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Nancy Abelmann, Jesook Song

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# Introduction: Korea through Ethnography

Nancy Abelmann and Jesook Song

All of the articles in this special issue, as our title promises, draw from ethnographic data. Each article takes us “there,” although variously, to particular scenes, spaces, bodies, places, people, media landscapes, and so on. The ethnographic methods across these articles are diverse, as are their modes of presentation; for example, in some of the articles we are more palpably introduced to the ways in which the ethnographer acts and is acted upon. While each of the studies in this issue focuses on particular kinds of people—from breast cancer survivors to Korean adoptees residing in Seoul—the reader will find these studies quite different from the village or community studies of classical ethnography. Nonetheless, the writers assembled here exhibit the best of the ethnographic tradition with carefully chosen vignettes that evoke not only particular social and cultural scenes but also mobilize important arguments and scholarly interventions. Indeed, these pieces demonstrate beautifully the ability of ethnography to surprise, and the ways in which the “field” teaches us about the complexity of lived experience. We begin here with examples of these evocative vignettes that both take us there and contribute to an argument. We then introduce themes that cut across the articles and demonstrate the powerful way in which ethnographic evidence can speak to the most important contemporary developments in South Korea—globalization, the changing family, and transforming cultures of democracy and capitalism among them.

Nancy Abelmann is Associate Vice Chancellor for Research (Humanities, Arts, and Related Fields) and the Harry E. Preble Professor of Anthropology, Asian American Studies, East Asian Languages and Cultures, and Gender and Women’s Studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. She writes on family, class, education, and migration with a focus on South Korea and Korean/Asian America.

Jesook Song is a sociocultural anthropologist in the University of Toronto, specializing financial crisis, welfare, gender, and youth in South Korea. Her publications include *South Koreans in the Debt Crisis* (Duke University Press, 2009), *New Millennium South Korea* (Routledge, 2010), and *Living on Your Own* (SUNY Press, forthcoming).

With Laura Nelson we are surprised that “among the happiest women [Nelson had] met in South Korea” (p. 261) were breast cancer survivors. We learn of the ways in which their postcancer lives had been transformed—from one woman deciding to learn how to ride a bicycle, to another letting herself take a daily walk and to pause to listen to musicians, to yet another “[giving] up on perfectionism” and “[aiming only] to put out 70 percent of her energy [vs. 150 percent before]” (pp. 260–61). These changes spoke to their shared social-cultural diagnosis that stress had been critical to their cancer etiology. It is against this ethnographic portrait that Nelson introduces the paradox that when these women acted publicly as cancer educators they neglected to ever mention stress.

We join Yoonhee Kang at Mr. Choi’s house in Singapore, where he is taking care of his children who are “early study abroad students” (pre-college), when his wife calls from South Korea, where she works as the family breadwinner. We listen in as he ironically, chuckling all along, coaches his daughter to tell her mother that she is indeed busy studying (although she wasn’t)—“Tell her you are now studying very hard. So hard your brain hurts [*laughing*]” (p. 287). This vignette goes directly to the heart of Kang’s argument about the ways in which study abroad fathers think of their parenting as broad-minded and superior to their wives’ narrow, academically focused parenting.

With Eleana Kim, we meet adoptees who have returned to South Korea and listen in on various cultural representations of these returns. With her we encounter, for example, the South Korean volunteer at an adoptee service NGO who says, “Most Koreans can’t understand why adoptees would give up a good job and a comfortable life to come to Korea to teach at a cram school” (p. 300). This is a comment that captures Kim’s argument about the dominant way in which South Korean society frames returnee adoptees as enviable neoliberal subjects able to capitalize on their cosmopolitan capital, such as Olympic skier Toby Dawson. Elided are those returnee adoptees whose job prospects abroad are not so rosy (and hence are willing to teach at a cram school in Seoul).

Jiyeon Kang’s research interlocutors are twenty-something youth who, in 2006, recall the 2002 candlelight vigils to protest the US military “vehicular accident” that killed two young South Korean girls. These young people share with Kang, a communications scholar, their “corporeal memories,” namely, their embodied experience of the vigils. Further, for some of the youth the candles themselves rekindled memories of school field trips in which they lit similar candles in honor of their parents. One woman who had been in eleventh grade in 2002 explained, “But the candlelight vigils were . . . candles! We used to do candle [ceremonies] at camps when we were younger . . . we called, ‘Mommy’ [*pretending to be crying*]. [During the 2002 candlelight vigils] I remembered that time, and it changed my attitude [about the meaning of the vigils]” (p. 338). Kang ventures an argument about activism and activist potential that diverges from ideologically charged social movements of the past; with this, she discusses the transforming culture of South Korean democracy in the Internet age.

In keeping with classical ethnography, Nicholas Harkness takes us to a single ritualized event, the homecoming recital for classical singers who have studied abroad. We follow Harkness as he goes to buy tickets for one such recital and learns that very few of these are actually purchased—the performance is instead a ritual that functions to reintegrate singers into their musical and social communities (typically attendees receive tickets for free). Harkness brings the concert hall to life—although not so much as a serious musical performance: “During the performance, older adults talked loudly with one another, teens texted on their mobile phones and giggled, and some small children even crawled around in the aisles” (p. 353). This lax approach to the performance is entirely different from the mood of the encore, in which the audience lends their rapt attention to the often Christian song repertoire. It is the encore that brings Harkness to his arguments about the ways in which it is the Korean Christian voice that allows for the performer’s successful reintegration.

Seo Young Park begins her article with a rich and telling story: of Misun, a seamstress and home-factory owner who described her divorce by saying that she “fired” her husband (p. 384). This surprising turn of phrase takes Park to the core of her analysis of the inextricable and intimate ties of work and family, public and private, and domestic and economic in Seoul’s Tongdaemun Market. Park once worked as a seamstress herself and her writing brings to life the ecology of daily life: from the preparation of side dishes in the owner’s kitchen upstairs to supplement take-out food for the workers downstairs, to workers’ lending funds to help pay for child care when the owner is short of cash.

Although describing very different moments and people in South Korea, these ethnographic articles share common themes, which we turn to now. With their focus on local meanings in their larger political and historical contexts, ethnographic methods allow for nuanced appreciation of the ways in which people navigate social and cultural norms, the theme we discuss first.

## THE NORMATIVE AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Several of the articles in this issue demonstrate the fine line between social reproduction and social contestation or, put otherwise, the enormous sway of normative social organization and conventions.

In her discussion of apparently path-breaking fathers who have accompanied their children for pre-college study abroad (a practice usually undertaken by mothers), Yoonhee Kang writes of the “stalled revolution” for even as the fathers take on new activities, they manage to nonetheless reinforce dominant gender ideologies. They distinguish their housekeeping and educational management from that of their wives: theirs are “macroscopic” and “sociocentric” approaches, while they describe their female counterparts taking a “microscopic,” “disciplinary,” and generally narrow-minded approach. Likewise, although Laura Nelson’s

informants (breast cancer survivors) articulated a powerful gendered critique of normative South Korean society—specifically of the “stress” of women’s lives that can contribute to developing cancer— when it came to their own activities as volunteer cancer educators, they spoke only of diet and exercise. As Nelson argues, South Korean women’s stress is so endemic or normative that it literally defied practical action. While gender norms are the focus for Kang and Nelson, Eleana Kim takes up social norms of success. Her informants, returnee Korean adoptees, contributed to the reproduction of social norms over time: as once-pitiable subjects, they spoke to South Korea’s achievements; while today, they stand for neoliberal ideals as cosmopolitan “civil diplomats.”

Each of these articles and some others as well, nonetheless leaves open a space for transformative potential. A stalled revolution aside, Yoonhee Kang observes “‘family flexibility’ . . . in which the conventional ‘gendered’ household arrangement can be modified or even trespassed upon” (p. 269). Laura Nelson can envision a time when the growing group of breast cancer survivors might go public with their social analysis, asking: “As more women in the prime of their lives join these survivors [of breast cancer] in this state of suspended animation, will the focus shift from personal, behavioral modifications to fundamental stress reduction and social change?” (p. 265). Eleana Kim introduces a small group of “troubling” returnees who defy cultural norms: namely, “wild and crazy” adoptees, who are most often non-English speaking and work in the so-called 3-D jobs (dirty, dangerous, and difficult). Their apparent “lack of futurity” as well as their bold call for an end to transracial Korean adoption unsettles conventional ideas about adoptees, the West, and even local values. And Jiyeon Kang is optimistic that her now twenty-something vigil memoirists might be ripe for their next chapter of social activism; and that, in any case, they stand ready to support the new activism of youth.

Perhaps the most normative of social-cultural formations everywhere is the family; and especially so for South Korea where family has been an institution mobilized for and implicated in all social and political projects. Interestingly, several of the articles take up family not as a fixed structure or form, but as an arrangement in the making. The families in these pieces fly in the face of normative ideas of the family as private, bounded, and removed from labor or the instrumental. Seo Young Park’s manufacturing families offer productive challenges in this vein; in her own evocative terms, of “‘family’ as a patched fabric of social, intimate, and economic ties that have been stitched together over time” (p. 389). Indeed, labor, child care, food preparation, and even sleeping arrangements are all inextricably tied with the demands of 24–7 production. Yoonhee Kang’s transnational split families in Singapore are ones made in conversation with South Korea’s gender regimes. We observe that gender roles are never easily or wholly transgressed. Although “new fatherhood” champions new modes of paternal affection for children, it also manages to reproduce normative divisions of masculinity and femininity.

While some of these articles engage normative social and cultural forms and practices, others respond to prevailing historical and political assumptions about South Korea, particularly concerning its capitalist history and democratic movements.

### **DOMINANT HISTORY AND ITS DISCONTENTS**

Several of the articles pay particular attention to the ways in which the South Korean present is narrated and more particularly to the ways in which dominant historical teleologies can obscure social realities.

Seo Young Park introduces us to the messy underside of the apparently glitzy postmodern clothing production of present-day Seoul. That underside goes far to rupture hegemonic understandings of the march of developmental capitalism toward postindustrial capitalism. Park's ethnographic center, the "remnants of a mass-production industrial model" that "lies around the city" (p. 400), defies the regnant imagination that presumes that these "family" production units are long gone. Likewise, if prevailing narratives would imagine such "remnants" as products of anachronistic and exploitative regimes of family production, Park argues that today's speedy 24-hour production cycles have instead manufactured new modes of industrial and family production. She takes issue with universalizing global histories of capitalism that assume that industrial capitalist production and laborers are too marginal or weak to be central to the ever-faster circulation of global commodities with new information and financial technologies.

Jiyeon Kang's interest in media and popular framing of the 2002 candlelight vigils and in the memories of vigil participants also speaks to the power of dominant cultural and historical frames or teleologies. One predominant representation of the vigils suggested that they were frivolous youth festivals with little political bite (akin to the mass gatherings of the World Cup)—a far cry from the student struggles for democracy in the 1980s. Kang argues instead that the candlelight vigils comprise their own activist mode or "repertoire," one different from the ideologically charged protests of yesteryear, but nonetheless substantive and able to effect real change.

It is concrete bodies in space and time that intervene in dominant historical narratives; indeed, a number of the articles observe more broadly the material human body as the locus of the temporal and spatial signs and as the consequence of history.

### **BODY/SPACE/TIME**

In keeping with theoretical developments in the social sciences broadly and anthropology in particular, a number of the articles are attentive to human action as lived through bodies, space, and time.

Jiyeon Kang appreciates the corporeal memories of candlelight vigil participants, memories that stretch both into the past and toward the future: for some the act and affect of holding the candles recalled high school retreats in which they lit nearly identical candles for their parents (and by extension the nation); and for many their vivid embodied memory of the vigils sparked their interest in the next generation of youth who were also employing this repertoire. In Seo Young Park's article, the Tongdaemun Market comes to life as a vibrant space in which people and goods move in particular ways to realize remarkably fast production cycles.

In Nicholas Harkness's article, it is the voice itself—its sonic qualities—that has the power to transform the mood and sociality of the performance hall. We learn of a rich vocabulary with which singers and audiences alike describe the “technique[s] of sound production” (p. 373) and the particulars of the Korean Christian voice. Laura Nelson's article delves into hidden narratives of ill bodies that embody stress and of cured/curing bodies that work hard to rid themselves of that stress.

### THE PLURAL GLOBAL

It is through their engagement with bodily experience, time, and space, that many of the articles consider South Korea's globalization. In recent decades the South Korean nation-state has effected an aggressive globalization regime. A number of the articles offer a window on South Korea's quite particular and transforming cultures of globalization.

Many of the adoptees in Eleana Kim's article, epitomized in the figure of Olympic skier Toby Dawson, have come to stand for “neoliberal values of flexibility, entrepreneurship, and human capital” (p. 304) because of their ability to speak English and their global experience. What is shocking is that some Koreans see adoptees not as victims of difficult histories and circumstances but as enviable beneficiaries of an intensive English study abroad program. In turn, those adoptees without the proper global capital (adoptions that did not function like study abroad) are lacking the capital that makes adoption “legible” or acceptable. That adoptees can be framed under the rubric of study abroad serves as a powerful index of the extent of South Koreans' global desires and anxieties.

The returning classical voice trainees in Nicholas Harkness's article are caught between the Korean music world's demands that they obtain degrees and voice training abroad, and the conventions of South Korean performance that ask them to unlearn many of the vocal techniques that they mastered abroad. In this vein, the homecoming recital is fabulously revealing: while the body of the recital (during which time most of the audience has tuned out) confirms the initiate's foreign training, it is during the encore—when the audience tunes in, most often to a Christian song—that the artist submits to South Korean musical norms and conventions.

Yoonhee Kang makes it very clear that even as families cross the border for education, their efforts are profoundly local. Kang also intervenes in the easy assumption that it is mothers who are the only parent available for flexible family (labor) migration. The reality of the fathers' migrations speaks to the fact that in this era of increasingly precarious and irregular labor, flexible mobility cannot be assigned to a particular gender. Yet, with Kang we observe that undermining the gender division in terms of wage earning does not necessarily entail the deconstruction of gender norms attached to masculinity and femininity.

Laura Nelson describes a cancer community that has embraced the norms of the transnational breast cancer community, one which privileges those behaviors that individuals can control. Not only does this silence these women's robust understanding of gendered stress, it also leaves unexplored the possibility of larger environmental and political causes (that might account, for example, for South Korea's globally unique escalation of cancer in young women). This is an instance of global membership that makes public a formerly tabooed topic (cancer), but does so in ways that foreclose the horizons of cultural and political critique.

We are delighted that *The Journal of Korean Studies* elected to devote an issue to ethnographic articles on contemporary Korea. Ethnographic research and writing, we like to think, makes an important contribution to the study of the Koreas, one that often nicely complements the discussions spanning the humanistic and social science disciplines. We began this brief introduction with the ways in which these methods invite the reader to travel alongside the ethnographer into the fine-grained details of particular places, people, and moments. We hope that our readers will enjoy the many "aha moments" in which ethnographic revelation challenges sociocultural and politico-historical assumptions. Ethnography offers a methodological contribution as it produces knowledge from deep participation and grounded experience in local realities. We submit that among the largest conversations about South Korea today emerge across these pieces, from contemporary junctures of capitalism, to the public sphere and social dissent, to migration and changing demography. For those readers among you who do not research and write in this vein, we hope that these pieces will provide a compelling introduction. For the seasoned among you, we hope you will agree that each of these pieces exemplifies the best of our methods.

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