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**Our Place in Someone Else's House: Korean
Americans and Gendered Identity in Global/Local
Context**

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**OUR PLACE IN SOMEONE ELSE'S HOUSE:
KOREAN AMERICANS AND GENDERED IDENTITY IN GLOBAL/LOCAL CONTEXT**

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Abstract

In recent years, students of gender and migration have established that ethnic immigrant families and communities are sites of both oppression and resistance. Less is known, however, about how immigrant women respond to their “double-edged” lives; how, in light of cultural globalization, their responses are forged in a global/local context; and what these responses reveal about larger processes of assimilation and transnationalism. As Korean immigrants hail from a country that has had long-standing ties to the US via US imperialist projects starting in World War II, they are a fitting case study of the ways immigrant women in particular wrestle with global/local dimensions of “race”/ethnonationality and gender, of “tradition” and modernity. Drawing from in-depth, open-ended interviews with 32 non-immigrants in Seoul and 47 immigrants in Los Angeles County, Kim finds that globalized culture and US experience foster the women’s identification with white American marriages and husbands as more “gender-equal.” While the women desire these marital norms in part to approximate American “modernity”/“whiteness,” their Korean nationalism and sense of exclusion in the US foster hybridized identities. In contrast, the men counter women’s changes by clinging to more “traditional” Korean nationalistic identities necessarily rooted in patriarchy.

Damn jealous, those men. The Satan General and the Jesus God fight over me, she said, thrusting her chest forward. I am the arena of their power contest. And in their battle to possess me, neither has any pity for me. I just can't take it sometimes.

That was the day she taught me to find lost things, something she taught all her daughters, because, she said, a woman must always find her own way. --
Nora Okja Keller, *Comfort Woman*

Introduction

Students of gender and immigrant families have long established that family and community sites are not simply modes of patriarchal oppression but that they serve as vehicles for women's everyday survival and for their resistance to dominant society (Dill 1988; Espiritu 1997, 2003; Glenn 1986; Kibria 1993b). From this recognition of both the oppressive and supportive dimensions of ethnic immigrant families has emerged the question of how the women themselves respond to their "double-edged" lives (Kibria 1993b:250). Insofar as immigrant women actively shape ethnic institutions and their gendered foundations, the questions of what happens to their identities, of what they want and how they seek to get it, and of their negotiations of varied tensions, have been contested ones.

Western feminist scholars have contributed to the study of Third World women and their immigrant counterparts, contributions which have shaped the noted debates. Though feminists on immigration have critiqued the classic assimilation model for its neglect of race and gender inequality – in part by noting some of the downsides of migration for women (Deutsch 1987; Zentgraf 2002) – others have continued to use, in Aihwa Ong's (2001:114) words, a "Western development model" to understand these women's needs, wants, and identities. Western development discourse has continued to impose a "non-modern or modern" dichotomization onto the "non-Western woman," precluding analyses of the deeply-felt tensions between tradition and modernity with which this woman grapples (ibid.:114). Indeed, "modernizing" Third World women may not desire Western women's goal of individual autonomy or of freedom from family and community bonds (ibid.:116; Ong 1987), but may desire these ethnic "traditions" even in the face of patriarchal maintenance.

In addition, transnational gender scholars have deftly revealed the ways in which migrant women incur both costs and benefits as gender relations get reconstituted across borders (Fouon & Glick-Schiller 2000; Goldring 2001; Grasmuck & Pessar 1991; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994; Levitt 2001; Mahler & Pessar 2001; Pessar 1999). Specifically, these scholars have tended to show that women enjoy greater "autonomy" by way of their central role in migration and in the US household economy or that they suffer greater burdens of both job and home or that they experience some confluence of both. Their important contributions notwithstanding, these scholars have not, however, adequately interrogated the force of an unequal, racialized global economy and attendant cultural globalization on gender relations. Patricia Pessar (2001:582) aptly speaks to this limitation:

...[W]e require more research on how images, meanings, and values associated with gender, consumption, modernity, and the family circulate within the global cultural economy (c.f. Appadurai, 1990) and how these "ideoscapes" and "mediascapes" are interpreted and appropriated in varied sites by different household members in ways that either promote or constrain mobility (c.f. Mills 1997).

To capture the gender-contested realm of ethnicity from the perspective of immigrant women of color and within a global/local context, I present a case study of U.S. Korean immigrant women and men. Like feminist gender and migration scholars before me, then, I depart from a non-gendered understanding of "ethnic attachments," or the non-gendered grounding of ethnicization processes in shared origins, culture, and history (Glazer & Moynihan 1963; Gordon 1964; Greeley & McCready 1974; Min 1991). Rather, I show that while Korean women proudly maintain some dimensions of Korean culture, they also seek transformation of the "old" Korean patriarchal household in light of its reconfiguration in the US. But, as a global/local framework also shows us, the women's imaginaries about marital roles (and in some cases, household behaviors) begin reconfiguring while in Seoul, long before emigration. In examining this impact of American "ideoscapes," "mediascapes," and "ethnoscapes" (Appadurai 1990) on the women's

household gender ideologies, I take into account the racialized global economic *order*. That is, I demonstrate the ways in which US global superiority over South Korea – a vestige of imperialist and other globalization projects in Asia – has reshaped gender and family dynamics in this “Asian Tiger” (see Basch, Schiller & Blanc 1994).

Drawing on in-depth, open-ended interviews with Korean immigrants in Los Angeles County and secondarily on various types of interviews with non-immigrants in Seoul, my analysis reveals that American “ideoscapes” set the stage for women’s subordination of the Korean marital household to the more “advanced” US model.¹ And while the women’s critique is grounded in their aspirations for American modernity and whiteness, “tradition-modernity” tensions and contradictions abound in these processes. The women therefore express hybridized and situational identities as Koreans and Korean Americans. In contrast, the men seek after a more “either/or” configuration of Koreanness (even in the face of a hybridized identificational and adaptational reality).

Methods

Primary data for this study were drawn from 47 in-depth, open-ended interviews with first-generation Korean immigrants in Los Angeles County. Supplementary data were drawn from focus group as well as in-depth, open-ended interviews with adults in Seoul, South Korea, yielding a sample size of 32. To begin with the Los Angeles County sample, the informants were recruited from various ethnic, civic, and social organizations, businesses, churches, language schools, and from processes of snowball sampling (by way of as many separate and diverse starting points as was possible). Twenty-six of the informants were women while 21 were men. The age of the respondents ranged from 24 to 76 years, with 46 years as the median age. And reflective of the predominance of middle-class South Korean emigrants to the US in general, all but 2 ranked somewhere within the middle-class strata. The remaining 2 were working class (social class status was determined by self-description as well as by the author’s assessment of their [and their parents’] incomes and educational levels). The predominance of the middle class is important, as most of the Korean women’s ideals and concerns thus reflect middle-class notions of work in “private” and “public” spheres, those often counterposed to working-class women’s notions. All but 9 were married or ever married. Finally, the sample was about evenly divided into 2 major subgroups of “old-timers” (more than 5 years) and “newcomers” (5 years or less), as the latter’s memories about American “race” and gender phenomena would likely fail them less than those of the old-timers.

Supplementary data were also drawn from interviews with non-immigrant Koreans in Seoul, South Korea. They were recruited mostly from university campuses, businesses, social organizations, personal networks, and through processes of snowball sampling. The genders were evenly represented (16 women and 16 men). The age range was 20 to 79, with 26 years as the median age (reflecting the predominance of university students and young professionals). In contrast to the LA sample, all but 11 were unmarried or never married. And employing the same class categorization system used for the LA sample, I found that about 60 percent of the sample were middle or upper-middle class, while lower-middle-class or working-class informants comprised the remaining 40 percent. Logistically, all the interviews in Seoul and most of those in Los Angeles were conducted in the Korean language. While the Seoul focus groups were conducted by a research assistant, the author conducted the remainder of the Seoul and L.A. interviews.

Korean Gender and Family Structures

South Korea

¹ It is important to reiterate that I am delimiting my analysis of gender to the heterosexual, marital household. Furthermore, the thrust of the analysis here is to investigate Korean women’s constructions of US nuptial household gender dynamics and the manner in which they shape and texture the women’s negotiations of Americanization. The paper therefore does not seek to determine whether and how the gender dimensions of Korean women’s everyday lives actually have been transformed in the US context.

Koreans most popularly trace their people's history to the Korean couple who established the first kingdom called Kojoson: "Grandfather Tang'gun" (*Tang'gun Haraboji*), a legendary son of a god, and his unnamed female partner from a bear-totem family tribe (Korean Overseas Information Service, 1988:23 as cited in Hurh 1998). Koreans believe that the Korean nation is traced to this couple and is thereby an "extended family" united by one racial bloodline (Balibar & Wallerstein 1991:101). Irrespective of gender, birthplace, generational status, and cultural Americanization, then, Korean immigrants largely trace themselves back to their "roots" (*ppuri*) of Korea. Indeed, to claim oneself a *miguk saram*, an "American person" (a synonym for "white person," thus defying biology to some extent) serves to deny one's own blood, one's own "family" (see N. Kim 2003). Noteworthy is that such nationalism tends to persist among women despite their more symbolic belonging to, not direct agency in, the nation and body politic (McClintock 1997:90). Accordingly, the "mother" figure in Korea's historical trope goes unnamed, unmarked, crediting sole birthing rights, then, to Grandfather Tang'gun. Consider one of many typical statements on the historical origins of the Korean people: "Have you heard of the founding of our nation by our Tang'gun forefather?" (Mrs. Ra, 25, 7 months in US). Grounded in this historical narrative, Koreans' legislated system of patrilineage accords males the superior bloodline (Soh 1993), that which courses through the heart of the nation.

It is this patrilineal kin, not the individual, that is the basic social unit of Korean society (Hurh 1998:83). In accordance with Confucian-based relationships, wives are expected to subordinate themselves to husbands (to whose lineage she goes) while children (namely sons) are devoted to parents (namely fathers) by way of "filial piety." By virtue of their gender, all men of the same blood lineage are to be buried together, whereas the wife, as an "associate member" of her husband's lineage (*munjung*), cannot be considered a fellow "ancestor" until she has fulfilled her household duties as daughter-in-law, wife, and mother (Janelli & Janelli 1982).

Moreover, the South Korean state has concretized this system of household head succession and clan boundaries by way of the Family Law, a form of legislated patriarchal favoritism. This favoritism exists in spite of the constitutional acknowledgement of sexual equality established by the introduction of democratic ideology and other Western values to Korea. Although the constitutional amendment has diversified Korean women's roles in modern-day Korea, the Family Law has largely usurped the

amendment for the sake of preserving Korea's "beautiful and good customs (*mip'ung yangsok*)" (read: patriarchy) (Soh 1993:21). The system of male family headship has therefore persisted despite the weakening of traditional familism by rapid industrialization and Westernization and despite counter-pressure from women's interest groups (Lee 2001). Still today, only about a quarter of 30 to 59 year-old women in urban areas participate in the labor force, according to the 1990 Korean census (National Statistical Office, Republic of Korea 1993:1 as cited in Min 1998:38). In addition, most women quit their jobs upon marriage – often involuntarily and despite a college education – in order to assume their household family roles. Home, then, is still the woman's "proper place" (Hurh 1998:84) and changes are mostly cosmetic, indicating that there is little to no *fundamental* change in the Confucian patriarchal household structure (Min 1998:28).

Korean America

Immigration from South Korea since the Korean War predominantly has been woman-led and –centered, in large part because of war brides, military wives,² and nurses who have come, naturalized, and sponsored their kin under family reunification immigration clauses (particularly since 1976) (Park 1997). And given Korean immigrants' dependence on family for the function of their small businesses, men cannot afford to exclude or subordinate members of the wife's lineage in the US. As an economic necessity to small business success, then, Korean wives have forged women-centered kin organization in Korean American communities, or "...the centrality of women in the web of kinship linking together sets of households" (Yanagisako 1979 as cited in *ibid.*:112).

South Korea's marital ideologies and structures have influenced the formation of the Korean immigrant family insofar as families remain largely intact (nuclear and/or with extended kin) (Park, 2000). Yet, Park (*ibid.*) cautions against an Orientalist "model minority" view of the Korean American family. For one, her study of Korean immigrants in New York found that men typically complained about how women-centered kin organization mitigated patriarchal authority. And since the 1970s the more grave consequence of husbands' "inferiority complexes," racial marginalization, and declassed status has been domestic violence (*Korea Times* 10/26/93 as cited in Park 2000:159). It is therefore not surprising that Korean divorce rates have escalated sharply in the US. While in South Korea, 6.2 out of 1,000 women over fifteen years old are divorced, in the United States the figure for Korean American women is 36.8, almost a sixfold increase (though still nowhere near American divorce rates) (*ibid.*:174).³ However, despite Korean women's greater autonomy in the US context, it is important to note that it has not forged a radical overturn of gender relations and structures in the Korean American community (*ibid.*).

American Gender in South Korea

² In a 1982 article in *The Korean Central Daily News*, Tai Young Lee (cited in Park 2000) estimated that about 80,000 Korean immigrant women were interracially married. Given the small size of the Korean immigrant population in the United States at the time, Shin (1987:251 cited in Park 2000) conjectured that the vast majority of Korean immigrant women admitted under the category of "wives of U.S. citizens" must have been Korean women married to American soldiers formerly stationed in South Korea.

³ Park argues that the real figure may even be higher, as this rate is based on formally reported cases at the Korean Consulate.

“If Korea is a country for men, America is for women” – “She said”

Congruent with Park’s findings, the Korean women informants spoke out against South Korean/Korean American forms of gender subordination in the marital household. Driven not only by personal benefits, the women often expressed support for “gender equality” based on influences from and validation by American ideals. Specifically, these women conceptualized gender “equality” as an equal or close to equal division of household labor (two earners; fair assignment of housework tasks). Drawing on this conceptualization, many women pointed to their ability to work in the American “public sphere” after marriage – as women in the US did generally – as a gender-liberating act. Thus these predominantly middle-class women who had been relegated to the home in South Korea embraced the model of women’s paid, public work as liberating (Ong 2001). Had these Korean women come from working-class backgrounds, however, they likely would have rejected this Western model on the grounds that *not* having to participate in the labor force for once was instead liberating (ibid.).⁴ Owing both to American and Korean middle-class structurations, Korean immigrant women desired to be agents of the “public” sphere and/or desired a more equal division of household tasks.

In documenting this phenomenon, it is important to note how the women constructed the United States and its gender system *before* emigration. As evidenced by Koreans’ valorization of white American dominance while back in Seoul (see N. Kim 2003), forty-six year-old Mrs. Kang had always felt that Americans were the ones “capable of moving the world.” In like fashion, most of the Koreans time and again interchangeably used the terms “world,” “bigger world,” and “advanced country” with “America,” thereby constructing the US as the architect of what happened globally. Indeed, Miss Park’s view of American “freedom” for women as morally correct motivated her immigration in 1981:

In Korea they’re disrespectful towards women, so I wanted freedom here Because I, you know, because of my family, you know, my father, he acted like a king, he decided everything, he didn’t even allow, you know, us children’s opinions. It was miserable.⁵

Implicit in her statement is that America was more respectful to women and allowed them “freedom.” However piecemeal were the moves toward destabilizing patriarchy in South Korea, the recent female émigrés in particular pointed to American influence as the driving force behind the changes. As we shall see, many celebrated the changes while expressing frustration at its “arrested development” by unyielding South Korean men and by society in general. For instance, Miss Suh noted the forwards and backwards steps Korea seemed to be taking on the issue of patriarchal households:

In Korea, many more women are working after they get married. There are many such women. It is *becoming Americanized* However, in Korea, although there are women who are working because they want to work, it is still a society for men and that gives men priority. Men still usually make money and women take care of the household. It’s still like that in Korea even though women are working. (emphasis added) (27, 5 years in US)

Many also made reference to the fact that the young Korean generations, including liberal-leaning young men, were those instigating the shifts in marital gender roles and ideology. In this vein, Korea’s younger female population both tended to give gender equity a Western/American label and to adopt this label for themselves. Consider the critiques of Korean patriarchy and tradition by two female interviewees in Seoul (which, incidentally, were not considered unusual by other focus group members, male or female). One expressed, “...because gender discrimination is really unfair when compared with the West, I do not think Korean traditions are all that important.” The other concurred, “In a way, in Korean women’s perspective the gender roles in the West seem more fair So I’ve never been against international marriages

⁴ I am indebted to Yen Espiritu for this point.

⁵ So as not to reify researcher-informant inequalities and racial stereotypes and also for sake of clarity, the few narratives that were spoken in broken English have been grammatically corrected.

[marriages between a Korean woman and a white American GI or civilian].”⁶ To many Koreans, then, the “West” is white, revealing their conflation of nation and “race.” While not as forcefully unequivocal as the young, older South Korean women echoed similar sentiments. Often articulating both pride in their spotless houses yet woes over the limitlessness and timelessness of housework, 63-year-old (and middle-class) Mrs. Lim captures this ambivalence well. While on the one hand she told me that I was beginning to exceed a marriageable age (“No man will want you if you’re too old”) on the other, she said exuberantly, “It’s great that in America, women can make something of their talents. Like you [interviewer], how wonderful it is that you can become a professor!”

In short, many of the women, especially those in the younger age brackets, did not just come to appreciate the more “equal” American marital household upon experiencing gains in gender status in the US but had come looking for reinforcement of gender liberalism learned in the “homeland.” Thereafter, the women often crystallized their nascent or maturing gender ideologies by way of improved gender status in the US.

American Gender in Korean America

With some version of American gender liberalism in hand, the women put the importance of Korean marital “tradition” – with which they had long been indoctrinated – on trial. Counter to Korean society’s maintenance of patriarchal nuptial households, many recent female émigrés of all ages and class backgrounds fervently called for the death of patriarchy when asked what Korean traditions “should go.” And female immigrants who had been in the US since the early 70s opined the same, though they based their views more on US immigrant experiences than on pre-fashioned media imagery or on transnational “ethnic wisdoms.”

As noted, most women honed in on gender equality as a more equal division of marital household duties. For instance, Mrs. Min asserts her proclivity for dual-working immigrant households in response to my query about which “Korean traditions should go”:

Male predominance. It’s not the case here [in the US], but men tend not to do anything in Korea. You know both wife and husband work here in the US so they’re supportive of each other. However, there are many housewives in Korea, so men are superior over women in that way. Well, I guess Korea has its own ways and the US has its own ways, but there are some Korean women in the US who live like Korean housewives in Korea and I really can’t stand that.⁷ (26, 2 years in US, working-class)

As a career-minded doctoral candidate in the United States, Mrs. Song points to and deplores the ways in which Korea’s patriarchal system “stereotypes” and places sanctions on women like her who (attempt to) operate outside of it:

R: Oh, yeah. Like Korean men think that, you know, Korean women have to obey them. They have to take care of their husbands, that kind of thing. And Korean men totally have this stereotype about women, being not very efficient or.. and if they meet a very smart and hard-working woman they think she is very, um, in English they don’t have this expression but, “daega ssaeda?” (pejorative remark for strong, thus unfeminine, women)... They don’t want to see that.

I: And you think we need to do away with that and allow women to pursue careers or..?

R (interrupts): Yes! Yeah, definitely! (28, 3.5 years in US)

⁶ To be sure, these women were college-educated, one of whom attended the feminist-leaning Ewha Womans University (school’s intentional spelling). But my data, as we shall see, point to the adoption of American marital norms/roles by women across varying class and age lines. Also worth noting here is that many of the Korean women in this study supported “international marriages” – and to a much greater extent than the men – despite Korean society’s disdain for blood-mixing.

⁷ It seems that she puts this theory to practice, as during our interview her husband had sliced and brought fruit for us, upon which she gleefully rhetoricized: “Do you think I married well?”

Twenty-one-year US resident and outspoken Miss Park carped about Korean men's inability to change their gendered selves and trumpeted Korean women's transformation of their marital and familial roles, particularly as new labor force participants:

R: ...men never can change, because you know what? When Korean people come to the US, when they want to be rich but when they drop in class status, it's pretty difficult to deal with the circumstances they have, right? Same with the differences between men and women! In Korea the man is the king over there, right? They do everything they want, right? [I: You mean here too?] No, here they *wanna* do it, but the woman is changed. Because usually women never stay home, they go out, women have jobs, they make their own money, so why do they have to obey all the time, which is an unreasonable thing, right? That's why they say: "Let's get a divorce," like that. That's why it happens, so it's the same as the class issue. And young Korean American couples are all more Americanized. For those my age or older, men never change, you know? Do you know how many, the percentage of men hitting women? [I: Yeah, I think it's high.] Here, it happens all the time! [I: Yeah, so in some ways that's one difference you see between Koreans in Korea and, I mean, Koreans here, is that the women are different?] Yeah. Yeah, the woman is different. Because...since they have a chance to make their own money, they *wake up!* You know, they realize how valuable they are so, uh, the woman is changed, the man is not changed.

Not only does Miss Park point out that first-generation Korean men's contempt for women's changes translated into domestic violence, but that younger Korean American heterosexual couples – implicating young men – knew better because their gender views were "Americanized." Furthermore, most of the quoted women emphasized how Americanization partially exempted them from yet another Korean marital tradition that they found most objectionable: obedience to mother-in-laws as a rite of passage into the husband's family. Indeed, Mrs. Shin's disdain for the mother-in-law tradition inspired her to sway South Korean women in the direction of coming to the US: "I have told them [family members, friends] to come over because it's not that complicated here. Life is pretty simple here. I think it's better for women."

"Married to Tradition?"

Gender-nation-race: "If Korean men could be like white men?"

In light of Korean women's intimate awareness or internalization of men's "needs, aspirations, and frustrations" as representing the nation (Enloe 1989:44), these women tend to conceive of a crude dichotomy between South Korea and the US. That is, they construct a binary in which Korean men are seen as having created and sustained a national system of patriarchy while they believe (white) American men have established and sustained a national system of (greater) gender equality. Operating in this vein, none of the Korean women, not even those with more gender-conscious views, made reference to movement efforts by white American women or women of color as having forged greater gender equality in the US home, workplace, or elsewhere. This strongly suggests that the information and "mediascapes" these women receive are apolitical in nature and promote white men as frames of reference. Moreover, the women's interpretation of such information within culturally Korean parameters promotes views of white American men as the ones who largely make the rules on how relationships with women should be. Simply put, the women make a gender-nation-"race" association by attributing the liberal marital household of the US to the progressive ways of white American men.

This attribution frequently manifested itself in Korean women's construction of white men as ideal husbands and of Korean men as less desirable. It is important to note that this affinity for white men (or at least of their image) began in South Korea, also supported by survey data revealing young native Korean women's ranking of white husbands just under Korean/Korean American ones (Chang 2000). Moreover, that the women respondents were largely undeterred by the earlier-mentioned stigmatization of "international marriages" reflects the irony that women's greater ability to envision exogamous marriage is afforded by their subordinate status in Korea's patrilineal system. As subordinates, the women could consider the possibility of marrying out. Korean men's marriage to a white woman, on the other hand, could defame an entire patrilineage. This in part accounts for why 33.3 percent of foreign-born Korean American women outmarry while only 3.5 percent of their male counterparts do (both genders mostly

marry white Americans) (Fong 2000; see also Kitano & Daniels 1988). To be sure, there is nothing “free” about the women’s marginal relationship to the South Korean nation-state. Nonetheless, the women’s disdain for Korean patriarchy and their internalized ideals about white American husbands spurred their admiration for the following male icons. For instance, my research site of Seoul was peppered with posters of Brad Pitt and Leonardo di Caprio. Jeremy Irons, though a British actor popularized by Hollywood, was named several times by women in both contexts (some of whom did not know he was British). While 47-year-old Mrs. Jun deified Irons in *The Mission*: “He’s charming (chuckles)... He looks just like a saint in that movie!,” her 26-year-old daughter quips that her mother “didn’t have a chance with him.” Similarly, one Seoul female university student uttered “He’s hot” in reference to Keanu Reeves, whom she did not know was part Chinese.

While women expressed awareness of both the high- and low-points (cultural conflicts) of marriage with white Americans, nearly all of them, whether in Seoul or Los Angeles, constructed white American men as desirable husbands. For instance, Mrs. Ra considered such a mate to enjoy the gender reciprocity she witnessed in American movies:

R: But when I became a college student, I once thought about a foreigner [white person] because, as you know, it’d be different from being with a Korean man. The white men share the household duties with their wives equally, they know how to love their wives. You know it’s different in Korea. Even though times have changed, I thought that it was worth thinking about, worth considering, at that time.⁸ Because we see them that way in the movies and like that. They take good care of their wives... (25, 6 months in US)

Similarly, 57-year-old widow Mrs. An, a recent émigré, preferred her second husband to be white

American and not Korean “because it would be fun to share different cultures.” This came right after citing the “King” as a figure she had admired in her youth:

R: When I was young I remember listening to Elvis Presley’s songs. [I: You liked him?] Yeah... [I: So you listened to Elvis Presley’s songs?] Yeah, I like his songs, and he is good looking too! (chuckles).

It is highly plausible that her exposure to US media’s hyper-idealization of Elvis (by screaming, crying women as well) played some part in making intermarriage with white American men seem more “fun.” Indeed, even Miss Moon’s elderly mother in South Korea who had never ventured to the US was accepting of a white American son-in-law:

R: ...but when my mom calls me from time to time, she says that (white) Americans are acceptable too. [I: Oh, white Americans? So she mentions them and doesn’t mention like other Asians or other...?] Yea, since this is the US, she says living my life with a white American would be okay too. (38, 2 years in US)⁹

⁸ At the time of the interview, she was already married to someone she called a “Korean immigrant” though he himself was a 1.5 generation Korean American (one who immigrated at a young age). To support this, she drew from the fact that her husband embodied a mixture of desired traits: not being “too American” (e.g., speaking Korean) yet having more appropriately American gender norms. In the end, she felt that the racial/ethnic/national gap with white American men was too great.

⁹ It is very plausible that Miss Moon’s mother simply wanted her to marry soon given that at 38, Miss Moon had substantially exceeded Korean society’s view of a woman’s “prime” (typically 24-26 years). Yet, had her mother been really desperate, she would have said that anyone, not just Koreans or whites, was okay. I maintain, then, that her conception of whiteness as Americanness and her high estimation of this status undergirded her marital advice.

Thus, despite having lived all her life in South Korea, the mother is comfortable with a white American son-in-law. Moreover, Miss Moon implies that her mother does not consider Asian and other nonwhite men “Americans,” in part explaining why the mother may not have thought of them as potential mates in the US (or perhaps why she might hold some in low esteem).

These idealizations unfold against a backdrop of South Koreans’ intense focus on outer appearances, a pressure applied particularly on women in service of the male gaze. In this vein, a 26-year-old Seoul student named Hee-Soo asserted:

R: There is this thinking among Korean women that Korean men are the worst-looking Asian men, but that Korean women are the prettiest Asian women. [I: (pause) But how can that be, if the sons have beautiful mothers?] (pause) Hmm, that’s a good point. I don’t know, I can’t really explain it, but that’s what most all of us think!

Importantly, these narratives reveal the Orientalist roots of Korean women’s denigration of Korean men and their valorization of white men and of their own beauty. That is, white American men are good companions (“know how to love their wives”), are attractive, masculine/heroic, modern, and “fun.” In stark contrast, Asian/Korean men are poor companions (don’t know how to love their wives), are unattractive, despotic, traditionally backwards, and less fun.¹⁰ Furthermore, it is conceivable that Korean women construe white men’s Orientalist desires for Asian/Korean women (like Suzie Wong) as a partial response to Korean women’s “exotic” and exceptional beauty.

While the above-quoted immigrants had all married Korean men and had only toyed with the notion of marrying a white American (excepting the concrete preference of Elvis-admiring Mrs. An), other respondents had more seriously considered marrying former white American boyfriends. Mrs. Noh was one who decided against it in the end as cultural differences outweighed gender reciprocity in her case. And in the following narrative, though Miss Park did not make the direct link between white men and gender-sensitivity, notice here how her past refusal to marry a Korean man – largely because of her oppressive father – leads immediately into a narrative about her former white male partner, a “Swiss American”:

When I was young, I didn’t want to marry a Korean because I had a bad impression of my father, so after I had a relationship with a Swiss-American and we broke up, I looked

¹⁰ I am indebted to Anthony Chen for reminding me of the importance of Orientalism to the women’s imaginings of Asian men and white American men.

back at that and asked, “Why did we break up?” Because he’s Swiss-American, I realized later that “Oh!” I never understood his background!

Miss Park implies that her alternative to the Korean husband was a white American husband. And worth noting is that she later indicated that the cultural differences responsible for ending her relationship with the Swiss American turned her toward Korean men with whom she thought she would be more culturally compatible. Yet, at the point of her interview, she still had not found a Korean man with whom shared gender ideals could also be realized. Despite, then, the women’s ranking of white men as equal to or just under Korean men in the marital preference hierarchy, the women quoted here ultimately opted for Korean partners. Foreign-born Korean women’s preference for white American mates, then, sometimes had to stay in the realm of the imaginary in light of racialized cultural barriers.

Implications of (White) American Gender for Korea: “Forwards not Backwards?”

Like their male counterparts, many of the Korean women maintained interests in South Korea with the hopeful eye of improving their country’s status. Via news broadcasts, newspapers, and/or transnational networks, the women tracked South Korea’s movements on the world stage. But their prescriptions for change and progress were, in some cases, antithetical to those of Korean men. Principally, the women respondents exhorted South Korean and Korean immigrant men to follow the US model of the nuptial household and by extension, white men’s treatment of women. This exhortation did not stop there, however. The women articulated forcefully the idea that the adoption of the American gender system was, in effect, a *staple* of the Korean nation’s advancement. In other words, if Korea as a nation were to realize its goal of one day reaching America’s global stature, then it best lose its patriarchal relics and catch up to the US, the paragon of modernity. The Korean women therefore felt their gender liberation to be *central* to South Korea’s national interest and progress. This stemmed in part from their view that the nascent forms of gender-based Americanization/modernization in the “homeland” – e.g., moves toward a nuclear over an extended family structure, toward more women in the labor force, toward liberalized gender ideologies – had fostered better treatment of South Korean women.

Having earlier in the interview wished for the “disappear[ance]” of “that aspect of Confucianism...that is part of our roots (*ppuri*), the idea that men are superior deeply rooted in our heads,” Mrs. Paik asserted that Korea’s gender hierarchy reflected the “homeland’s” need to more closely approximate American modernity:

...[L]ike the idea that women can’t do certain things but men can, that kind of thing has to go. That just seems like it totally doesn’t match with *the rest of the world*, but because we still have it, you see how much people from my generation and background still think that way, the women have lived really hard lives. [I: Where?] In Korea. I *never* feel that in America (emphasis added). (56, 1 year in US)

Though by her statement it seems that Mrs. Paik has not encountered any Korean immigrant women who suffer heavier dual burdens of occupational and domestic work (Min 1998:34), important here is that “the rest of the world” and “America” are two sides of the same coin. Similarly, Mrs. An asserted that Korea’s Confucian system of “superior” men and “inferior” women had to be jettisoned to “change according to the world standards” (57, 8 months in US). Note, again, that the “world” is not other Asian countries where Confucianism has a stronghold, but denotes nations like the US where it has never existed as a formal system. Similarly, Mrs. Kang exhorts:

We should learn the good things about Americans. We shouldn’t just imitate their glamorous appearances, but also their private lives, their personal way of life, it’s obviously different from ours, this sort of thing we should learn from them. If we learn from them and live exemplary lives, Korea will become a better country. (46, 3 years in US)

In essence, Mrs. Kang believes that the nation of Korea will improve by Americanizing Korean people at the micro level, by emulating whites’ family and friendship lives that she implies have helped elevate the United States to the top of the world.

In what follows, Mrs. Pak and Mrs. Jang describe the destructive ramifications of Koreans’ resistance to women’s equality in the “private” and “public” spheres. As evidence of the way women’s talents are “waste[d]” in Korea, Mrs. Pak – proudly a registered nurse – condemns the practice of native Korean

women attending college not as a means to a career but as the means to marriage. In light of few career opportunities for women in South Korea, marriage is typically the most viable guarantor of a socioeconomic livelihood. And bride-hunting families' view that a strong educational background is a prerequisite for good wifehood is where college, much to Mrs. Pak's dismay, often enters the picture.¹¹

R: In Korea, even if you're a college graduate, after you get married you just stay at home, you "waste money and time," uh? [I: So you're saying that going to college is a waste of money and time?] The reason why women go to college even to this day is to meet a suitable spouse. I think it's still a little bit like that, maybe it's not as bad as in the past. I'm talking about the younger generation. So think about it, it's a waste of money and time, *also for the country!* And after they marry and have children, they don't do anything!! They don't do anything! (51, 26 years in US)

Therefore Mrs. Pak believes that South Korean society's domestication of highly-educated women wastes the latter's time and money that otherwise could have been invested in the labor force and thereby, in the nation itself. With a similar air of exhortation, Mrs. Jang asserts why Korea's traditional system of discrimination on the basis of "level and background" (implying gender) must be abolished or at least muted: "I mean you cannot get rid of that thought [bias], but at least you need to learn how to *hide* it at the bottom and work with it, okay? OK, just don't make it *so* obvious because it will kill people's relationships, it will kill lots of ah, good results that could've happened but because of that, don't happen" (47, 26 years in US).

Korean Men and Marital Gender Traditions – "He said"

While Korean women believed that part of Korea's advancement as a nation hinged on men's emulation of the American marital household – in essence, becoming like white American men – the Korean men could not disagree more. Rather, their desired view of a strong Korea hinged on Korean men remaining Korean men. Yet this itself depended on Korean women remaining "traditionally Korean" as well. Such a dependence on the women to retain Korean authenticity reflects Fournon and Glick-Schiller's (2001:542) notion that, "To the extent to which the family and home simultaneously are defined as women's domains and the site of national honor and virtue, when women do women's work, they become committed to the ideas and imagery that build the nation." As active transmitters and producers of the national culture (Yuval-Davis & Anthias 1989:7), then, Korean women and their domestic activities, beliefs, and identities enable men's/the nation's continued patriarchal reign. Subordination of women – through preserving Korea's marital household – was therefore the central way the men counteracted their inferiority to American/white male superiority. This was especially salient in light of American culture's "tentacle-reach" inside the homes of South Koreans and Korean Americans alike.

With specific regard to family issues, Mr. Sohn, an elderly old-timer immigrant, lauded the American polity as a "blessed democratic country" yet bemoaned the Americanization of the Korean family. Claiming family as "most important" to a "Korean identity," he lamented: "These days, they [the Korean immigrants] don't realize the importance of family relations. They've become more Americanized" (73, 43 years in US). Similarly, Mr. Han remained steadfast in his subscription to the patriarchal family system. Specifically, he stressed time and again that women's work outside the home signaled the demise of the Korean family and by implication, stunted immigrant success:

¹¹ I witnessed this myself in 1997 upon a visit to the above-noted Ewha Womans University. My native Korean friend and I walked by a large group of very sharply dressed women frantically applying make-up, fixing their hair, and generally beautifying themselves for what looked like a photo shoot. When I asked my friend what the women were doing and why the nervous excitement in the air, she informed me that they were taking their picture for the college yearbook which many families referenced to pick out potential wives for their sons. As how pretty the woman looked could be the very determinant of her life fate, we both noted that the nervous excitement made sense. Similarly in 2000, my Ewha-alum Korean language teacher showed us her yearbook picture and proudly informed us of the phone call she received from an interested family. It seems plausible, then, that despite South Korean women's increased workforce participation in recent years this bride-selection phenomenon has not yet died in Korea.

You know how women also have jobs? Because women have jobs, they think “You [husband] are not the only one who makes money, I should make money too.” Then he starts asking: “Where have you been until this late?” then the wife might say: “I had business meetings,” then he’ll ask: “Why do you go out this late at night?” or “Who is that man?” so there is this *man/woman* relationship problem and secondly that causes an *economic* problem within the family, so then troubles arise. Third, because they both work, because “mom and dad” both work, the children have problems. There’s no conversation within the family, so then problems arise, like the children taking drugs.¹² (64, 24 years in US)

Here he makes a causal link: women’s work outside the home ultimately leads to neglected children talking drugs. Following this logic, then, if the mother would only comply with traditional patriarchal roles, the family would be functional.

In a rank order of what was most important in life, another long-standing immigrant father and husband said that just under health (as one could not do anything unless one was healthy) was the relationship between husband and wife: “Because if you have a problem with wife and husband, your family’s gonna be no good, you know? You lose your wife, you lose everything. Of course, you’d still have money after losing your wife, but your living would be all ruined” (Mr. Jung, 54, 24 years in US). He implies that the loss of one’s wife meant the loss of the “women’s work” that bound the family together and that secured the man’s sound representation as the family patriarch. His view that losing wives would not eliminate income (“money”) implies that either wives were not wage-earners (which was true for the first part of his family’s life) or that they were not the higher earners. Hence, he believed that women’s roles should be as wives/mothers who depended on men for “money” (for a related discussion, see Glenn 1986; Kibria 1993).

Both men’s construction of women’s domesticity as the lifeline of the Korean family suggests that women, through unpaid housework and kinwork like organizing family rituals and socializing young children, are responsible for the strength of family ties (Espiritu 2001:423). Mr. Jung’s appeal for a maintained gender hierarchy is therefore not surprising:

R: ...respect for the husband, I think that’s good. [I: You like that?] I like that. We keep it! [I: You want to keep that?] Yeah but uh, the Americanized ones, they try to change it but I think that’s *not* a good way!

The following narrative, as much a behavioral enactment of sexism as a declaration of it, reinforces how Korean men maintain their paternalistic grip in the face of women’s gender empowerment in the US. In this fascinating exchange among 69-year-old Mrs. Gheem, her husband (who, with back turned, remained in the room throughout the interview), and the interviewer, the couple’s incompatible viewpoints on gender roles play themselves out:

¹² It is worth noting that he himself is divorced. As it was inappropriate to ask about his divorce despite his long, impassioned tirades about a woman’s place in the home, I can only surmise that gender conflicts facilitated or caused the break-up of his marriage.

R: There is another thing that my daughter told me; you know, my husband and I are old and we live together but we can't die at the same time. One of us will die first and the other will be left alone. Thinking about that, my daughter said that I always depend on my husband for everything, even filling out official documents. She said: "What if he dies first, how would you live alone?" America's totally different from Korea in the sense that people in America pursue a life that allows them to live independently. She always puts that idea in my mind saying that I have to learn those ways.

--Interviewee's husband (interrupts): That's nonsense!

R: I don't know why but..

--Interviewee's husband (interrupts): You do get to learn it. That's nonsense. People adapt according to their circumstances.

R: (ignoring him) To give you a simple example, like about writing a check to pay the rent; I learned it in [adult language] school. When I say that I have to know it and so I want to go over it again, he [her husband] doesn't teach me and just tells me that I can do it when the time comes, that I'll be able to do it myself when I have to survive on my own. But I think it'll be better if I learn it in advance. One of the students who sits beside me at school and who studies with me lives alone and she did it [check-writing] very well when we learned it. It was the first time that I'd ever learned it—I've never done that before at home. She said that I couldn't do it well because I always depended on my husband, and that she could do it well because she lived alone. (10 years in US)

It is clear that Mrs. Gheem is in a subordinate position to her husband as the more dependent and the less knowledgeable of the two. The fact that her daughter implored her to be independent and that her husband refused to teach her the fundamentals of survival in America (check-writing) could implicate him in an almost-"orchestration" of her dependence. Moreover, though she attends English language school everyday for several hours at a time, she noted having to do the brunt of housekeeping thereafter. It seems that her husband, like the other quoted male old-timer immigrants, had not liberalized but maintained or strengthened his gender ideology in the face of challenges to it in the US.

Culture

While unwilling to relinquish the Korean patriarchal family by becoming more like "gender-sensitive white men," Korean men, like the women, concede that South Korea should emulate the US political system to overcome its historical and ongoing economic/political struggles. Yet Mr. Han qualifies his profuse valorization of the "big country" with the "highest democratic system" unattained by "undeveloped" Korea as reserved only for the political—not cultural—realm. In responding to my query on his conception of Korean traditional culture, Mr. Han boasted:

In terms of culture, I think Korea is superior to America. Culture, I think there is no culture in America. But us, I mean Confucian culture, Buddhist culture, they're also cultures; but there is no culture in America. [As if talking to America, says in English:] "You are nothing!" They just made things in a splendid way, but the thing called *Asian* culture is great.

By revering Confucian culture – the keystone of Korean patriarchy – Mr. Han thereby constructs the greatness of Asian/Eastern culture in opposition to American/Western culture *in absentia*. Moreover, his proclamation, "You are nothing!" sounds like the kind of fighting words one would direct against an "enemy" of sorts, such as US racism and nativism.

Outside of household and employment roles, Korean women themselves were critical of American individualism, particularly as it defied Confucian age hierarchies and norms of respect. Thus some of the very women who censured Korean marital households and valorized American ones also censured American individualism and esteemed Korean forms of collectivism. A case in point is Miss Park, the most outspoken "feminist" of the sample in my view, who declared that the following was white America's greatest pitfall:

More ego. More selfish No matter what, before you have responsibilities, before you make your own money and have control of your life, I think until then, you have to obey your parents in a certain way. OK, you know, because with Korean food we usually eat lots of vegetables because we couldn't, you know, afford those kinds of things [e.g., meat, in the past]. Right now, young Korean families in the US and Korea eat totally like Western style. So also young parents spoil the children and give them *everything*, you know, without controlling them, but those kinds of things spoil the children and there's no respect.

Miss Park makes an interesting food analogy to elucidate young South Koreans' and Korean Americans' lack of respect for parents and their unsettling individualism. In this analogy, these youth had gone from the respectful children of pre-modern South Korea who learned to appreciate everything because there was so little to be had (no meat, just vegetables) to the spoiled children of the modern era who ate from the American cornucopia of plenty (e.g., McDonald's on every block) and thus lacked appreciation for anything and anyone.

Newcomers like Mrs. Shin (29, 6 months in US) said, on the one hand, that she desired the end of "the patriarchal system, things like wives having to obey husbands. There are lots of cases like that... and the younger people can't stand it." On the other hand, she expressed bewildered dismay at the following sight:

R: I've been taught to do things in certain ways in Korea since I was a kid, and when I watch those who were brought up here who don't act the same way as I do, I tend to think that there's something wrong with them and that they shouldn't be acting in those ways. Like I mentioned earlier about the kids, some of them are spoiled, but it just seems like that's just the way it is here [in the US] and I get a little confused by it. But still, I think they should do things like showing respect to the elders but they don't do it here.

I: I see, so you're saying it's because they were brought up in American ways?

R: Yeah! They don't even bow [to adults]!

While like the others, middle-aged newcomer Mrs. Baek appreciated certain aspects of American gender culture, she condemned what seemed like the cruel individualism of the American family: parents divesting themselves of financial responsibility for children after age eighteen. She said: "Americans and Koreans, there's a difference. If it was my child, I would support them to the very end, until I die, even if they were all grown-up and were adults, I would have to. Because that's how we [Koreans] have always done it, if we don't, then there's no way to prosper." Thus while I showed earlier that many women believed South Korea's advancement hinged on emulating American nuptial households, Mrs. Bahng also saw that the "motherland" could not wholly emulate American parenting norms and still survive.

(American Sexuality)

On the level of sexuality, Korean women seemed to be just as critical as Korean men of Americans' pre-marital sexual activities. In South Korea, while virginity until marriage generally has been imposed upon all – part Confucianist, part Christian influences – men are not constricted as tightly with the chastity belt as are Korean women. Therefore the women themselves internalize the gendered belief that women (more than men) should practice sexual morality. Take Mrs. Kong, a young woman who spoke out against gender biases but whose first assumption about a white American female exchange student in Seoul was of her sexual licentiousness. That this was also her *only* assumption further elucidates that, in her eyes, differences in sexuality were what set white American and Korean women furthest apart: "But after I got to know her, my image of her became really positive. She was really genuine and pure. It's because we Koreans think of white Americans as those who are really sexually immoral, you know?" Old-timer immigrant Mrs. Go shared newcomer Mrs. Kong's opinion: "Koreans are more conservative, more than Americans [whites]. Americans are more free with their sex life, but Koreans are more conservative." Similarly, while 25-year-old Mrs. Ra lamented Koreans' unequal (hence, "unAmerican") division of household labor, she at the same time appreciated Korean culture's more "sexual conservatism" in the face of American promiscuity. Upon articulating this, she concluded:

R: I think Korea is a more moralistic society. [I: Than here (the US)?] Right. ... I don't know whether I think that way because I'm more like that, but that's how I feel.

Implications for Identity

The Significance of Race, Nationhood, and Culture

Such musings about certain forms of Korean culture as more moral and “superior” than America’s reinforce the women’s and men’s ethnicization as Koreans. After all, these immigrants often considered their bloodline to be a purely Korean one, one vested with exceptional qualities as intelligence, diligence, collectivism, and morality. Importantly, these tropes are used, in part, to subvert white American racial “superiority” (Espiritu 2001).

Mrs. Gheem was one such proud Korean who believed that “[i]n the US we will always be discriminated against somehow, because this is not our country.” A sixty-nine year old wife, mother, and grandmother who had been in the US for ten years, Mrs. Gheem makes parallel her unfailing loyalty to Korea in world sporting competitions to familial loyalty:

R: Of course, Korea! [I: Always?] Of course. [I: Why always?] Because it’s my country, they’re kids (*aedul*) from my motherland. (chuckles) [I: But you’ve lived here long and you’ve gotten US citizenship...] Even so... I always cheer for Korea (chuckles). You know, your arm tends to bend inward (Korean proverb).

Suggestive of the familial-basis of Korean culture, Koreans use a word *aedul* literally meaning “kids, children” as a pronoun to describe the general third person. Using this terminology Mrs. Gheem conveys her loyalty to Korea by way of a proverb on the instinctive loyalty to one’s kin, as instinctive as the tendency of one’s arm to bend inward. Mrs. Baek’s response to my query “Do you think Korean cultural traditions are important?” also conveys that one’s identity is drawn from one’s true ethnonational culture:

R: I think so. [I: Why?] My Korean identity is in all of those things. Like in the traditions, not in the other things [modernized things]. I can’t forget them, especially the Korean language. If we forget it, we won’t be able to find ourselves, our identity. It’s really important for every nation. That’s why we all want to keep it [the culture] for a long time, until the very end (chuckles) ...because each country has their own identity, but if you forget that, then you lose your identity. (46, 3 years in US)

With a greater air of lamentation, Mrs. Kang believed that America’s predominance and influence over the globe meant that traditional Korean culture was the only remaining vestige of their “authenticity”:

R: As a matter of fact, I don’t think there’s anything impressive we can offer, we don’t have anything that will appeal to the people here [in the US]; so, uh, in the end, it has to come from our cultural legacy, the good things from our culture. [I: You mean, something traditional?] Yes, the traditional things, things that are Korean. I think these are the only things that these people [Americans] will be impressed by. After all these people are the ones who are capable of moving the world, so the only way you can impress these Americans is to show something unique about your country and wow them and make them feel that it’s unique and it’s something they don’t have, something they can’t do. We should show this to them. Everything else comes from these people’s ideas, so anything beyond that wouldn’t mean much to them.

In essence, Mrs. Kang believes that Koreans will become known and respected in the US by way of their cultural distinctiveness. She is resigned to the fact that South Korea cannot compete with the United States on the global scale, and thus believes that her “homeland” and its people will find their place in America and the “world” by forging identity and cultural politics. And she herself made efforts to this end, as she performed traditional Korean dances and shared Korean Buddhist teachings. Be that as it may, what are we to make of Korean women’s embrace of American marital households and its formation by white American men at the expense of Korean cultural authenticity, that is, Korean patriarchal tradition?

To address this question, Aihwa Ong’s (2001:114) concept of tradition-modernity tensions is extremely helpful. As drawn from the women’s valorization and denigration of both Korean and American cultural

forms, in this section I demonstrate the ways in which tradition-modernity tensions play out in the women's (and the men's) negotiations of Korean and American identities and their interstices. I start with Korean women's conceptions of American "modernity" via the realm of work outside the home.

"Whistle While you Work?"

In Los Angeles of the late 1970s and early 80s, Hurh and Kim (1984:128) found that the traditional division of labor strongly persisted in Korean families. In this vein, some scholars have found immigrant women's occupational work to burden them with the "second shift" of work at home (Hochschild 1989; see also Espiritu 1997; Hurh 1998; Min 1998; Zentgraf 2002). Yet, wage/salary-earning or independently entrepreneurial women typically report greater gender autonomy and life satisfaction (Grasmuck & Pessar 1991; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994; Kibria 1993; Min 1998; Park 1997; Pedraza 1991). As the latter labor-force categories – wage-/salary-earners or independent small business proprietors – predominated in my sample, the women tended to report positive views of occupational work, gains in status, and a more equitable division of household labor than they had in South Korea (e.g., Hondagneu-Sotelo & Messner 1994). As a result, Korean women expressed more affinity for, comfort with, and pride in their Americanized lifestyle of work outside the home. For instance, Mrs. Pak's Americanized views and identities were rooted in her greater gender autonomy as a career woman in the US and her subsequent disdain for South Korea's patriarchal household system. Contrary to first-generation immigrants' more typical equation of happiness with their children's success, Mrs. Pak traced her life satisfaction to her long-term work in the US as a registered nurse:

Yes, when I first got here, I just followed my husband here, and I raised my children here. And when I look at what's going on in Korea now, I think I made the right decision by coming here. I think I made the right choice, and I have a job here Women need to be happy with their own lives, have this sense of achievement...in their lives. It's not enough to just eat and spend the money the husband brings home. The "old generation" still thinks that that's the life of a woman, but I, because I have lived here, my thoughts have changed. (51, 26 years in US)

In the following statement Mrs. Pak equates her gendered "sense of achievement" with American modernity and progress. Most importantly, it is this equation that enables her identification as a "Korean American" and her exemption from the "Fresh off the Boat" ("F.O.B.") stigma that she attaches to most other Korean immigrants. As a nationalistic label often used by US-born or -raised Asian youth to mark nonAmericanized immigrants as "backward" and inferior (see Lee 1996), the "F.O.B." stigma is assigned to less *white American* mores (poor English; nonAmerican comportment). According to Mrs. Pak, however, "F.O.B." did not describe her:

R: Yes, I can be considered "Korean American." I'm not an "F.O.B." anymore, as the kids say (laughs). [I: F.O.B.!] R: (laughs heartily) Depending on how many years you've been here, Asians, especially Koreans, it's possible for them to feel that they're still more Korean, a Korean person. Me, I've lived in the US as long as I've lived in Korea... so starting from this year, I will have lived in the States longer. So, uh, I think a little differently than Koreans, I have a completely different value system.

As in the case of many of the women, Mrs. Pak's embrace of Americanization was tied to the more "advanced" and dominant white status consonant with it, further suggested by her use of terminology more frequently used by Americanized Koreans like her children. It is also suggested by her unflinching appropriation of the term "Korean American," a term which she, along with most of the Korean immigrants, typically used to refer to the younger Korean generations. In a similar vein, Mrs. Noh, who

believed that Koreans should maintain the “good aspects” of their culture, could not understand the logic behind her husband’s wholesale rejection of American culture, that of the most advanced society in the world no less. After all, she argued, what, then, “...was the point of coming to America?”:

In general...I think they [Korean men] should give up things that are too Korean in a way, things that are too traditional. My husband has this kind of traditional thinking, I mean...he tries to maintain Korean things, tries to make the Korean things stronger, so then I ask him, “Why doesn’t he go back to Korea, then? Why does he live here?” I ask him that. My husband says that while he lives in the US, he wants to Koreanize the Americans’ way of thinking,... but I think the opposite, that I should be Americanized since I’m living here in America. (31, 4 years in US)

The women’s reconfigurations of identity in the US therefore were centrally tied to the dual benefits of greater gender autonomy and the more modern/American status that it conferred onto them.

Korean and/or American?

Though still always “blood-Korean” as their nationalistic loyalties demonstrate, the women’s prizing of American modernity on issues of gender tended to foster their more “and/and”-oriented identifications (e.g., Korean and American; Americanized Korean; situationally Korean/American). As Mrs. Baek aptly put it: “In some ways the Korean way is better, and in some ways I feel that the American way is better, and I think it would be nice to mix that a little in our lives.” In contrast, the men were inclined toward a more “either/or” (e.g., just “Korean”) configuration with some, though little, concession that their identities had become precisely that mixture endorsed by Mrs. Baek. As suggested earlier, then, maintenance of the patriarchal household was a salient reason behind the men’s desire to assert only their Korean identities even in the face of more hybridized responses and adaptations to US immigrant life. It is therefore ultimately the women who more openly embark upon reshaping and reinventing their ethnicity as part of their engagement of Americanizing forces (see Conzen et al. 1992; Greeley & McCready 1974). Starting with the women, let us consider the case of Mrs. Jang. A highly satisfied data analyst who over a long period had worked her way up within a predominantly white company, Mrs. Jang’s Americanization was also rooted in a professional career she could not have had in South Korea. Based on her ability to exercise both Korean and Americanized situational identities at her mostly white workplace, she felt that “rather than constantly worry, ‘I’m an Oriental!’ or ‘Can I be American?,’” Koreans similarly should opt for a situational use of “ethnic options” (Waters 1990). To Koreans who had rebutted her by saying that whites still discriminated against “American-acting” Koreans, she maintained a very Americanized stance of individualism: “I’m not living in the USA, I’m living on earth okay? And I pick and choose whatever I feel like!” At times reminiscent of a motivational speaker, Mrs. Jang’s reasoning for the use of situationally-invoked identities stemmed from what she considered the perspicacious eye afforded by negotiating two cultures, redolent of Park’s (1950) “marginal [wo]man”:

Even though in terms of the job, the professional life, I like doing it [business] the American way 110%, what I am saying is that I’m not going to accept 100% American way. What I’m saying is that you *can* keep your flavor, your *real* flavor, Korean flavor like you’re going to have, you’re going to have the ability to *judge* this incident: “I love the *American* way, however *this* incident I think I’d rather pick the *Korean* way because it’s more delicate and more elegant and um more, you know, it’s a unique way of doing it.” And it could give me another special *flavor* of my personality to keep it the Korean way. You know what I mean? And you will be able to judge yourself *which* way you want to go. In other words, I want to keep both ways, but both ways have to be for a better way for the future. So, I’m enjoying *so much* being both ways, OK? I really enjoy being, living two different cultures and every minute you make a decision which one you want to choose.

Noteworthy is that her words echo Mrs. Kang's strategy of highlighting uniquely Korean

"traditions" as a way to uplift oneself and the "race" in the eyes of white America.

Yet, juxtapose Mrs. Jang's celebration of the utility of both Korean *and* Americanized identities and cultures with the following statement by Mr. Pak. Based on his racialized phenotype and immigrant status, Mr. Pak, an old-timer immigrant and American citizen, went so far as to reject even a "Korean American" label. He reasoned that it was "because white Americans' purpose of asking me is to find out about my ethnicity/nationality. Therefore, I say that I'm Korean." Notice that to Mr. Pak, expressing himself to authentic Americans (i.e., whites) as both Korean *and* American would go against their non-American construction of him. Moreover, he did not believe that his US citizenship, long US tenure or English proficiency could outweigh his racialized appearance that traced him to a country outside of America. In like fashion, other Korean men tended to construct their identities as transnationally Korean. Testifying to white Americans' external constructions of Koreans as "foreigners" and to the men's need for an undiluted sense of blood-Koreanness, 19-year resident and influential ethnic media figure Mr. Yoo stated: "Even though they pretend to be happy, Korean men are miserable here because they neither feel fully Korean anymore nor do they feel American. So when they get older, they worry about where to be buried and things like that."

In this vein, the interjections of men are quite different from Mrs. Pak's proud diatribe about her non-"F.O.B." status, Mrs. Noh's resolve to Americanize (at least in part), and Mrs. Jang's embrace of situational Korean/American identification. Rather, the men remained staunchly "Korean" by way of a transnational outlook that Mr. Yoo called, "Living with our eyes pointed to the Korea across the Pacific Ocean." Yet the men's linkage to the "homeland" necessitated Korean women's conformity to the gendered marital/family roles that defined the "homeland" (or the Korean household) itself. It is therefore not surprising how wed the men were to a Korean identity that hinged on rejection of the American household system. Like the other men who rejected an identity as a "Korean American," conservative Mr. Yoo made clear what side of the national fence he was on:

I: Do you sometimes lean more towards American culture since you live in America?

R: No, not really at all! I'm a Korean even though I live in America, a *typical* Korean. [I: Oh, what's a typical Korean?] How should I say? They are conservative and very *strict* and...they are also obsessed with their *family*. That's a *typical Korean*.

In other words, a "typical" Korean maintained the "typical" (read: patriarchal) Korean family, that is, one uncontaminated by American culture.

Similar in outlook, Mr. Bahng demonstrates his discomfort with an identity that incorporated both Korean and American elements, even for a second-generation Korean like myself:

I: As you learn about and adapt to American culture do you think you would think of yourself as a Korean American?

R: I always tell people that I'm Korean. [I: Why is that?] I look Korean.

[I: But, then again, I (a second-generation Korean) look Korean too, don't I?] You should say that your roots are from Korea. (46, 7 years in US)

Thus despite Mr. Bahng's valorization of the US as the "greatest country," he instructed me not to take on a hyphenated Korean identity. Drawing from a cultural repertoire of collectivist parenting, Mr. Bahng felt compelled to parent not just his own children but "the nation's" children like myself, lest another potential repository of Korean tradition be lost to the force of Americanization.

To be sure, a few men were more candid and realistic about the fluid, hybrid, and/or situational nature of their identities in the US. The important distinction to underscore here, however, is that the women tended not to express "misery" or a sense that they were "less Korean" for having adopted or "folded in" American cultural ways. Counter to the men's sense of an identity crisis, recall that long-time resident Mrs. Jang's calls for hybridized or situational invocations of Koreanness and Americanness did not in any way weaken one's "real" Korean "flavor." Rather, Koreanness itself became "better" by incorporating its virtues and those of American culture. Recent émigré Mrs. Baek (46, 3 years in US) similarly asserted that modifications to Korean culture as necessitated by US immigrant life did not negate one's Koreanness: "I'm merely throwing away the Korean way of life that needs to be thrown away, the person inside is still

Korean.” In light of the women’s fuller embrace of changed identities relative to the men’s penchant for uniformity, it is not surprising that transnational or “international commuter” marriages (Min 1998) are often forged by women’s desire to stay in the US and men’s desire to return-migrate. Yet, hybridization does not negate, to some extent, contradiction. As with Ong’s (1987, 2001) contention that Third World women may not prize freedom from family and communal bonds, Korean women enjoined for more equal nuptial households without demanding complete “independence” or “autonomy” from men (see also Park 1997). For one, all of the women respondents desired marriage to a man. As another example, Mrs. Ra did not seem too conflicted over the fact that her individual desire to live with her family in Seoul for a year or two had to be subordinated to the needs of her in-laws in the States (in large part because of patriarchal in-law duties): “...because in the end, I have to adjust myself to life here anyway, so I’ve changed my mind Plus I’m afraid that if I keep going back and forth to Korea, my in-laws won’t like it, so I should stay here with them.” Similarly, though Mrs. Du advocated women’s work outside the home, she also felt that certain patrilineal family traditions should be maintained:

My brother is a *jang son*. That means that he’s the oldest son of the oldest son of my grandfather [the oldest male grandchild] and so because of that, he has a lot of family responsibilities. Because I’ve grown up watching this, I mean, ever since I was little I’ve always been taught this old family system, this traditional form of the patrilineal family, so I think it’s somewhat important. (24, 6 months in US)

Korean women’s identifications therefore may reflect unresolved contradictions of tradition and modernity as much as they signal neater resolutions of them (at least relative to Korean men). In this vein, Mrs. Suh’s response to my question on whether a woman’s life in the US was easier seems rather fitting: “I don’t think it’s necessarily easier. I don’t think it’s easy, but a woman’s life in the US *looks* much easier, it seems more convenient compared to women’s suffering in Korea from the traditions and Confucian ideas that have been passed down.” Thus while the life of a Korean American woman was not “easier” per se, perhaps the woman’s ability to redefine herself as a result of US immigration made lighter the gendered burdens.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have identified 3 key underpinnings of Korean women’s willing Americanization/modernization/whitening of their marital identities and roles in the US: 1) dissatisfaction with the Korean patriarchal marital household; 2) the congruence of pre-migration idealizations of white American marriages and husbands with certain post-migration gains in gender status; and 3) the belief that South Korea’s adoption of the “modern” white American household would mean the country’s elevation within the global racial and economic order. My findings reveal that as a result of global Americanization the women perceived overwhelmingly, often before emigration and without actual experience, that life in the United States granted women more “freedom” (their word of choice). While this was especially true of the younger cohorts who recently emigrated, middle-aged Korean women (newcomers and old-timers alike) also subscribed to and/or enacted this gender ideology. On balance, the women firmly believed that Korean patriarchy had to be jettisoned to catch up to “the world,” i.e., the US. More importantly, they asserted that Korea’s global advancement hinged not just on political imitation of the US but on *culturally* emulating white Americans’ marital household structures. By implication, then, these women opted for and embraced an Americanized form of Korean identity not just because of the gender gains consonant with it but because of its conferral onto them of a more modern, white-approximating, and non-F.O.B status-claim. And in an ironic twist, it was women’s “inferior” status within the South Korean nation-state that facilitated their gendered Americanization and their greater comfort with certain adaptations of it. In contrast, the men – namely those of long US tenure and hence, long histories of marginalization – resolved to maintain traditional Korean patriarchy in the face of challenges to it by the women and by mainstream America. It was this resolve that helped strengthen and fortify their transnational Korean

identifications. Yet, it was also these ties that bred men's struggles over such questions as to where they really belonged, how often to visit Korea, and where ultimately to die and be buried. Indeed, the women's sense that they could Americanize the Korean household without mitigating their own nationalistic, transnational Korean identities did not come without men's traditionalist backlash or the maintenance of patriarchal duties. This study therefore lends itself to those which argue that Korean American households have *not* been "gender-revolutionized" (Park 1997; 2000). Furthermore, the women's Americanization along gender lines came at the expense of reinforcing (Orientalist) ideologies and practices of white male superiority. Indeed, the women's idealization of white men as having established a system of (greater) gender equality without strong consciousness of American women's role in forging it,¹³ ultimately services white American men's extant forms of domination (Espiritu 1997).

At the same time, the women's reconfigured gender identities did not negate their criticisms of other American gendered norms (e.g., sexual promiscuity, individualism) or preclude their valorization of other Korean ones (e.g., sexual morality, collectivism). This in large part accounts for why the women still chose to maintain, enact, strengthen, and hybridize their Korean cultural "flavors" – their Korean identifications – as opposed to extricating themselves completely from "tradition." It accounts for why in the process Korean women articulated certain contradictions and tensions, those which could be interpreted as the result of both resolved *and* unresolved negotiations of tradition and modernity, of who they thought they were and could be. In this sense, the women's hybridized and situational identities potentially reflect the "bifocality" that Rouse (1991) found among Mexican immigrants, whereby Korean women's newer gender roles enabled them to view the world simultaneously through different types of lenses. In other words, the Korean women desired Americanization in terms of marital household duties while simultaneously remaining true, sometimes in contradictory form, to Korean "homeland" traditions of collectivism, female sexual morality, and familial loyalty (see Conzen et al. 1992; Levitt 2001).

What also tells a crucial story is that none of the women identified themselves as unhyphenated "Americans" nor did any waver in labeling themselves racially/ethnically "Korean." That is, the women's conception that they had Americanized their gender identities ultimately did not and could not foster their status as unqualified "Americans."¹⁴ Rather, the "American" status-claim was the province of whites, *miguk saram* ("American/white people"). This response throws into relief Korean immigrants' allegiance to the "homeland" by way of nationalistic, transnational identities (Abelmann & Lie 1995) and their subsequent reification of the Korean nation-state. It also illuminates the *exclusionary* properties of American cultural citizenship despite stereotypical model minority eulogies of Koreans and other East Asian Americans (Ancheta 1998; C. Kim 1999; N. Kim 2003; Lowe 1996; Tuan 1998; Wu 2002; see Ong 1996). Thus while the women identify with what they consider to be the white-male built, female-friendly American "house," they do so *not* as "American women" but as self-invented modern *Korean* women.

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¹³ Let alone Asian American women's historic (and ongoing) role in forging better opportunities for all Asian women (and men) (see Hune 2000).

¹⁴ I am indebted to Sonya Rose for reinforcing this connection to me.

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