejin merely offered, 'they should work hard and make themselves rich too'. Here we can recall the highly personalized project of self-realization in which the 'individual' must tout court fashion her own mobility. Heejin criticized the state for its policies of 'downward equalization,' with 'dumbing down' the country in a way that it can ill afford in the global race.¹⁵ Towards the end of our meeting, her friend interjected a comment that Heejin found simply beyond comprehension. In the torrent of talk about English, her friend confessed to preferring the study of Korean literature, to which Heejin simply replied, 'I don't get it'. A preference for Korean literature was, by that point in the conversation, to risk limiting oneself to a smaller universe, a domestic scene with lower standards, through a commitment to a cultural form with a limited global circulation and market value. Whereas Heejin's friend valued literature, especially Korean literature, Heejin focused exclusively on market value and its ability to circulate within a larger frame. Furthermore, with her sense of the competition among nations mentioned above, Heejin made clear that citizens bear a responsibility to be competitive for the global contest; in this sense, her friend with her localized literary interests, would be a drag on the nation.

Heejin thus positioned herself as a neo-liberal paragon, and all the more so as the graduate of a 'special purpose' high school, one that ran against the policy current of school equalization. As an elite college student, she enunciated the neo-liberal turn, relishing in the project of her own creative capital formation.

A 'third-tier' college coed

'I can't get anything from this school.'

We met Sori for the first time in 2004 shortly before she was to resume her senior year at Myônggi University after a year's leave. Myônggi University had been a disappointment to Sori in every way. Having been a hard working high school student in a peer group headed for greener pastures, Sori had a hard time coming to terms with herself at what she dubbed a 'third-tier college.'¹⁶ What is so fascinating, if semi-tragic, about Sori's case is that she articulated a narrative of personal development not unlike Heejin's, even as her personal circumstances had shut her out of the elite college 'brand' capital that confers ideal human development. The profound personal costs and even trauma of Sori's college story aside, she was nonetheless willing to take on the entire burden of her own human or capital development, holding herself 'responsible for [her] own regulation' (Walkerline 2003: 239). Although she intermittently generated systematic structural and gendered critiques, she then quickly returned to the theme of personal responsibility.

It is impossible to wrest Sori's own college story from her father's college story; indeed, college is always an intergenerational conversation of one kind or another. When Sori 'ended up' at Myônggi University, her father, an import-export small entrepreneur and a self-made man, let her know that she had 'yielded no return' on his expenditures and that there was no point to his 'investing' in her any further! Sori had made her way to Myônggi University after a year of *chaesu*. Her scores had been so low on the first round that she didn't even apply to college because she had no interest in those schools that her scores would have enabled her to attend. Unlike most students from middle class families, which Sori's appeared to be, she did not attend a private institute in her *chaesu* year, but instead burrowed herself in a public library because her father had pronounced her, his only child, a 'hopeless case'.

We note here, that at this turn Sori's family's education investment became clearly gendered. She described the hapless library crew of other students, adrift in their private pursuits, many of them already years into the project of college entrance or study for one or another state exam. The irony of Sori's settling for Myônggi University was that her father, the first in his poor family to have attended college, had himself gone to Myônggi University; it was thus unthinkable that the daughter, who had been raised with so many more advantages, had not managed to do any better. A year later it turns out that Sori's college entrance exam scores actually went down; she explained that it seems that hers is a personal 'code' (*k'odû*) or personality ill-suited to the entrance exams. Further, she admitted to the arbitrariness of it all: her best scores, for example, were on the third go-around when she had not even studied for it. But even when we pushed, and even with her admission that she is not an 'exam-person,' Sori refused any critique of this engine of selection in a highly competitive South Korea; instead, echoing Heejin, she accepted that exams and competitive credentialization were necessary for South Korea's competitiveness.

When Sori explained that the score that it took to enter her major at Myônggi University's Department of Business Management was no different from that required by less desirable departments at higher ranked schools, it seemed that she was about to criticize the stratification of higher education in South Korea with its brand capital. Instead, however, Sori was very critical of the college. She detailed the various ways in which it did not live up to her image of what a college should be, an image made all the more palpable because the vast majority of her high school and after-school institute friends ended up attending higher ranking schools. Indeed, on the day we met, she was accompanied by a friend who was about to begin graduate school at prestigious Yônse University located just minutes from the Myônggi campus. Sori mentioned the empty Myônggi library, completely vacant except during exam season; here we can recall how Heejin was moved by the

students who lined up to enter the Koryô University library at dawn. Also lacking for Sori were meaningful social relationships: she described that while students at Yônse or Koryô Universities build relations with their 'seniors' (*sônbae*) and join clubs or study groups, 'there is nothing that I can learn from them [other Myôngji students]'.¹⁷ She went on to enlarge her claim, 'I can't get anything from this school.' When we asked her why she cannot even 'have a conversation' with classmates at Myôngji, she continued:

To give an example: I am interested in English, but if I try to talk to them about learning English, they are clueless. They know nothing about what teacher is good at what institute or how to prepare for the TOEFL, and so forth. If they have studied English even a little, they would know that much and I would at least be able to talk to them about how hard the TOEFL is. But all they can say is 'I don't know anything about the TOEFL' or 'I have never taken the TOEIC.'

With these comments, Sori felt she was describing students with no future or little ambition. She was also remarking on the lack of network or social capital at a place like Myôngji University; there were neither strategic ties nor helpful information to be garnered there. These same students, who knew so little about the English exam for which Koryô University was requiring a score of 800 for graduation (the very score that earned Sori a sizable merit fellowship at Myôngji University), nonetheless went for study abroad, but, Sori stressed, 'with no mind of their own': 'They just head for China or the United States because their parents send them. I don't understand them. They say, "Isn't it a good thing to study abroad? Doesn't it expand one's horizons?" But they have absolutely no plan to make good on their study abroad experience.' For her part, she could never imagine using her parents' money without 'strong determination' to really study hard. Here, Sori distinguished the spirit from the letter; her classmates, she asserted, lacked the spirit – the subjecthood – that would assure meaningful effects.

Aspiring to follow in her father's footsteps, Sori had taken on the burden of self-development on her own. Sori admired her Dad, a well-traveled successful businessman, 'a self made man who speaks English well considering his age.' She went on to note that his English is in fact better than hers. In spite of admitting to being 'hurt' by him and to the trials of 'never being able to live up to his expectations', Sori was busily crafting her own parallel track. Foremost, she knew that she would need to identify her own import/export 'item' (*ait'em*) if she were to succeed. Over the course of our conversation, we began to listen to this phonetic loan-word for 'item' more metaphorically, to stand for the stress that many students put on discovering their own talent or nurturing their own passion. We were struck that Sori's 'item' – something that she would market or bring from abroad – paralleled Heejin's 'events,' both styled themselves as decidedly cosmopolitan by extending their ambition beyond South Korea and by working to acquire English capabilities that could enable such mobility. Sori did not want to be merely 'a part of the machine,' but she aspired instead to becoming a 'figure in her own right.'

Like her *chaesu* year, Sori's 'item', was a particularly gendered burden. She described: 'My dad says that his trade item is too good to let it die with his generation and that if he had had a son he could have had him take it over'. To wit, her entrepreneurship was indeed a self-entrepreneurship; the matter of fashioning herself as a woman was tied up in the project of somehow identifying that perfect trade item. Denied her patrimony on the basis of her gender, Sori's dream to circulate on a larger stage became harder to realize. Interestingly, Sori described that as a young girl she had been indulged by her father who at that time still had big dreams for her. Like Heejin, she thus never even entertained the possibility of attending a woman's college that would somehow hem her horizons. It was as if, in the face of her failure, Sori's father relegated her to the feminine, as if to say, 'crawl out, if you can, on your own bootstraps'.

Sori's gendered perceptions of her parents' domains are revealing. She characterized that, while her father moved on the world stage, her mother, the kinder and more empathetic parent, was confined to the domestic sphere. It is telling, if ironic, that the 'masculine' accoutrements of the healthy subjectivity that Sori admired are cold or even cruel, while she portrayed 'feminine' kindness as hemmed in or domestic in both senses of that word. Sori's gendered worlds and evaluations collide as she mapped her own future. She described a 'dilemma'. On the one hand, she wanted to marry and have children: 'I want to have three kids and a harmonious home filled with the sounds of children. I want my kids to have siblings and I want to hear the sounds of people making noise when I come home'. On the other hand, however, Sori was aware that in order to become the 'savvy entrepreneurial woman' who could please her father, she needed to postpone her vision of a happy home to the distant future: 'Honestly, I don't think I can get married before my 30s. ... I need to work in a company and start my own business too, but if I get married and take care of my home and my husband, I won't be able to do anything'. She dismissed out of hand the possibility of help from her mother who has already, she offered, 'sacrificed too much to patriarchal demands'.

Sori's struggles, however, must be appreciated in the context of what she described as the 'two things that matter to my father: patriarchy and money'. Sori was determined to 'both marry well and become a classy woman by virtue of making lots of money' so that her father will approve of her – 'give her an OK' – in spite of her having attended a lesser college, as he had. We detail the family context of Sori's situation to underscore that her burden of self-development was intricately stitched into the fabric of conservative family norms and patriarchy. In this case, middle-class advantage was withheld along gendered lines. We would like to note, however, that this case is perhaps not representative of trends today: with South Korea's rapidly declining birth rate there are many families with only girls and many surmise that such girls are afforded the same privileges that would have been accorded a boy. Of course gender ideologies and their transformation work their way unevenly in all populations.

Although the task of unearthing Sori's 'item' was still a project for her future, she had meanwhile been taking a year off so as to study further for the TOEIC as well as to travel and take up photography. Sori was frustrated by what struck her as an irony: although non-elite, the university's tendency to give constant small exams throughout the entire semester thwarted her own desires for human development. She calculated that she was better off leaving the campus to realize her project. English, travel, and photography comprise an easy trio, for they are all highly valued human development assets, assets that are all the more important for students from Myôngji University, because this is where, Sori described, the large firms don't even interview.

In sum, we have introduced Sori as a third-tier college coed who realized that her human development, in the constellation of that sense that we have described, was in her own hands. Lacking both the college brand and the gendered inheritance of her father's import/export item, Sori was indeed on her own in the project of developing herself for a transformed world. At times she called attention to matters beyond the boundary of the self (e.g. personal exam proclivity, college reputations at the departmental level, and gendered inequalities in family support for exam preparation), but she nonetheless considered herself responsible for 'ending up' at Myôngji University and having to take on the development of her own human capital. Hardly unfettered by the burden, Sori nonetheless embraced it.

Bordering the megalopolis

'Each of us has to know exactly where we are headed and then make choices accordingly.'

We turn now to two male seniors at Inch'ôn City University, Min and Kûn, both the children of small entrepreneurs. Min was also the son of a single mother. Although we foreground university stratification here, Min and Kûn are also clearly from a lower class background than the students discussed above. However, they, too, took on the burden of human development beyond the walls of their university. Min argued for the self-management of college in which each student decides where college fits in their own self-development strategy. Kûn, having recently decided to take the civil service exam, was resigned to a rather conventional occupational future while holding on to the possibility of personal development beyond the job. Inch'ôn City University is a non-elite university attended by students from Seoul unable to gain admission to colleges in Seoul proper and also by Inch'ôn locals and students from the provinces. Inch'ôn, a sprawling city neighboring Seoul, presents an interesting case. Although an independent city with its own history distinct from the Seoul megalopolis, it is close enough to Seoul that it is not easily classified as 'provincial' but is nonetheless clearly not a part of the greater Seoul metropolitan area. Inch'ôn City University, which began as a private university, was transformed into a public university in 1994 and is currently in the process of changing into national university. We met Min and Kûn in a larger group of students from the Communications Department in 2003 and in a smaller group again in 2004. In 2004, Min was off campus because of an internship that had turned into full-time employment, although he still needed to finish up some coursework. He made considerable effort to come and meet us because he had an urgent story to share. In 2003, Min, who was stylishly dressed in offbeat clothes, spoke of his 'fate to follow a different life course' and of his distinctive childhood without a father and with a 'crazily' strong mother. He introduced himself as an 'eclectic philosopher,' and it was clear that his classmates had heard much of this before. Min was a frequent performer of his own difference. In 2003, he spoke at great length about South Korea's impoverished culture of conversation or debate. Speaking of English as 'more comfortable,' Min seemed to be saying that his use of the English language was unfettered by South Korean schooling and perhaps the dictates of Korean social life. With his comments on English, Min referred both to his international travel, namely several low-budget trips in Asia, and his cosmopolitan affinities.

When I speak English, it doesn't seem so hard. It is easy and systematic.... We have a real problem with our education system. We begin our schooling learning such strange things [textbook English] – and in high school and middle school too. I don't know why we learn those kinds of things. We could just go and talk when the situation arises, but instead we study English this way. Who knows why we can't get out of our books?

Moments later, Min championed 'survival English,' an English born in real life interactions and through a more natural process of acquisition:

When I spoke English abroad, I didn't think about it consciously – I just memorized the words and sentences that people used and said them that way. ... It's really easy to learn how to just change the ending of sentences and put that into action, but instead [people in South Korea] just sit in the library five hours a day studying. That's meaningless. We really need to change [the education system] soon.

If the English that Min spoke and learned in his trek in India was somehow more 'natural,' South Korean English was a disaster, held hostage in South Korean textbooks and classrooms. On hearing Min speak about English study, Kûn did not negate what he said but offered his own take on Min's position: 'Our [i.e. South Korean] criterion for English study is the TOEIC exam. He hasn't studied for the TOEIC exam, but he went to India and tried out his English a lot there. In a word, he is talking about practical English (*siljôn yông'ô*). We will see below that Kûn had only traveled domestically and thus had made different choices than Min, although we think that their class backgrounds are not so different.

In keeping with his deep-seated criticisms of South Korean English education, Min was also an avid critic of South Korea's chronic competition and of the connections (through school, region, and kin) that it takes to make it. In this litany, he included South Korea's 'Seoul National University sickness,' referring to the pathological obsession with this one school. Interestingly, in his excursus on English, Min also asserted that his English mastery exceeded that of Seoul National University students. Like Sori, Min also made structural critiques, however he appeared to be more deeply empowered by them in the sense that he had not internalized his 'failure' in his having to settle on being an Inch'ôn City University student. While it is hard to generalize from this case, we think that both class and gender are relevant here.

Min was not burdened by Sori's sense of failure and lack of empowerment. Whereas Sori was burdened with the desire to please her patriarchal father, Min prided himself on his unique family background, on being unfettered by 'Korean' familial convention. Min's assertion of freedom from patriarchy can be considered ironically as a gendered privilege itself; a fatherless daughter would have been very differently positioned and would by no means have been free from patriarchal constraints. In describing the many ways in which he had styled his path from travel in India to side jobs in college, Min detailed an entrepreneurship of the self that had begun early in his life by virtue of his cultural marginality. His position was outside of the logic of patriarchy that had so burdened Sori. In imagining his future, Min described his inspiration from Buddhism ('following one's heart').

By 2004, via an internship, Min had landed a highly desirable job in Seoul as a TV producer in a broadcasting company. In explaining how he landed the job, he made clear his understanding that each person must take responsibility for the management of their own future, a management that is inherently risky and driven by many choices:

When I was taking classes, I got many calls asking, 'Min, are you up for some part time work?' And I would turn to my friends, 'Hey, let's do it together,' but most of the time they said 'No, I can't, I have class.' But in my case, I cut class and did those jobs. Because I skipped many classes, my GPA was between a B and a C. ... but I learned many skills in the field. And so I have been able to enter the work world so quickly. Those students who stuck to their classes can't enter society and begin working as easily. It was a matter of my personal judgment; I did what I did because I chose to do it. Grades are also important, and I did fret about my grades. ... *Each of us has to know exactly where we are headed and then make choices accordingly.* I chose my course a long time ago and I have stayed on that path without wavering. [emphasis added]

Min's thoughts here about learning 'in the field' echoed his earlier pronouncements about language learning and signified his embrace of new modes of human development. However, Min had made considerable effort to meet us that evening not to offer these reflections but to tell us a love story.

It was a very long story, spoken with almost no interruptions, other than sympathy pangs from the assembled listeners; for Kûn and another student present, it was clear that the story was already very familiar. In brief, Min had fallen in love with an Indian woman he had come to know because she was featured in a TV program that he had spearheaded as part of the internship that had led to his present job. It was a fairy tale story of true love and tragic parting: the woman was not at liberty to marry a non-Indian. Although a serious and at moments melodramatic telling, there were humorous asides, mostly about the ways in which Min skimmed on his work to follow his heart. We listened to the story intently. Min was skilled at keeping his listeners tuned in. As we listened, we were struck that Min seemed to be mobilizing the tale in almost the same way he had described making choices in college as an instance of living and experiencing intensely. Although at first glance a very far cry from the credential-happy Heejin with her 'events' or from 'item'-seeking Sori, the intensity, the personal flair, and the interest in experience are consistent.

Min also told us a lovely story about an encounter with a Japanese traveler in India. The meeting had been serendipitous and fleeting but somehow very meaningful. It captured beautifully the allure of travel, the magic that it promises the adventuresome. The talk of travel, yet another instance of 'experience,' had also featured largely in the meeting the year before, especially for Kûn. Born and raised in Inch'ôn, Kûn had transferred from physics to communications, finding it better suited to his interests. After stating this, he said, 'and I especially like to travel'. We asked about the relation between his love of travel and his new major in communications, which made everyone chuckle. Kûn's answer was telling: 'Well, there's no exact relationship between them, but ... I think of travel as something that gives you time to contemplate. The way I think of travel is that while passing through new environments, it allows us to think alone and to plunge into our own thoughts.' For Kûn both his major and his love of travel were tailored to personal proclivity and to self-fashioning of the sort we have been describing. Kûn described his lofty goals at the start of each journey, 'setting out for the answers to "how I should live," "what life is," and so on.' But, he continued wistfully, 'after all, it's the same. Whether I travel or not, life is hard.' Kûn would have liked to travel abroad but limited resources precluded it. The 'weight of reality,' which Kûn had described in 2003, had been getting in the way of his travels.

Kûn's comments on his future one year later must be heard in the context of his listening to Min's account. Kûn, conservatively and neatly dressed, smiled quietly throughout the telling. It was after this tale of adventuresome travel in India, television, and international romance that Kûn shared his decision to take the civil service exam, a decision that would foreclose the possibility of employment better suited to his studies and passions. His future course appeared all the duller against the landscape of Min's accounts. Kûn spoke of the naked realities of contemporary circumstances for all college students but even more so for those in universities outside of Seoul: 'People say that our economy is getting worse and youth employment is becoming a serious issue. These days there are no college students who are relaxed. We hang out together, but the moment we are alone again we are overwhelmed with worry, worries about the future.' Kûn thus described an anxiety that we observed across many of our college student interviews and particularly those with students at the lower-tier universities. Kûn, however, went so far as to note that these days even Seoul National University students struggle.

Traveler Kûn, however, made peace with his decision to take the civil service exam this way:

If I become a public servant, I will have enough spare time. I can't imagine working more than ten hours a day like Min. [As a public servant] I will go to work at 9 and finish by 5:30. The rest of the time is my own. And in the near future, public servants will have every other Saturday off. And somewhere down the line, all Saturdays will be off.¹⁸ With that time, I can do something for self-development.

In this way, Kûn registered or at least performed his peace with his decision of necessity to become a public servant. The peace, as he described it, came from the self-development that he charted for after hours. It is interesting how Kûn even spoke of his shorter work day, contrasting with Min's, as liberating in its own way. Kûn's sketch accorded with widespread images of a changed salary man who does not forsake his personal life 'for the company.' The typical salary man of the era of the South Korean developmentalist state was the one who gave his soul to the company for the economic development of the nation; family life, in turn, was relegated entirely to women; and leisure life was merely an extension of company life (see Janelli 1993; Kim 1998). Kûn thus described self-development as a leisure time project. What is interesting here is Kûn's meditation on freedom, his charge that perhaps labor that one is passionate about and demands full devotion – such as Min's – is not liberating at all!

In the previous year, Kûn had described his own convictions, not unlike Min's, to live differently. Dismissing conventional marriage and family, he had said, 'Why should I live like that?' Now, however, as Kûn spoke about the unparalleled benefits (e.g. retirement) of civil service jobs, he seemed to be sketching a much more 'conventional' life course. However, if a civil service career smacked of something conventional, Kûn nonetheless reserved his after hours and the promise of Saturdays into the future of a transformed South Korean work life. It stood in for that refuge that he had once sought – if only half realized – through travel in his earlier college days. Even as he discovered how indeed 'life is hard,' Kûn was holding firmly to his ideals of self-expression and self-development.

Conclusions

The university students discussed above all aspire to human development, and they all accept the 'burden' of managing their personal formation. These 'new' students mark a break from the past with their aspirations to realize values of democracy, individualism, and cosmopolitanism. We have described how a small number of students across three campuses inhabit new discourses of human development and how in turn they manage their education and chart the course of their future lives. We have paid particular attention to differences according to university prestige as well as family background to argue both that the 'burden' of human development was borne variously across these campuses and that it is powerfully gendered. Heejin, we argued, occupied a privileged position in which her campus conferred a brand of subjectivity itself. In her vision of becoming a cosmopolitan events maker, she narrated her self-formation as a vital person to be a matter of personal responsibility and choice, largely unfettered by structure or circumstance. Similarly in her case we saw how English, as a powerful sign of the global, is a project for personal endeavor and transcendence.

Although Sori equally embraced the project of vitality as a student in a non-elite institution, she assigned herself the task of managing it on her own, independent of her university whose brand capital she found to be lacking. We analyzed that her cosmopolitan vision of the future, in which she secured her 'item,' was a gendered 'burden' that she needed to shoulder alone, unlike a son who we surmise would have been able to take over his father's 'item.' Against the backdrop of Heejin's triumphant projects of personal development, we register Sori's as more fraught, raw, and even pained.

Finally, Min and Kûn, like Sori, pursued their project of human development beyond the bounds of college. These two young men, however, emerge as distinctive cases: Min, not unlike Heejin, offered an empowered narrative of choice, cosmopolitan belonging, and gendered freedom (all of this achieved, he stressed, in spite of his campus). Kûn, on the other hand, spoke of a vital future and the riches of domestic travel but at many points returned to the limits of his own particular circumstances, as the son of a humble family and a student at a non-elite college outside of Seoul.

Across these conversations there *were* mentions of circumstance, indeed by all of the students featured here except for Heejin. But, as we have noted at many points, the discourse of human development in the neo-liberal era seems to obscure structural differences by foisting the burden on the person herself, a burden that people necessarily come to carry differently.

We are well aware of the irony that through the embrace of the discourse of self-development, these college students appear to be blind to their structural differences and positions. All the more ironic in an era when young people face a record low rate of employment and high rates of underemployment. With this case we document with others how young people's embrace of a new and very individuated discourse of subjecthood works as a 'political rationality' (Foucault 1991; Gordon 1991; Lemke 2002; Seo 2008). As

many scholars argue, in the Foucauldian sense, the shifting techniques and technology of regulation in neo-liberalism focus on the technology of the self – the self-management of citizens (Gordon 1991; Lemke 2002; Rose 1999; Walkerdine 2003). By rendering individual subjects responsible for themselves, neo-liberal governing technology passes the responsibility for social risks or problems, such as poverty and unemployment, onto the shoulders of individuals. We also note that this individualistic character of neo-liberal subjectivity precludes collective alliance both in South Korea, and, just as importantly, across Asia where so many youth face similar circumstances and technologies.¹⁹ This individualistic character of neo-liberal subjectivity tends to prevent these students seeking out all collective alliance. In the logic of neo-liberal political rationality, the political subject is less a collective or social citizen than an individual citizen who obsessively pursues personal fulfillment (Seo 2008: 3).

Under these new forms of regulation, neo-liberal subjects are elected to understand their positions in personal terms, even as they are located in a complex web of structural positions, as articulated for example by class and gender. This is why Valerie Walkerdine calls for the necessity of exploring the ways in which social inequality ‘is differently lived’ in the era of neo-liberal transformation (Walkerdine 2003: 243). We thus assert that the ethnographic interlocutors we have introduced here have allowed us to consider the ways in which vectors of social inequality, in our case college rank, class, and gender, are now differently lived in South Korea’s neo-liberal transformation. In her discussion of British class politics in the neo-liberal era, Walkerdine notes that in the new mode of self-management technologies, ‘class differences are taken to have melted away’ because diverse people, including low-paid manual and service workers, are constantly ‘enjoined to improve and remake themselves as the freed consumer, as the “entrepreneur of themselves”’ (Walkerdine 2003: 239). Indeed, despite intensified social inequality in the context of neoliberalism, she argues that people’s sense of the possibility of upward mobility seems to have flourished as they celebrate individual freedom to self-regulate and improve oneself. In a similar way, we argue that the robust discourse of self-development of the South Korean college students we introduce here can work as if their education and future is the outcome of individual choices free from any structural constraints.

Furthermore, as we have pointed out, for South Korea and other recently democratized states, including many Asian countries, the discourse of self-development is all the more easily celebrated because of the ironic historical conjuncture between neo-liberal and post-authoritarian/collective liberal transformations. We think that this conjuncture helps to explain how and why the college students introduced here all aspire so eagerly to an individualized project of human development.

Acknowledgments

We are grateful to generous and enormously helpful feedback on drafts of this article from Amy Borovoy, Ed Bruner, Bong Gun Chung, Noriko Muraki, Myung-gyu Pak, Cathy Prendergast, and Jesook Song. Additionally, comments by Fred Carriere, Greg Brazinsky, and Kirk W. Larsen at George Washington University where an earlier version of this article was presented were very helpful. Also, this article has benefited enormously from feedback at seminars at Columbia, Harvard, and Stanford Universities and at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. We also extend thanks to Jinheon Jung who assisted during summer 2004 research. In addition, this ethnographic research was enabled by the generosity of introductions facilitated by Byung-ho Chung, Hye-young Jo, Jin-Heon Jung, Donghu Lee, Deok-hee Seo and Keehyeung Lee. Finally, we are grateful to two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments.

Notes

1. Critically important is that the state has effected recent higher education transformations in a centralized manner, concentrating on the country's top-tier universities and thus intensifying the already enormous stratification of South Korean education with neo-liberal reforms (J. Lee 2004). Although our focus is on structural correlates of college rank, we also understand that in many cases college and class capital overlap. The correlation between college and class capital seems to be increasing as contemporary education in South Korea offers to consumers with economic means many new arenas for investment, foremost the option of study abroad prior to college. A 550 million-dollar venture in the first quarter of 2004, doubling the figures from 2002, the so-called 'early study abroad' (*chogi yuhak*) is an escalating market (*Hankook Ilbo* 2004). Parents struggle as to how to best educate their children for a transformed South Korea in a transforming world (Park 2006). A not uncommon discussion is the one that asks, 'Which will be more valuable into the future, a degree from Harvard or from Seoul National [South Korea's premier university]?' These options present new, and sometimes risky, human capital development strategies. In the self-development narratives of the students featured in this article, we will see that they enthusiastically embrace these risks. Of course, however, such a struggle – even just with second- or third-tier schools in both countries – is not separable from the student's class resources.
2. While we observe the interaction between patriarchal family forms and neo-liberal subjectivity – particularly the ways in which gender and patriarchal norms mediate family investment in children and human development ideals – this paper does not further larger discussions of the articulation of gender and neo-liberal subjectivity, a still theoretically and empirically underdeveloped topic in the literature (see Anagnost 2000; Park 2007; Walkerdine 2003). Further, while we highlight persistent gender norms, it is important to note that South Korean families are among the smallest in the world, that son-preference has declined significantly, and that, relatively speaking, South Korean families make enormous economic and emotional investments in the next generation, investments that are arguably ever greater in the face of today's considerable class reproduction anxiety.
3. We are grateful to one reviewer who pointed out that perhaps the neo-liberal subjectivity we document in this paper was a short-lived phenomenon; while we are not ready to announce this subjectivity as a thing of the past, we do appreciate the constant need to historicize in this era of dizzying transformation.
4. As neo-liberal logics have spread worldwide, they take on specific trajectories in different places. See Anagnost (2004), Apple (2001), Borovoy (2004), Comaroff and Comaroff (2000), Du Gay (1996: 182), Ferguson and Gupta (2002), Fong (2004), Gee (1999), Kingfisher (2002), Rose (1990), Song (2003), Walkerdine (2003), Wallulis (1998), Yan (2003).
5. Comaroff and Comaroff similarly describe, 'Neo-liberalism aspires, in its ideology and practice, to intensify the abstractions inherent in capitalism itself: to separate labor power from its human context, to replace society with the market, to build a universe out of aggregated transactions' (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000: 305).
6. See Borovoy for a study of the ambivalence of Japanese young people as they struggle to meet the new-found requirements of Japan's 'new competitiveness'. In parallel with the South Korean case in this article, these Japanese young people are asked to become a new generation of individualized and creative workers. Borovoy analyses both how class works such that some youth are not afforded the opportunity to develop these new subjectivities, and how for elite youth these new requirements challenge deeply held values as well as ambivalences about American-style capitalism (Borovoy 2004).
7. The complex political colors of the current education policy climate are easily observed through a recent *JoongAng Ilbo* editorial which denounced South Korean education as an 'outdated steam engine' that hampers the 'nation's competitiveness.' The editorial continued, 'Korea is still mired in the age of democratization, in which remnants of previous authoritarian regimes continue to linger. As such, the influence of ideology remains evident' (D. Lee 2004: 39–40).
8. Yoon summarizes South Korea's education transformation in terms of several key shifts: from standardization to autonomy, diversification, and specialization; from provider to consumer; and from classroom education to open and life-long learning (Mok *et al.* 2003: 61).
9. As Mok *et al.* characterize, 'the Korean government openly acknowledges that the existing system has failed to equip the society with autonomous capacity' to solve the problems presented by the new knowledge economy (Mok *et al.* 2003: 62–63). Former President Kim Dae Jung was committed to education reform that nurtured 'autonomous' and 'creative' human capital (Mok *et al.* 2003; Song 2003).
10. All quotations without citation hereafter are from the personal interviews of the researchers with four students, the main informants. The names that appear here are all pseudonyms.
11. Special purpose high schools, which originally started in the late 1970s only for art and athletics, expanded during the mid-1990s in accordance with educational reforms which emphasized the 'diversification,

- specialization, and autonomy' of schools. These schools have special purposes to nurture talents for the new economy, including technical, science and foreign language skills. These high schools thus now seem to run entirely against the grain of decades of high school equalization measures (Kim 2003; Lee 1998).
12. In South Korea, top-rated women's schools are easier to enter because of the decreasing popularity of women's schools generally.
 13. English has long been a class marker in South Korea: namely, knowledge of, and comfort with, English has been a sign of educational opportunity, especially study abroad, and of social success, including successful jobs and career promotion in South Korea (see Park and Abelmann 2004). Several universities now have English course and examination requirements for graduation.
 14. This refers to the list produced by *The Times* of London, a list that is well known in South Korea.
 15. Here Heejin referred to South Korean state's longstanding ideological commitment to egalitarian education – especially the 'high-school equalization policy'. Her assertion echoed some neo-liberalist arguments that South Korea's recent educational turn is not a thorough neo-liberal one because it has sustained equalization policies (D. Lee 2004: 39–40).
 16. In informal on-line rankings of South Korean colleges and universities, Myōngji University appears most often in the upper quadrant of schools; 'second-tier' then would be more accurate.
 17. See Borovoy (2004) for a fascinating discussion of college clubs as a mark of university status in Japan. More broadly, she takes college clubs as a key element of elite 'college socialization' that prepares students for elite corporate work and social life. She considers both what it means that students at a provincial 'low-level' college participate in clubs at significantly lower rates (30%) because many of them are commuter students; as well as differences in the 'easy come easy go' way in which they participate in the clubs.
 18. Since July 2005, public servants work only five days from Mondays to Fridays.
 19. We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer who pushed us to think about the implication of our findings and argument for collective alliance.

References

- Anagnost, Ann (2000) 'Scenes of misrecognition: maternal citizenship in the age of transnational adoption', *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 8(2): 389–421.
- Anagnost, Ann (2004) 'The corporeal politics of quality (*Suzhi*)', *Public Culture* 16(2): 189–208.
- Apple, Michael W. (2001) 'Comparing neo-liberal projects and inequality in education', *Comparative Education* 37(4): 409–423.
- Borovoy, Amy (2004) 'What color is your parachute? New middle-class subjectivities in the post-gakureki society', conference paper, presented at the conference of Researching Social Class in Japan, The University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.
- Cho, Youngghan (2008) 'The national crisis and de/reconstructing nationalism in South Korea during the IMF intervention', *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 9(1): 82–96.
- Comaroff, Jean and Comaroff, John (2000) 'Millennial capitalism: first thoughts on a second coming', *Public Culture* 12(2): 291–343.
- Crystal, David (2003) *English as a Global Language*, 2nd edn, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Du Gay, Paul (1996) *Consumption and Identity At Work*, London: Sage.
- Ferguson, James and Gupta, Akhil (2002) 'Spatializing states: toward an ethnography of neo-liberal governmentality', *American Ethnologist* 29(4): 981–1002.
- Fong, Vanessa (2004) 'Filial nationalism among Chinese teenagers with global identities', *American Ethnologist* 31(4): 631–648.
- Foucault, Michel (1991) 'Governmentality'. In G. Burchell, C. Gordon, and P. Miller (eds) *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality: with Two Lectures by and an Interview with Michel Foucault*, London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 87–104.
- Gee, James Paul (1999) 'New people in new worlds: networks, the new capitalism and schools'. In B. Cope and M. Kalantzis (eds) *Multiliteracies: Literacy Learning and the Design of Social Futures*, London: Routledge, 43–68.
- Gordon, Colin (1991) 'Governmental rationality: an introduction.' In G. Burchell, C. Gordon, and P. Miller (eds) *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality: with Two Lectures by and an Interview with Michel Foucault*, London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1–52.
- Hankook Ilbo (2004) 'Significance of U.S. educational institutions' entry into Korea', *Korea Focus* 12(3): 57–59. Originally published on *Hankook Ilbo*, 1 May.
- Janelli, Roger L. (1993) *Making Capitalism: The Social and Cultural Construction of a South Korean Conglomerate*, Stanford: Stanford University.

- Kim, Yi Eunhee (1998) 'Home is a place to rest: constructing the meaning of work, family and gender in the Korean middle class', *Korean Journal* 38(2): 168–213.
- Kim, Young-Chol (2003) *A Study of the System of Special Purposed High School 특수목적고등학교 체제연구*, Seoul: Korean Educational Development Institute.
- Kingfisher, Catherine (2002) 'Neo-liberalism I: discourses of personhood and welfare reform'. In C. Kingfisher (ed.) *Western Welfare in Decline: Globalization and Women's Poverty*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 13–31.
- Lee, Chong-chaeh (1998) 'An analysis of the debate on the relative evaluation system of the high school grades for special purposed high schools' '특수목적고등학교 비교내신제의 쟁점분석'. In Korean Educational Development Institute (ed.) *Review of Korean Education 1997 한국교육평론 1997*, Seoul: Kyoyuk-Kwahaksa, 201–219.
- Lee, Deok-nyung (2004) 'Dreaming about a revolution in education', *Korea Focus* 12(1): 39–41. Originally published in *JoongAng Ilbo*, 10 April.
- Lee, Ju-Ho (2004) 'The school equalization policy of Korea: past failures and proposed measure for reform', *Korea Journal* 44(1): 221–234.
- Lenke, Thomas (2002) 'Foucault, governmentality, and critique', *Rethinking Marxism* 14(3): 49–64.
- Mok, Ka-ho, and Welch, Anthony (2003) 'Globalization, structural adjustment and educational reform'. In Ka-ho Mok and Anthony Welch (eds) *Globalization and Educational Restructuring in the Asia Pacific Region*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1–31.
- Mok, Ka-ho, Yoon, Kiok and Welch, Anthony (2003) 'Globalization's challenges to higher education governance in South Korea'. In Ka-ho Mok and Anthony Welch (eds) *Globalization and Educational Restructuring in the Asia Pacific Region*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 58–78.
- OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) (2000) *Korea and the Knowledge-based Economy: Making the Transition*, Paris: OECD
- Park, So Jin (2006) 'The Retreat From Formal Schooling: 'Educational Manager Mothers' in the Private After-school Market of South Korea', PhD dissertation, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.
- Park, So Jin (2007) 'Educational manager mothers: South Korea's neo-liberal transformation', *Korea Journal* 47(3): 186–213.
- Park, So Jin, and Abelmann, Nancy (2004) 'Class and cosmopolitan striving: mothers' management of English education in South Korea', *Anthropological Quarterly* 77(4): 645–672.
- Rose, Nikolas (1990) *Governing the Soul: The Shaping of the Private Self*, London: Free Association Books.
- Rose, Nikolas (1999) *Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought*, Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Schein, Louisa (1998) 'Importing Miao brethren to Hmong America: a not-so-stateless transnationalism'. In Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins (eds) *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling Beyond the Nation*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 163–191.
- Seo, Dong-Jin (2008) 'The will to self-managing, the will to freedom: self-managing ethic and the spirit of flexible capitalism in Korea', conference paper, presented at Neo-liberalism in South Korea, 1–2 February 2008, Toronto, University of Toronto.
- Seth, Michael (2002) *Education Fever: Society, Politics, and the Pursuit of Schooling in South Korea*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Shin, Kwang-Yeong (2000) 'The discourse of crisis and the crisis of discourse', *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 1(3): 427–442.
- Song, Jesook (2003) 'Shifting Technologies: Neo-liberalization of the Welfare State in South Korea, 1997–2001', PhD dissertation, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.
- Song, Jesook (2006) 'Family breakdown and invisible homeless women: neo-liberal governance during the Asian debt crisis in South Korea, 1997–2001', *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 14(1): 37–65.
- Walkerline, Valerie (2003) 'Reclassifying upward mobility: femininity and the neo-liberal subject', *Gender and Education* 15(3): 237–248.
- Wallulis, Jerald (1998) *The New Insecurity: The End of the Standard Job and Family*, Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Yan, Hairong (2003) 'Neo-liberal governmentality and neohumanism: organizing suzhi/value flow through labor recruitment networks', *Cultural Anthropology* 18(4): 493–523.

Authors' biographies

Nancy Abelmann is the Harry E. Preble Professor of Anthropology, Asian American Studies, East Asian Languages and Cultures, and Gender & Women's Studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

where she also co-directs the Ethnography of the University Initiative (EUI). She has published books on South Korean social movements; women and social mobility; the L.A. Riots; Korean film; and Korean American college students.

Contact address: Department of Anthropology, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 607 S Matthews Avenue, Urbana, IL 61801, USA

So Jin Park is a research fellow at the Institute for Social Development Studies at Yonsei University and also teaches at Yonsei University. Her main research interests include the globalization and privatization of education, the transformation of maternal subjectivity, and the articulation of class, gender, and urban space.

Contact address: Institute for Social Development Studies, Yonsei University, 134 Sinchon-dong, Seodaemun-gu, Seoul 120-749, Korea.

Hyunhee Kim is a PhD candidate in anthropology at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Her dissertation entitled 'Ethnic Intimacy: Race, Law, Citizenship in Korean America' investigates the reproduction of legality/illegality and its articulation with racialization in the Korean American community in New York City.

Contact address: Department of Anthropology, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 607 S Matthews Avenue, Urbana, IL 61801, USA

Copyright of *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* is the property of Routledge and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.