

# Memoir/manuals of South Korean pre-college study abroad: defending mothers and humanizing children

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**Abstract** *In this article, we analyse the memoir/manuals of three 'goose' families. These are South Koreans whose children participate in pre-college study abroad (PSA). One parent (typically the mother) accompanies the child while the other (usually the father) remains at home to support the venture. Although many South Koreans aspire to study abroad, both the mothers and children of goose families have attracted wide criticism – the mothers for being narrowly instrumental and too family centred, worried only about social reproduction and mobility and the children for forsaking their nation, foregoing their filial duties and, perhaps, failing abroad. These memoir/manuals defend the goose mother and protect the PSA child against such charges. As memoirs, they depict remarkable people worthy of documentation. As manuals, they offer (at least some) guidance for mothers and families contemplating this particular family strategy. The memoir/manuals open a window to the challenges and anxieties of PSA in South Korea today.*

**Keywords** SOUTH KOREA, STUDY ABROAD, GLOBALIZATION, TRANSNATIONAL FAMILIES, CHILDREN, MEMOIRS

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In 1993, when pre-college study abroad (henceforth PSA) was still foreign to the majority of South Koreans, 22-year-old Hong Chung-wook's account of his educational success in the United States, *Ch'ilmak ch'iljang* (*Seven acts and seven chapters*), swept South Korea.<sup>1</sup> Hong attended Choate boarding school, which is renowned in South Korea for having educated John F. Kennedy, before graduating

from Harvard and then entering Stanford Law School. His memoirs sold more than a million copies and schoolchildren and parents alike celebrated him as a model to emulate. Not only Hong but also his father, whom Hong described as the ‘source of my ambition’ and his mother, who taught him the ‘intellect and grace of characters from *The Great Gatsby*’, captured the South Korean cosmopolitan imagination. Many PSA students (including Ahn 2004; and Yi 2003) recollected their boarding school days in memoirs and hailed Hong as their ‘idol’. Hong’s iconic status persisted and, in 2003, he published an updated version of his memoir. In 2002 Hong became the youngest owner of the largest English language newspaper in South Korea and, in 2008, he successfully ran for the National Assembly.

As PSA dramatically increased and diversified in the late 2000s, the PSA memoir flourished as a genre of writing. Prior to 2000, there were only three popular books on PSA. In 2000, however, eight books appeared and, by 2009, there were more than a hundred such works,<sup>2</sup> more than half of which PSA parents (overwhelmingly mothers) had written. Furthermore, even among student PSA diarists, the mothers were nearly always featured prominently.

In this article, we analyse maternal accounts of the so-called goose family<sup>3</sup> experience in which mothers accompany their PSA children abroad while the fathers remain in South Korea to earn money. In present-day South Korea<sup>4</sup> women invariably design and manage their children’s education in general and PSA in particular (Kang and Abelmann 2011; Ong 1999; Park and Abelmann 2004). We refer to their works as memoir/manuals to indicate that they work simultaneously as accounts of remarkable mothers (like memoirs) and as how-to accounts for families, especially mothers, contemplating this particular global family strategy (like manuals). While there have long been memoirs of remarkable people (Olney 1980), these ones reflect more particularly South Korea’s neoliberal social and cultural ethos<sup>5</sup> (Abelmann et al. 2009; Apple 2001; Cho 2009; Kim 2007; Rose 1989; Song 2012). As paragons of neoliberal subjectivity (see Yamane and Hong 2008), the educational migrant mother works hard to fashion herself and her children to survive in an increasingly global and competitive world (Burbules and Torres 2000; Rizvi 2005).

Beyond their practical utility and celebration of global subjectivity, however, these memoir/manuals defend goose mothers against charges of being narrowly instrumental and ‘familistic’, that is putting the interests of the family over those of the individual and focusing too intently on social reproduction and personal mobility. Indeed, in South Korea today, goose mothers and their children are problematic figures in debates about social inequality and the family. The memoir/manuals also defend PSA children against accusations of having forsaken their nation, foregone their duties to their parents and, perhaps, even failed abroad.

We focus here on three memoir/manuals published in 2003 and 2004, the historical moment when, following 30 per cent annual increases after 2002 when 10,132 students left home to study abroad, the practice had become a viable option for middle-class Koreans. These three works are among the first memoirs written by PSA mothers for PSA mothers, in a market previously dominated by practical how-to guides by PSA experts and the success stories of prominent Korean-American

students told from the other side of the Pacific. Having reviewed 20 books,<sup>6</sup> we selected our three as representative of a range of approaches. Using critical discourse analysis (Kress 1990; Kress and Hodge 1979; van Dijk 1993), we focus on the various strategies the authors of these works employ to defend themselves against a range of class and gender charges. We highlight the importance of this media discourse because we contend that it plays a significant role in fashioning goose family life abroad. In other words, PSA mothers and their children cannot help but be self-conscious about their participation in this widely publicized educational strategy. While there are many sociological and anthropological debates about whether and how PSA mothers subvert or transcend the restrictions of traditional or familistic methods of capital accumulation (see Man 1995 *versus* Ong 1999 and Waters 2002), we focus instead on the cultural work of goose families. In keeping with Chamberlain and Leydesdorff (2004) in the *Global Networks* special issue on memories and narratives in transnational families, we suggest that a goose family strategy is highly scripted, one that women embark on in the rich context of personal conversations and media (on and off line) texts, among them memoir/manuals like those on which we focus here. The mothers who write these memoirs often feature in women's magazines, which review their memoirs and interview them under titles such as 'First-hand experiences' or 'Straight from the horse's mouth'<sup>7</sup> (Kang and Abelmann 2011). Memoir/manuals thus speak to the lived experience of globalization in South Korea in general, namely anticipation and anxiety about ideal subjectivities for family survival in the global era. Before proceeding to the memoir/manuals, we introduce South Korea's pre-college study abroad (PSA) as a veritable educational exodus by the middle class and the maternal labour associated with it.

### **The ambivalent educational exodus of South Korea's middle class**

The movement of South Koreans abroad for all reasons, including travel and study in either the short or long term, increased in the 1990s alongside a per capita rise in GNP, the liberalization of travel (it became possible to get passports) and the state-supported globalization policy of the Kim Young Sam regime (1992–97). Broadly, the 1990s ushered in the first phase of the radical democratization of South Korean society, though many consider that the 1997 election of opposition party leader Kim Dae Jung signalled the true achievement of democracy (Kang C. S. E. 2000; Kang M. K. 2000; Kim 2000). With democratization came the rise of personal desires for individual expression and fulfilment over collectivist demands, some of which took on life in the first wave of globalization and travel (Yi 2002).

In this same period, the South Korean state school system, with its national curriculum, standardized tests and equalization measures, seemed increasingly incapable of addressing the citizens' clamour for more opportunities to prepare their children for a changing world and to nurture their 'individual' talents and proclivities. 'School collapse' or 'classroom collapse' described the mood at school in which students and teachers were no longer successfully fulfilling their roles as responsible educators or dutiful learners. In response, the late 1990s saw a rise in private after-

school supplementary lessons and an increasing call for changes in K-12 education, including specialization, individuation and stratification (Chun 2003; Kim J. W. 2004). The escalation in private lessons after school, with near universal participation among South Korean children (even in primary school), has drastically transformed South Korean education, which was historically known for being egalitarian and uniform. It is widely appreciated that the high cost of this market – South Koreans spend more on education than any other people in the world (Park H. 2007) – is a driving force in PSA. In this early PSA phase, we can perhaps accurately state that families were managing their way abroad under the radar of legal restrictions that prohibited the formal exit from South Korean schooling (Cho 2005).

Many scholars have written about how ironic it was that the first opposition regime in South Korea (that of Kim Dae Jung) should preside over the extreme market liberalization of the society during the so-called IMF crisis (Crotty and Lee 2005; Haggard and Mo 2000; Lim and Han 2003; Song 2009). The International Monetary Fund's terms for a bailout during the East Asian financial crisis of 1997–98 were massive corporate liberalization and restructuring. In the educational sector, this translated into ever more privatization<sup>8</sup> and a greater response from the state to people's educational demands, including specialist schools, intensive English courses and technical training colleges. The IMF crisis initiated a sharp increase in unemployment and under-employment, which in turn reduced the faltering confidence of the middle class, significantly decreased cash flows and increased the flexibility of the labour market, thus leading to a greater bifurcation of South Korea's class system (Kim and Finch 2002; Kwon 2004; Mah 2002). Not surprisingly, in the immediate aftermath of the crisis, PSA rates slowed down, reflecting decreased cash flows and less economic confidence. Despite the IMF, however, the absolute number of PSA students increased. Between 1998 and 2008, the overall number of South Korean elementary and secondary school pupils decreased from 8.5 million to 8.3 million. Nevertheless, during the same period, there was a seventeen-fold increase in the number of Korean PSA students (1562 to 27,349). These sudden increases, which began in 2000 as Koreans were recovering from the IMF shock and peaked in 2003 and 2004, are reflections of the social and political changes of post-IMF South Korea in which all citizens are anxiously responding to the economic and social insecurities of the times (Öm 2007; Park C. 2007).

Goose mothers are ambivalent figures in both class and gender terms,<sup>9</sup> for not all mothers in South Korea can manage pre-college study abroad for their children as a strategy for family capital accumulation (Man 1995; Ong 1999). Increasingly, it is understood that the haves support their PSA children with a considerable amount of help from maternal and family labour, while the have-nots can neither satisfactorily support their domestic children nor nurture parallel global dreams (Byun and Kim 2010; Kim 2010; Lee and Koo 2006).

The experiences of Korean goose mothers echo those of other mothers whose children study abroad, most notably mothers from Hong Kong, Taiwan, China and Singapore.<sup>10</sup> One line of scholarship holds that, though separated from their husbands and extended kin, these mothers fulfil domestic roles because they labour on behalf of

their children's and their family's future. Some authors describe this familial arrangement as almost neo-traditional, with the sacrificial mother weathering the difficulties of life abroad as her equally sacrificial husband stays behind to sustain the family (Chamberlain and Leydesdorff 2004; Yeoh et al. 2005). That said, some scholars appreciate that PSA mothers enjoy their new domestic role because of the greater independence and new opportunities for self-fulfilment it delivers (Waters 2002; Yeoh and Willis 2005).

The existing literature has yet to examine how media discourses 'at home' affect PSA families. Given the disjuncture between the egalitarian ideals of public education and the class-based character of PSA, we are increasingly coming to understand class inequality in relation to maternal or family labour. It is easy to appreciate just how labour intensive children, mothers and fathers find PSA, for they expend their labour not only on productive activities such as studying, cooking or making money, but also on fashioning particular student and parent subjectivities.

Some scholars accuse PSA mothers of misdirecting their labour by engaging principally in family and/or class reproduction with little interest in the common good (Kim 2009; Nelson 2000; Park 2008). Further, they suspect that their labour might be unnatural or even destructive (Kim 2009) in that it can engineer family dissolution or activate their own global project quite independently of that of their children (Park and Abelmann 2004). With mothers accused of being agents of family dissolution, the South Korean media produce a steady stream of stories about goose fathers becoming depressed, gaining weight on fast foods, succumbing to sexual affairs or even committing suicide (Ly 2005). Former Minister of Education Cho Soon accused PSA parents of forsaking their children's 'sound emotions, wholesome values, and healthy bodies' (Cho 2007), a tension that Western mothers also navigate in the modern era. In this vein, Hays (1998: 175) describes the tension between the rational logic of the market and the ideology of 'sustainable human ties, free of competition and selfish individualism' as 'the cultural contradictions of motherhood'.

In their own right, these PSA children are ambivalent cultural figures; they are the distorted or even failed products of their mother's labour. First, like their mothers, they have a class profile: while their less-privileged brethren must make do with the many problems and limitations of South Korean schooling (and afterschooling), they can escape. In a country with one of the world's strongest ideological commitments to equality of educational opportunity (Abelmann et al. 2011; Seth 2002), these young people accentuate the obvious inequities of the system. Elsewhere, we have argued that, in the discourse of South Korean newspapers, PSA is 'domesticated', no longer depicted as a discrete foreign educational field, but instead understood as the competitive edge of a highly stratified South Korean education market (Kang and Abelmann 2011; see also Koo n.d.). Second, though goose families are arguably organized to produce flexible citizens (Ong 1999, 2006) able to navigate the world for education and employment, these children are nonetheless called on to become proper 'Koreans' who fulfil their national and filial duties (see Fong 2004; Hoffman 2006). Third, can these PSA children succeed in the global schoolhouse? The child's subjectivity stands in for the propriety and productivity of the mother's labour.

We believe that these memoir/manuals offer insights into the challenges and anxieties of PSA in South Korea today. We are particularly interested in how they address the widespread charges against PSA as a misdirected and unproductive form of labour. Indeed, these authors' main defence of PSA is in their particular representations of maternal labour and the child's subjectivity, or ways of fashioning a competitive self. As many scholars have argued, neoliberal capitalism places a higher value on the capacity for labour and the effect of the labouring person than on sheer physical labour (Chakrabraty 2000; Urciuoli 2008; Yan 2008). As discussed elsewhere, PSA success not only requires knowledge and financial resources, but both children and parents must also have the right 'character' traits (Kang and Abelmann 2011). While literary scholar Nancy Miller (2007: 541) noted that memoirs were guides to new territories, whether 'foreign or domestic', the ones we examine here introduce the reader not only to this territory but also to the kind of person who can successfully navigate it. Heidi Marie Rimke (2000: 62) argues that self-help books help us to 'rely exclusively on oneself, simultaneously to rely on an expert other, and then again to become an expert in some aspect of one's selfhood'. The memoir/manuals here reveal what Rimke (2000: 65) describes as the 'liberation/regulation paradox' in that they liberate readers to rely on themselves, but at the same time outline a labour-intensive subjectivity project in a neoliberal vein. We turn now to how the authors of three memoir/manuals defend both mother and child.

### **Defending mothers**

Although all three books defend charges against the mother's elitist and familistic labour, each achieves this in a distinctive manner.

#### *Hard labour for mere survival*

We begin with Kim Hee Kyung's (2004) *Chukto paptto andoen chogi yuhak* (*Neither rice nor gruel: pre-college study abroad*). The Korean idiom 'neither rice nor gruel', denoting a useless intermediary, suggests that Kim's PSA children returned to Korea without becoming successful cosmopolitans abroad. The text stands out for its unromantic account of a woman's attempt to rescue her children from the disillusionment of their American education. Kim argues that successful PSA requires massive financial resources, huge willpower on the part of the children and a considerable amount of work by the mother (Kim H. K. 2004: 263). By highlighting her 'hard' work and challenging array of prerequisites – as if to say that she did not quite measure up to them – Kim absolves herself of PSA privilege, while her children, with their moderate cosmopolitanism and appreciation of their home country, prove that her labour has been productive.<sup>11</sup>

Kim had an M.A. degree, many years of successful work experience and, in early 2001, had started her own business. Soon thereafter, in August 2001, she left all this behind to go to the USA with her two sons, who were in the fifth and second grades respectively. After one and a half years in New Jersey, she returned to South Korea with her children.

*Neither rice nor gruel* is a story about ‘failure’ in which Kim sets out to break up the love affair so many South Koreans have with the United States and to question their infatuation with PSA (Kim H. K. 2004: 15). In her preface, she challenges the facile assumption that PSA children become smart, creative and successful (Kim H. K. 2004: 8). On the contrary, she believes that if allowed to run its natural course, PSA promises little other than to turn Korean children into run-of-the-mill Americans. Although Kim states her commitment to reveal the ‘true picture’ of PSA, her account documents that she has *nonetheless* somehow managed to guide her children through this quagmire. Ironically, she thus emerges as *no ordinary* mother after all. As with the other authors we review, Kim is indeed the writer of a book-length account of herself as a remarkable woman in her own right engaged in difficult to imitate maternal labour.

*‘It’s not a piece of cake’*

Kim’s critique of PSA and her personal modesty serve to protect her against charges of elitism or excessive familism. She claims that an American lifestyle is not necessarily appropriate in a Korean context and some of the subtitles in her book refer to negative aspects of US society. For example, she asks, ‘is American education really an alternative to Korean education?’ ‘Does English really come naturally when you go to the USA?’ and ‘Will your kids be happy growing up in the USA?’ She uses these almost tongue-in-cheek rhetorical questions to shatter the expectations of hopeful PSA mothers. She is asking them to question whether an American environment actually equips a child with English proficiency, creativity and a successful career in the absence of the mother’s close management and an expensive private education. Among other dream-shattering facts about American schooling, she describes how her two sons were burdened with as much homework and afterschool courses as they had been in Korea and how hard they struggled to make friends. They were the victims of American racism, ‘discrimination, prejudice and being ignored’ (Kim H. K. 2004: 7). She described daily life as a veritable battlefield. In fact, as she put it, ‘it is not a piece of cake!’ (Kim H. K. 2004: 7). ‘Is American education truly a viable alternative to South Korean education?’ ‘No’, she answers, for it promises ‘neither success nor happiness’ (Kim H. K. 2004: 8).

Kim’s discovery then is that rank-and-file PSA students are unlikely to make their way to the American Ivy League universities. As she explains, with tuition and living expenses at private colleges in the United States exceeding \$50,000 a year, they are inaccessible to all but the very rich (Kim H. K. 2004: 39). Kim was also alarmed when her son reported that the school principal had told him that ‘the President and a clerk at a gas station are equal to each other.’ She feared that her children might conclude that studying did not matter, musing ‘is this the high quality education for which I yearned?’ (Kim H. K. 2004: 40). In her words, ‘the American public education that we revered is in fact useful for Americans who will become ordinary citizens, but [it is] not an alternative for Korean public education’ (Kim H. K. 2004: 42).

*A mother's hard labour*

Like the other memoir/manual mothers we introduce here, Kim describes the nature of her work, but unlike the others she neither idealizes nor feminizes it – she merely emphasizes *just* how hard it was. We suggest that her pretence of failure allows her to portray herself as a ‘regular’ mother trying to rescue her children from both Korean and American education.

The child’s mastery of the English language is at the heart of the PSA project, but the acquisition of this asset costs the mother considerable time and effort. For the first five months, Kim spent between four and five hours a day practising English with her elder son. She lets other mothers know that if they think that PSA is just a matter of letting the school do the job – with their only task being to feed their children – they are gravely mistaken. The mother needs to scour libraries and bookstores for English reading matter; she must peruse their contents to decide whether they are appropriate for the child’s age and level; and finally she should read alongside her child to guide his interest and shore up his vocabulary (Kim H. K. 2004: 46). Kim goes out of her way not to romanticize her labour, insisting that it was not a question of her being an ‘extraordinarily eager mom’, but that without this effort her son would have had no chance of even surviving at school (Kim H. K. 2004: 45–6).

Through her apparent criticism of PSA, Kim defends herself against the general attack of PSA on class and gender grounds: she emerges as neither particularly privileged nor overly feminine, but certainly as patriotic. Her description of sheer survival nonetheless portrays an exceptionally maternal subject.

*Minimal labour*

We now contrast Kim’s *Neither rice nor gruel* with Lee Sunhee’s (2003) *Naüi sönt’aek, Chein üi söngkong* (*My choice, Jane’s success*). Kim’s labour was hard and intensive; Lee’s was minimal and easy. Where Kim had to work against the current to prevent her children becoming run-of-the-mill Americans, Lee merely had to ensure that she did *not* get in the way of the *natural* course of things. Her minimal effort, however, required shrewdness, knowledge and cultural capital, for she needed to *know* when *not* to work. Lee’s book starts with her decision to move to the USA for the education of her daughter, Jane, who had struggled in South Korean schools because they failed to appreciate her creativity and, as a consequence, she had remained ‘reserved and shy’ (Lee 2003: 17). In the USA, however, Jane became a successful fashion designer, won a fellowship to the prestigious Parsons School of Design and became more outgoing, expressive and mature (Lee 2003: 17, 78, 80).

An implicit ‘other’ mother emerges from Lee’s account – a mother whose labour is stupid, misdirected and laborious. Furthermore, her minimal or natural work is gender specific, namely what ‘good’ mothers do *naturally* (Lee 2003: 22, 72, 84, 90, 127). Her gendered work can be used to defend her against charges of narrow familism and class privilege – it *appears* to be anything but labour intensive. Memorable about Lee, then, is that she knows just how *not* to labour!

*'My choice'*

Lee's account portrays Jane alternately as *the* only sort of child who can succeed at PSA *and* the sort of child whom PSA can fashion. Either way, a mother needs to recognize whether hers is the sort of child who can succeed at PSA or whether she needs to guide PSA to bring out her child's success – hence her title '*My Choice*'. Jane's story, Lee decides, is a success story. 'If entering a so-called desirable college is a success, then I can say without hesitation, "Jane was able to succeed because I brought her to the United States"' (Lee 2003: 283; emphasis added). What is important here is that Lee and her husband knew that Jane was well suited to an American education. 'Beginning in elementary school, my husband and I tried *objectively* to observe Jane's personality, talent, strengths and weaknesses. I was convinced that American educational methods and [an American] environment would suit her better than [a] South Korean education' (Lee 2003: 24; emphasis added).

*Witnessing Jane's success in America*

In *My choice, Jane's success*, Lee repeatedly portrays the South Korean education system, with its maniacal focus on academic excellence and its inability to allow children like Jane to realize their talent (Lee 2003: 23) as the culprit. *My choice, Jane's success* is a tribute to American education for allowing Jane to realize her full potential thanks to its creative and stress-free environment and to American teachers who know how to be encouraging (Lee 2003: 36, 109). Lee (2003: 132, emphasis added) goes on to explain how:

Upon reflection, I am glad that throughout the process of sifting through all that information and choosing a high school, *I let Jane decide her future*. ... My Korean friends send their kids to schools with no regard for their talent or interest, and force their kids to submit to [their] plan.

Had Jane's mother not known that she should trust her, Jane might have lurked in the 'shadows', unable to 'reveal her given talents' (Lee 2003: 27) or to 'express her [bold and outgoing] personality to the full' (Lee 2003: 16–17). Lee compares her parenting in the United States with an invisible hand quietly guiding Jane to make the 'right' decisions. Her intelligent and intelligently invisible parenting made 'Jane different from other kids who hide from their parents' (Lee 2003: 201).

Lee found it natural for a mother to support her PSA child. 'Someone needed to accompany her and it needed to be my husband or me – there was little question as to which job would be forfeited' (Lee 2003: 22). At times, Lee beautifies her maternal sacrifice, describing for example how thrilling it was to attend Jane's first flute recital in the United States. As she put it (Lee 2003: 84), 'the joy and that sense of achievement is the happiness of raising a child. That is the happiness that compensates for the sense of loss from forfeiting my own name and title.' Presenting herself as a witness to, rather than an architect of, Jane's success, Lee defends herself against the charge of narrow instrumentality by describing her efforts as an expression of a mother's natural devotion to her child. Nevertheless, the reader gathers that PSA success

depends on a family possessing and being able to mobilize the most appropriate assets to ensure the child's success.

### *Feminine Labour*

Extremely feminine labour is what characterizes our final memoir/manual, *Hankukesō t'aēōnan ai segye mudaeesō sōnggong sik'igi* (*How to make kids born in South Korea succeed on the global stage*) by Chung Haeng-ja (2003). Although profoundly class based, Chung naturalizes her maternal labour as the work of a sacrificial mother – what a 'good' mother is delighted to offer for the future of her children and for humanity. We suggest that this intense feminization serves to soften both the labour and the privilege.

Chung is the wife of a diplomat. She tells the story of how she brought up her son and daughter in the United States, Malaysia, Indonesia and South Korea to 'succeed in American schools, master five languages, develop their talents, [and] stand out among people everywhere they go' (Chung 2003: 7). Her son, Hyuk, graduated from Princeton before acquiring a Ph.D. in engineering from Stanford: her daughter, Jisoo, is a medical doctor in South Korea. Chung refers to her childrearing practices as a 'natural method' of education designed to develop children's personalities through finding their passions, exposing them to the arts and letting them interact with friends instead of focusing solely on their academic achievements.

### *Know your child*

Like Lee, Chung sketches a portrait of *the* South Korean child well suited to PSA and, like her, insists that a parent's first job is to know his or her child: 'I support study abroad if the child has [a] strong will, talent and ability' (Chung 2003: 42). Chung holds that a 'successful' life is the 'unique' life that emerges from a unique personality (Chung 2003: 50). Education, she proffers, must follow the 'natural' course of the child. Instead of forcing their children, parents should develop their potential.

Thus, as a first challenge, parents must 'meticulously examine the methods to meet the purpose of education and find methods suitable for their child's individual personality and ability' (Chung 2003: 42). Like Lee, she points out that the parent plays a critical role in shaping a child who can succeed at PSA. The mother's second challenge is to become a competent teacher in her own right and to design teaching methods tailored to her children's needs. Chung, for example, decided not to send her children to a preschool or neighbourhood afterschool because she did not want them to become 'cookie-cutter kids'. She devised her own methods of bringing them up to be creative individuals (Chung 2003: 80–1). As a human quality, such maternal expertise satisfies the remarkable (neoliberal) subjectivity befitting the author of a memoir.

### *Woman as fertilizer and role model*

According to Chung's memoir, a woman's 'way' is to serve her children, family and country with love and devotion. Women, Chung writes, are like 'fertilizers' in that

they lay the ground for the family and nation (Chung 2003: 5, 8). She describes her role in national terms – she devotes her energies to ensuring that her children become part of the national ‘brainpower ... [that] can contribute to the society’; it is in this vein that she pronounces her children ‘treasures more precious than I am’ (Chung 2003: 78). She recounts how readily she set aside her original plan to pursue graduate education in the United States in favour of supporting her children, but that at her son’s graduation from Princeton she felt fully ‘compensated’ for the ‘sacrifice’ she had made (Chung 2003: 196). As role models, parents must display exemplary habits, in fact habits that seem increasingly difficult to achieve as the book progresses. They must, for example, ‘constantly read newspapers and books and make the most of their leisure time, [so that their] children too will develop the habit of reading and efficient use of leisure time’ (Chung 2003: 48). As a role model, a PSA mother must be diligent and hardworking (Chung 2003: 327) and must become her child’s teacher or tutor. A parent, she writes, is always preferable to a tutor because ‘children get motivated when they see parents trying hard on their behalf’ (Chung 2003: 334). Chung’s efforts even took her into her children’s daytime school. To gain a better grasp of her children’s reality, she received special permission to shadow them at school. ‘How could I’, she mused, ‘stay at home wondering how my children who spoke little English were faring in school?’ (Chung 2003: 117).

As a manual, Chung’s account is the most detailed of the three and the most highly rewarded with visible success – her children had prestigious college degrees, prominent careers and outstanding personalities. The effort that went into producing these qualities deserved a written memoir because it revealed extraordinary sacrifice, passion and knowledge: she was happy to labour on behalf of her children for the good of society and humanity. Her narrative of passion, love and joy rescue her from the charge of being narrowly instrumental; by applying the concept of a ‘role model’, Chung was able to argue that if the parent is genuine, caring, giving, hardworking and efficient, the child will be the same. We conclude that *How to make kids born in South Korea succeed on the global stage* is not entirely successful at mitigating the charge of elitism but makes inroads into confirming the suspicion of a gender bias often directed at PSA.

The three maternal accounts mount their defences against charges of elitism, narrow familism and educational failure by variously describing the mother’s work as difficult (rescuing her children from a hostile environment), minimal (merely observing her talented child) and feminine (following her natural impulse). Despite removing privilege or instrumentality from the equation, the mothers nonetheless not only exhibit considerable knowledge and skill but also possess sufficient sensitivity, judgement and character to ensure PSA success.

We also note that the absence of the father further accentuates the subjectivity of the devoted yet independent and capable mother. In all three books, either the father is absent from the family’s PSA project or his presence is mediated via the mother’s work. His absence is most conspicuous in Kim’s *Neither rice nor gruel*. In a section entitled ‘My husband is a goose father’, she stresses the burden of having to fulfil the traditional male role in the household, including long-distance driving, thus drawing

attention to the extent of her maternal labour. For Lee, as *My choice* implies, the father's role in Jane's PSA is minimal, basically offering the family an experience of America while he studies for his Ph.D. While Lee and her daughter navigate their way through PSA in the absence of the father, mother and daughter form a close and friendly relationship. Similarly, Chung also becomes the primary caregiver and, through her careful and devoted work, nurtures the characters of her two children, which includes teaching them to appreciate their successful diplomat father.

We turn now to the children in the three memoir/manuals.

### Humanizing the PSA child

Each account humanizes PSA children in a way that defends the mother against the charge of privileged instrumentality. In *Neither rice nor gruel*, Kim localizes her children as 'good enough cosmopolitans' who are after all happiest 'at home'. In *My choice, Jane's success*, Lee individualizes Jane as an 'American cosmopolitan'. Finally, in *How to make kids born in South Korea succeed on the global stage*, Chung – despite the title of her book – depicts her children as devoted national patriots. We argue that these goose mothers feel compelled to describe their children in this way to allay suspicions about *who* can thrive in PSA and *whether* in fact it is an appropriate option for South Korean children. It is ironic that South Koreans both suspect that Korean children are incapable of becoming truly cosmopolitan *and* worry about what happens if they do. As these are maternal narratives, they fail to depict the agency of the children, namely their role in and decision-making about PSA, in an autonomous manner. Rather, the children's and the mother's agency is bundled in a family project.

#### *Localization: the 'good enough cosmopolitan'*

Kim's depiction of her children as local and at their happiest when they are at home – 'Koreans are happy when they live *as Koreans in Korea*' (Kim H. K. 2004: 10, 75, 262; emphasis added) – protects her from possible charges of exploiting her privilege and forsaking South Korea. To allay suspicions that her children might have become something other than Korean, she asks, 'can we really do that?' and answers, 'we cannot, I did not.' The reader nonetheless comes away from *Neither rice nor gruel* impressed that Kim had been able to fashion 'good enough', partially cosmopolitan, yet appropriately 'Korean' children. Their achievements, while apparently modest, are nonetheless still worthy of a memoir. It is interesting that in choosing a local idiom for the title of her memoir/manual, Kim is indicating the importance of her Korean identity.<sup>12</sup>

Kim placed much emphasis on the painful and alienating features of PSA – 'my sons would not say that the one-and-a-half years in the USA were either happy or humane' (Kim H. K. 2004: 86). As foreigners, they faced constant 'stereotyping and disdain' and 'counted the days until their return to Korea' where they would be able to enjoy a 'truly humane life' (Kim H. K. 2004: 86). She claimed that the foreign and stressful environment even changed their personalities. The principal would castigate her sociable elder son for playfully pushing a classmate and for other behaviour con-

sidered innocuous in Korea, which would make him feel cautious at school, as if he were walking on thin ice (Kim H. K. 2004: 113). Meanwhile, his American schooling, in which his classmates engaged him in daily arguments, turned her ‘smiling and tender’ younger son into a ‘fighting cock’ (Kim H. K. 2004: 65). These stories aside, Kim concluded that her sons ‘adapted relatively well to the USA’, but urged her readers to imagine the fate of other PSA students who might not have the luxury of a mother or sibling to watch over them. The likelihood of a cosmopolitan child emerging from the environment these stories depict seems impossible, or even undesirable. Furthermore, Kim’s American epiphany was that even time would not really do the trick. ‘No matter how much knowledge, money, or English they have, Koreans are perpetual foreigners in America’ (Kim H. K. 2004: 82). Even the most successful Korean American doctors and lawyers, she went on, end up in Korean American neighbourhoods servicing Korean American clients.

Her conclusions suggest modest returns – ‘a modicum of comfort in English, some knowledge of the USA and recognition of the importance of family and motherland’ (Kim H. K. 2004: 14). However, she intimately ties this *Wizard of Oz*-like re-evaluation of home to dream-shattering realizations about being ‘Korean’ in the world. She and her family felt isolated in the United States when they watched the successes of their fellow citizens during the 2002 World Cup (Kim H. K. 2004: 14). It made her realize that, at the end of the day, for people who come from a small country and speak a minority language, home is perhaps the best place to be; it is where they can celebrate the rare instances of their global successes with their co-nationals.

Although Kim told her story in a rather self-deprecating manner, the aspiring PSA mother reading it will easily recognize it as a worthy success. As we noted earlier, Kim presents her children’s achievements as if they had not been worth the effort. She describes how they ‘learned enough English to use when arguing or playing with each other. ... Does everyone learn such English? No way! It took excruciating efforts by me and my children – blood and tears’ (Kim H. K. 2004: 11). For any aspiring mother, however, learning ‘some’ English – enough to argue and play in English – is certainly a desirable outcome from a year and half abroad. The reader is drawn to sympathize with the tumultuous journey of two boys and their mother, while acknowledging their laudable achievement and maturation *en route*.

#### *Individuation: an ‘American’ cosmopolitan*

The child in *My choice, Jane’s success* emerges as a particularly American subject. The use of ‘Jane’ in the title – clearly her adopted American name – suggests a comfortable, mainstream American girl. Unlike other memoirs, in which student and parents constantly wrestle with their Koreanness, Jane’s story hardly mentions cultural difference or national identity. Jane lives in the *American* environment as an unmarked, mature, competent and creative subject. Lee humanizes her as an ‘individual’ realized in the crucible of American education rather than as an abstract global or cosmopolitan child.

Jane’s freedom, maturity and spontaneity are apparent from Lee’s description of

her US weekends. While Jane was in high school, they made regular trips to Barnes and Nobles in New York City, ‘drinking Starbucks [coffee], reading on our topics of interest and of the world’ (Lee 2003: 76). Lee recollects, ‘New York City and its environment of diversity helped to build [Jane’s] cheerful, optimistic and serious personality’ (Lee 2003: 207). It seems that Jane derives her humanity from her membership in the American creative cultural class. *My choice, Jane’s success* is an easy manual in the sense that it promises PSA success merely by placing the struggling child in the right environment. In this way, it effaces the class attributes of the child. By presenting Jane as an ‘individual’, the memoir elides the matter of filial duty or nation. She is not a privileged child, but merely a creative person who can prosper in an American cultural milieu. The reader, however, probably thinks that this creative child is cosmopolitan enough, thus showing how deftly the text balances its defensive and celebratory tasks.

### *Filial nationalization*

Chung’s children emerge as filial nationals. While poised to be global elites, she equally celebrates them for being traditionally ‘Korean’. She describes, for example, the humble way in which they readjusted to South Korean society. When her son, Hyuk, was doing municipal service – in lieu of military training – for example, ‘he walked two hours to work each day so as to get acclimatized to his new environment’ (Chung 2003: 257). Moreover, during that time he befriended a co-worker and went on to help him at the store his family owned at the traditional open-air Namdaemun Market. Her son’s ‘innocence’ and willingness to take on the ‘most menial of tasks in good cheer’ moved Chung (2003: 255), as did his ‘maturity’ in spontaneously wanting to learn about all walks of life in Korea (Chung 2003: 263).

Moreover, Hyuk emerges as exceedingly filial. On entering Princeton, he told his parents ‘I have two life goals. One is to achieve academically and the other is to make my father and mother happy’ (Chung 2003: 34). Hyuk, we learn, always bows when he comes home: ‘we say not to, but he always greets us with a respectful bow’ (Chung 2003: 35). Chung (2003: 190) recalls Hyuk saying, ‘Mom, thank you. I know well that I came all this way thanks to your sacrifice and effort. I always tried my best not to let you down.’ At that moment, filled with emotion, Chung recollects how ‘since he was young, Hyuk tried not to spend money, out of consideration for his government-official father. He understood his parents’ [financial situation] and gave up much of what he wanted to do’ (Chung 2003: 190). Unlike Hyuk, his sister Jisoo, who became a successful AIDS physician, chose to live in South Korea because she liked Korean food, culture and people (Chung 2003: 168). With her experience abroad and fluent English, she gets frequent invitations to speak at international conferences and to collaborate with renowned researchers worldwide. Chung (2003: 309) says that when she comes home from such trips, she thanks her parents for her ‘special talents’, of which English is one.

Chung’s narrative conjoins the subjectivity of the mother and children. As mentioned earlier, ‘being a role model’ is a predominant theme: a child will share the

attributes of a parent who is genuine, caring, giving, hardworking and economical; the child's subjectivity is modelled after the mother's and the child's virtuous behaviour, in turn, affirms the mother's celebratory subjectivity.

These mothers variously portray their PSA children as local, individual and loyal to their parents and country, thus counterbalancing these subjectivities against the popular images of PSA children as overly instrumental, self-interested or unpatriotic. Through their accounts, the mothers attempt to defend themselves against charges of using their class and gender to achieve their aims. To accomplish this, they tend to downplay the mother's agency. For instance, Kim's efforts are merely survival tactics in a hostile environment; Lee's motivation comes solely from Jane's creativity; and Chung is simply responding to a mother's natural impulses. At the same time, the children attest to the sophisticated way in which their mothers negotiate the complicated tensions that exist between securing class reproduction and effacing instrumental privilege, and fashioning cosmopolitans while at the same time promoting family and nation – skills that are clearly worthy of a memoir.

## **Conclusion**

We examined three memoir/manuals published during the maturation/acceleration phase of PSA in South Korea. Each book narrates the story of an exceptional mother and the kind of labour (hard, minimal or feminine) she expended on her PSA children. With hard labour, one mother managed to negate suspicions of class privileges to produce modest cosmopolitans who are comfortable at home. A second expended only minimal labour to nurture an American global subject. The third, with feminine labour, produced cosmopolitan yet filial subjects.

As we have shown, these texts address the cultural ambivalences that surround the mothers and children of South Koreans who decide to follow the PSA option to study abroad. The accusations directed against the mothers are that they misapply or abuse their labour, create excessive instrumental familism, abrogate gender norms and forsake their nation to produce over-privileged, insufficiently filial and unpatriotic children. In some cases, as the child's failure attested, the maternal labour is simply futile. We have argued that these memoir/manuals mount a defence against such charges by rearticulating maternal labour and humanizing the children through localizing them as partial cosmopolitans, individualizing them as creative Americans or nationalizing them as filial patriots.

We argued, however, that the celebration of a remarkable mother and child invariably underlies the author's defensive and humanizing textual work. Indeed, to operate effectively as memoir/manuals, they must elaborate admirable and to some extent apparently imitable subjectivities. Thus, we offer these memoir/manuals as accounts of an emergent family form and practice – the goose family – that speaks to the considerable social and cultural tensions that animate neoliberal globalization and yet to which so many people aspire.

Our examination of the media context of PSA, namely of the cultural climate in which families adopt this particular educational strategy, makes a contribution to the

gendered analysis of mothers' educational migration across East Asia. We suggest that a gendered analysis must look beyond questions of women's family labour to the cultural scripts of that labour. We appreciate the cultural work of these memoir/manuals precisely because they recognize and talk back to these social critiques of class and gender.

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### Notes

1. Unless noted otherwise, Korean sources are our own translations. We have used the *McCune-Reischauer* Romanization system to transliterate Korean words and names. For personal names, the family name comes first followed by a space and the given name.
2. According to the National Assembly Library in Seoul.
3. The *kirogi appa* (goose father) phenomenon refers to the large number of middle-class families in which wives and children migrate for education while the fathers stay in Korea to work and support the family. For Koreans, geese, which migrate seasonally to mate, have traditionally symbolized marital fidelity. In goose families, the father characteristically uses his holidays to visit his wife and children overseas once or twice a year. Although it is difficult to predict the exact number of goose fathers, an article published in the *Korea Times* in 2009 estimated the number as between 30,000 and 50,000. In recent years, other types of 'bird fathers' have emerged. An eagle (*toksuri*) father has enough social and economic resources to visit his family whenever he wants. A penguin (*p'eng'gwin*) father, however, is, like penguins who cannot fly, unable to visit his family at all. Now, another term has emerged, that of the sparrow (*ch'amsae*) father who cannot afford to send his children overseas at all. The wide public circulation of these stratified bird images suggests the extent to which PSA is both mediated and stratified (Cho 2004; Goh-Grapes 2009; Lee and Koo 2006; Ly 2005).
4. Other migrant Asian households have comparable family arrangements. For example, in the Taiwanese astronaut family, the father lives and works in the home country while the wife and children reside in the host country; in Hong Kong, however, the children, known as parachute or satellite kids, remain behind in the host country while their parents live in the home country (Chiang 2008; Waters 2003).
5. For similar analyses of Japan, see Arai (2000); Driscoll (2007); Lukács (2010). For China, see Anagnost (2008); Hanser (2002); and Hoffman (2006, 2010).
6. We examined a number of books written in Korean, which we have excluded from our list of references because they are likely to be inaccessible to our readers. For the purposes of

this article, we have translated their titles into English. If readers wish to consult any of these sources, they should communicate directly with one or other of the authors. The books include: Chin, *You can be 120 per cent successful in pre-college study abroad* (Seoul: Supsok ui kkum, 2003); Choe, *Twenty years ahead of others: study abroad early* (Seoul: Easy Books, 2002); Choi, *How to follow a commanding goose mom's life in America* (Seoul: Carrot House, 2007); Ha, *No matter what, leave for pre-college study abroad* (Korea: Book Café 2003); Kim (ed.) *It is hard to be a high school senior in America, too* (Seoul: Chosun Ilbo, 2002); Kim, *Aim for Harvard rather than Seoul National University* (Korea: Mulp'ure, 2003); Kim, *Study abroad report from an eager mum* (Seoul: Kyongrok, 2006); Kim, *Goodbye, American elite high school! I am returning to Korea* (Seoul: Random House, 2007); Kong, *Vivid study abroad journal by elementary school student Kong Hyun Soo* (Seoul: Ulp'aso2003); Lee, *Chonguk: let's go to school in Canada* (Seoul: Waikeli, 2003); Lee K. S., *Study abroad journal by Mencius's mother in Canada* (Seoul, Korea: Hongik Books, 2005); Lee S. J., *What do you want to do? Lee Sojung's early study abroad story from Taech'idong to Canada* (Seoul: Uridul, 2005); Lee S. M., *Son, enjoy this wide world* (Seoul: Easy Books, 2005); Min, *This is how I sent my son to an elite American high school* (Seoul: Sisa Yong'osa, 2004); Min and Cho (eds) *Perfect students* (Korea: Chosun Ilbo, 2002); Oh, *Realize your dream with faith* (Seoul: Duranno Books, 2005); Öm, *Children, don't just learn English – become cosmopolitans* (Seoul: Nexus, 2003); Pu and family, *The study abroad success project of a fearless family* (Seoul: Öno Sesang, 2006).

7. The following are examples of such stories from a magazine entitled *Woman Sense*: 'Let's go to American elementary schools knowing exactly what's what' (March 2003); 'Four housewives who failed PSA and returned' (April 2004); 'Brave mother Yi Hyunjoo's PSA story' (September 2006).
8. Since the late 1990s, private, foreign-language and science high schools have emerged as alternatives to failing public education. These specialist schools, often criticized for being 'aristocratic prep schools', were considered an efficient route to elite colleges in South Korea (Han 2002). In addition, as college students sought an English education as a means to procure a job, private English institutions targeted college students and employees. In response, South Korean colleges initiated, or radically expanded, intensive English education (Brender 2005).
9. The demands placed on the South Korean family as a primary unit of survival (and on mothers as primary family workers in economically anxious times) are consistent with findings in *Global Networks* about the educational demands on mothers throughout East Asia (Huang and Yeoh 2005; Waters 2005; Yeoh et al. 2005).
10. On the Philippines, Hong Kong and Taiwan, see Ho and Bedford (2008); Ley (2010); Parreñas (2008); Tsang et al. (2003); Tsong and Liu (2009); and Waters (2002).
11. We found elsewhere that a PSA mother must both learn from the experiences of others and simultaneously already have enough acumen, skill and other personal resources to self-style a PSA course for her child. South Korea's popular media urge parents to 'listen to the experiences of others, advice from students and parents in the host country, and to the concerns of other parents, but ... [they] should not blindly trust them' (Chōn 2006, emphasis added). Another article, 'Only dead fish follow the flow of the river', warns mothers of the danger of following the paths of others (Kang and Abelmann 2011).
12. We are grateful to Nick Harkness for pointing out the Korean register of this title, and the English register of 'Jane' in *My choice, Jane's success*.

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