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Women's Class Mobility and Identities in South Korea A Gendered, Transnational, Narrative Approach

NANCY ABELMANN

IN EXAMINING POST-WAR SOUTH KOREA, we cannot but be struck by the rapid decrease of farm work and the dizzying increases in urban production and petty-entrepreneurial work over the course of a single generation. It is remarkable, for example, that from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s the farming population declined by almost 50 percent. Indeed, South Korea is an exemplar in the development industry and a popular example in the annals of development studies (Amsden 1989). Sociologists, however, have reached little consensus about the meaning of these structural transformations and the nature of their effects on individual and familial trajectories. In consideration of the reorganization of the labor market, even some of the most basic numbers are debated because analysts do not agree on how to characterize and classify post-Korean War jobs. Particularly contested, for example, are the boundaries between clerical workers and manual laborers, petty entrepreneurs

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and informal economy workers, and capitalists and upper-level white-collar workers (Hong and Koo 1993).¹ Although sociologists of South Korea seek to understand employment in the context of society's evolving socioeconomic realities, they remain limited not only by a lack of quantitative consensus but also by gender and production-focused biases of their primarily statistical measures. Also compounding the situation is that South Korean sociology, perhaps because of its long-standing orthodox Marxist bias, has paid relatively little attention to the study of social mobility. This paper departs from the limitations of deriving class identities, social history, and social life from static maps of men's productive labor.²

In this paper I develop a gendered, transgenerational social mobility perspective on South Korean class identities and horizons. I use "class" here in the Weberian sense such that a social class is made up of "the totality of . . . situations within which individual and generational mobility is easy and typical" (Weber 1978, 302). In this way, mobility boundaries (and people's sense of them) are central to the distinction of social classes. As Grusky and Fukumoto (1989, 227) argue, "[t]he mobility table itself becomes a 'map' of the stratification system, with the patterns of inter-occupational exchange serving to reveal the major cleavages and class divides" (see also Crompton 1993).³ Class horizons refer to a person's social mobility desires for herself and her children. A person's current class identities are in part fashioned through these desires, and thus through the realm of the imaginary. As Arjun Appadurai (1991, 200) argues, people constantly imagine other life possibilities.⁴

This paper's approach to class demands attention to three concerns: the transgenerational context of people's lives, including their families of origin and

¹The demarcation of these boundaries is problematic not only for sociological studies of South Korea but is also at the heart of both neo-Marxist and neo-Weberian debates on class in general (Crompton 1993, 90–91, 191). We can observe these debates for South Korea through several numerical contests. For example, Hong Doo-Seung and Kim Yŏng-mo calculate considerable increases in the numbers of the new middle class (Kim records increases from 6.9 percent in 1960 to 17.3 percent in 1980; similarly, Hong notes increases from 6.6 percent in 1960 to 17.7 percent in 1980 and 19.8 percent in 1990); however, orthodox Marxist Sŏ Kwan-mo records an increase of only 4.3 percent in 1960 to 8.7 percent in 1980. On the other hand, Sŏ's estimation of the growth of the laboring class is much more dramatic than that of Hong and Kim (Hong and Koo record laborers at 22.6 percent in 1980, in contrast with Sŏ's figure of 37.2 percent) (Hong and Koo 1993).

²This paper is part of a larger project to redress these shortcomings through the analysis of women's personal, familial, and transgenerational social mobility stories. For the larger project I conducted open-ended interviews in Seoul with women who were in their late 50s and who belonged to a wide class spectrum. I interviewed each of my ten key informants from eight to fifteen times in sessions lasting from three to six hours. I chose this generation of women because they came of age during times of great social dislocation and experienced the tremendous structural changes of post-War Korea during the vital years of their adulthood, yet are still young enough to continue to have some hand in class reproduction through the education and marriage of their children. In our interviews, I explored the ways in which these women consider their own social mobility in relation to that of their immediate kin, particularly their own and their husbands' siblings. See Bertaux (1995, 75–78) on the history of sociocentered (vs. ego-centered) genealogies.

³I follow those neo-Marxists and neo-Weberians who pay attention to the nonmarket aspects of class, including both consumption and expression, and who consider the interrelationship between class and status (Crompton 1993, 131; Goldthorpe 1980).

⁴See also Tamara Hareven (1982, 359–63; cf. Bertaux-Wiame 1993, 50) on the concept of "life plan": "a wide range of goals and aspirations around which an individual or family organizes its life." In another idiom, Daniel Bertaux (1995, 78) writes of people's "*champs des possibles*" ("fields of realistically possible life courses").

childhoods; women as critical agents in the production of family culture; and the narration of class mobility and identities. A transgenerational approach to social mobility pays attention to the particular class cultures and resource networks of families over time. In this way, I take up families not as uniform social entities but as social spaces (comprised of people and cultures) through which class identities are transmitted (Bertaux and Thompson 1993, 7; Thompson 1981, 297 and 1993, 32).⁵ As Paul Thompson (1993, 15) argues, “despite a general recognition of the importance of parental influence and other familial factors both in achievement and in the definition of social status, investigations of social mobility have been almost exclusively focused on statistical studies of *individual* occupational mobility.” Thus class identities are developed from and sometimes in reaction against family (of origin) experiences.⁶ And these experiences are subjectively remembered and recuperated in adult life and desires (Spence 1991, 236; Steedman 1986).⁷

A transgenerational, social mobility approach to class necessitates the inclusion of women because they are critical to the culture and reproduction of families (Bertaux 1995, 79). The inclusion of women in discussions of class and social mobility demands much more than merely adding women’s labor force participation to the picture; rather, women must be appreciated as critical agents in the production of family class and in the work of class mobility.⁸

Finally, because this paper’s approach to class identities and horizons builds on people’s subjective experience, it pays close attention to personal narratives (see also Abelman forthcoming a). That is, I consider *how* people understand the workings of transgenerational social mobility. Daniel Bertaux (1995, 85–86) notes that during times of considerable social mobility, family stories “stimulate the sociological imagination” and are thus “loaded with sociological insights.”

Before proceeding with theoretical and historical discussions, I briefly introduce Mrs. Kang,⁹ a 58-year-old woman whom I discuss at greater length later in this paper, in order to sketch the challenges of understanding class in South Korea. Like most women of her generation, Mrs. Kang belies easy placement in South Korea’s contemporary class cartography. It is not that Mrs. Kang or the women of her generation are anomalous; rather, in order to capture the sociohistorical specificities of their mobility trajectories and class identities, we need to refocus our analytical lens. Upon cursory inspection, Mrs. Kang (with her husband) is a propertyless laundress whose observable living quarters and life-style are by most standards humble for late-twentieth-century South Korea. Nor are her monthly earnings after rent anything that would challenge these first impressions; nor again would her educational attainment—both she and her husband are unschooled. Mrs. Kang’s class location

⁵See Bertaux (1995, 71) for an elaboration of his “social genealogies commented on and compared” methodology.

⁶See also Bertaux (1995, 73) on infancy and childhood “transmissions” that take place in the “longue durée”: “They operate little by little in everyday practices that often escape consciousness, and with slow motion effects that only become visible after periods measured in years and even decades.”

⁷In a similar vein Bertaux (1995, 83) articulates “family memory fields” (*champs mémoriels familiaux*) that take shape in particular cultural and historical milieu.

⁸Joan Scott’s (1988) feminist historical interventions insist that our revisions should not only include “women” as historical actors but also that we should examine the gendered character of social institutions and ideologies (see also Ortner 1991 and Rapp 1982).

⁹I use “Mrs.” here to refer to women’s married status. It is, however, relevant to note that in Korea married women continue to use their father’s surname and that there is no form of address which corresponds exactly to “Mrs.”

and identities, however, become considerably more complicated when we take a transgenerational look at her story. We learn that her father had an elementary school education, an elite pedigree in those days; that three of her four brothers are college graduates, putting them in the privileged educational minority of their times; and that all of her three sons began college—a considerable accomplishment for the sons of a modest laundress.

In the context of these educational trajectories of her own patrilineage and of her male offspring (she has no daughters), Mrs. Kang's productive life seems anomalous. But the picture gets more complicated when we learn more about those male kin—about their own horizons and limits. Her father identified himself as a *yangban* (referring to an association with a gentry-like lineage) but worked mostly as a common urban laborer. Mrs. Kang's one brother who did not finish college faltered until he emigrated to the United States, where he now runs a not-so-successful laundry. Similarly, a generation later her one son who did not finish college decided to emigrate. She is extremely worried that her youngest son, although soon to be a college graduate majoring in education, will be unable to find work as a teacher because jobs are scarce and seem to be reserved for those with connections and bribe money. The path to and promises of education must be examined at the crossroads of family specificities (e.g., family structure and the distribution of resources) and historical contingencies (e.g., the value of educational capital and labor market composition).

In thinking about the class positions and identities of Mrs. Kang or her family, it is important to consider both theoretical and popular discursive effects that have obscured the contributions of her work and the influences of her family of origin's class culture and resources. I argue that in the case of South Korea, social scientific and popular discourse combine to obscure the very parameters that make for a sociohistorically nuanced understanding of class.

I now turn to a background discussion of post-Korean War social mobility in order to understand the empirical and narrative contexts in which people make sense of their own life trajectories. I then expand upon and challenge this history by paying attention to women as social actors, and to the critical impact of gender norms and ideologies. Finally, I return to the social mobility story of Mrs. Kang.

South Korean Social Mobility History

The Developmentalist Bias

Equality of opportunity is a powerful justification for inequality.

(Crompton 1993, 7)

In both scholarly writing and the popular imagination there has been a tendency to overestimate equality of opportunity in South Korea's post-Korean War era. That is, a "developmentalist bias" makes facile assumptions about individual mobility trajectories and well-being on the basis of South Korea's dramatic "structural mobility"—the composite of employment shifts that emerge with urbanization and industrialization. This bias is reflected in the "structures of feeling" (Williams 1973)—the collective representations and sensibilities—that fashion the present. In turn, class identities and horizons are fashioned at the crossroads of collective mobility histories (particular structures of feeling) and personal mobility stories. A brief discussion of the general study of social mobility will help me elaborate the parameters of the developmentalist bias in and for South Korea.

The general study of social mobility is divided as to how to understand the meaning of the sectoral redistribution of employment stimulated by industrialization (structural mobility). Broadly, theoretical positions cluster around two main hypotheses. The first, purported by the so-called modernization or industrialization theorists, maintains that increases in structural mobility lead to a greater openness of society; its proponents argue that there is net mobility (after correcting for structural mobility) because of increases in education, mass communication, urbanization, geographical mobility, middle-class work, and the decline of required ascribed attributes for employment (Kim B. 1993, 22–31; Kurz and Müller 1987; Lipset and Zetterberg 1959). The second hypothesis, known most widely as the FJH Hypothesis (Featherman, Jones, and Hauser 1975), argues that in spite of the structural change shared across the capitalist industrial economies, there are no *real* increases in people's mobility chances; that is, people's relative mobility chances remain static over time. Critical for these theorists, whose research is wholly statistical, is the constancy of cross-national findings.¹⁰

In the case of South Korea, a state-promulgated and state-centered developmentalist bias echoes the modernization/industrialization perspective. However, many aspects of social life—particularly in recent years—have fostered popular perceptions closer to the formulations of the FJH Hypothesis. My own survey of the sociological literature on social mobility in South Korea suggests that there were relative mobility opportunities in the immediate aftermath of the Korean War, but that these diminished over time. However, in order to grasp the popular sense of mobility opportunities over the post-War era, it is important to pay attention to the long-lasting effects of these early mobility opportunities. We will see this at work in Mrs. Kang's sense of her own and of South Korea's more general mobility history.

The South Korean developmentalist bias builds on several assumptions: first, that structural shifts represent a vast extension of mobility opportunities as people have left the agricultural sector for one or another urban (and often industrial) destination;¹¹ second, that the individuals and households comprising these sectoral shifts have been in aggregate “upwardly mobile”; third, that these shifts correspond to increases in mental labor (i.e., white-collar vs. manual or blue-collar labor) that require educational credentials such that these sectoral transformations both build on and foster widespread educational opportunity (Chŏn and Kwŏn 1991, 532); and fourth, that these shifts are predicated upon and fabricate a society that is not held back by rigid status hierarchies that prescribe particular productive lives and class habitus to people. In sum, there is a popular and scholarly tendency to imagine the contours of individual mobility trajectories and meanings from the fact of dramatic structural mobility. Although this tendency to apply aggregate assumptions to the social life of individual and family trajectories is problematic, it is critical to consider the effects of this portrait on class identities and horizons (cf. Sewell 1985, 268–69).

¹⁰There are, however, researchers who have argued for the particularity of national cases, including Byoung-Kwan Kim (1993) on South Korea (Kurz and Müller 1987).

¹¹In this vein, Nam Ch'un-ho (1988, 85) warns, for example, that to conclude from the dramatic shrinkage of agricultural labor and the increases in industrial production labor that rural migrants to the city uniformly joined the ranks of the urban industrial sector does a tremendous injustice to the enormous variety of the experience of rural exodus. Kim and Topel (1995, 229) similarly argue that South Korea's manufacturing growth was achieved by hiring new entrants into the labor force, while “migrants from agriculture entered the nonmanufacturing sector, replacing the young workers who were hired into manufacturing.”

This developmentalist portrait of South Korea as an open society relies on particular social understandings of the engine and timing of social and economic transformation. There are several sociohistorical breaks that are posited to have enabled various aspects of the transformation, including the end of Japanese colonialism (1945), the Korean War (1950–53), land reform (1949–50), and the rise of “modern” social relations. The Korean War, a colossal national tragedy, is an easily identifiable watershed because its death toll, destruction, and dislocations refigured the political, social, and economic landscape (Kendall 1996, 203).¹² Taken together with the end of colonialism, the War marks a threshold to modernity, signifying the end of fixed social and spatial ascriptions. In addition to the refuge of people from local ideological strife, there was the demise of long-standing status distinctions both because of class struggle and the material destruction of the markings and trappings of these distinctions—the records and accoutrements of the rich. The War memory turns on the belief in collectively shared impoverishment. Indeed, it is true that only a small minority went untouched by the dislocations and deprivations of this War.

Land reform, which eroded the holdings of the largest landlords and turned large numbers of dispossessed peasants into independent farmers, is also critical to the public story of the erosion of village status hierarchies and the increases of economic opportunity (Lie forthcoming).¹⁴ There is a widespread sense that historical processes converged to engender “modern” social relations that eliminated the excesses and exploitations of premodern social hierarchies. That is, this modern era “liberated” national subjects who could exercise their will to speed freely to the vortex of South Korea’s vital economic development (Pak M. 1995, 536). I submit that although we need to pay attention to the ideological effects of this developmentalist portrait—knowing that these have in part authored critical structures of feeling—we must remember that they obscure important continuities that prevailed in the contemporary era. Presumed watersheds are often permeable and individual trajectories cannot be fully gathered from aggregate statistics. This paper’s findings thus challenge us to be mindful of critical contemporary links to the past.¹⁴ In Mrs. Kang’s case, although her father’s early rural emigration did not translate into steady factory work in Seoul’s burgeoning industrial sector, his pre-Liberation and pre-Korean War class and educational capital nonetheless affected his children’s achievement. A transgenerational, gendered, narrative approach to class identities reveals social historical processes that are otherwise easily obscured. I turn now to some observations on mobility over the post-Korean War era.

Social Mobility in South Korea: An Overview

[In the United States] the change in life situation had a good deal more to do with war-generated prosperity and the business cycle than with individual talent or effort;

¹²Byoung-Kwan Kim (1993, 247) describes the destructive effects of the War: “Not only human lives, but also infrastructure, traditional residential arrangements of villages, industry structure, culture, and social order, including traditional rules that had shaped individual work lives, were destroyed by the three-year war.”

¹³The promulgation and efficacy of land reform, however, were not entirely uniform or successful (Abelmann 1996).

¹⁴See Cho H. 1992 for discussions of contemporary college students’ sense of their links to the past.

but the important question is how it was (and still is being) interpreted, especially by parents to their children.

(Elder 1974, 296, emphasis added)

Fragments of the post-War South Korean story enable us to sketch a portrait of collective social mobility that can help us make sense of personal mobility histories as they take place and structure consciousness amidst ideologies or fictions of mobility.

I consider two main phases to the post-Korean War social mobility history. In the early post-War years, the dislocations of the War combined with the early phases of modern industrialization and the rapid extension of education to effect opportunities for some open (or relative) social mobility. Over time, however, with the slowdown in social and economic change, these opportunities evaporated. The ideological effects of this history are as follows: the early years of relatively open mobility opportunity, bolstered by the state's ongoing developmentalist rhetoric, fostered an ideology of individualistic open mobility—the sense that one's efforts could ford considerable class distances. In turn, this ideology long outlasted the social realities and fictions that produced it, managing to persist—if awkwardly and at times intermittently—even in the face of considerable collective and personal counterevidence. It is these awkward ideological effects that we will find in Mrs. Kang's social mobility narrative. Beginning in the 1980s and throughout the 1990s, however, increasingly visible class distinctions and fixed class subcultures contributed to a growing sense of limited mobility horizons—challenging the long-standing developmentalist ideologies of open mobility.

Several statistical studies confirm the relatively open mobility in the years immediately following the Korean War. Based on work histories gathered nationwide in 1983,¹⁵ Byoung-Kwan Kim (1993, 244) reports that from 1954 to 1963 there were much greater chances of dramatic labor mobility than in any period thereafter. Hagen Koo (1984, 1031, 1035) similarly documents greater egalitarian income distribution in the immediate post-War era through the 1960s. We can attribute the relatively more open and egalitarian early years of the post-War period to several factors, including the effects of the War, the structure of industry, and changes in status hierarchies. Aspects of employment and industrial structure are also relevant.¹⁶ This early period allowed for greater open mobility because of the relatively unstructured first phase of industrialization in which career paths were not yet systematized (Kim B. 1993, 246, 248); in this vein, we will see that Mrs. Kang admires people who made something grand of early work opportunities in Seoul. Koo (1984) supports this contention with his argument that work thereafter became increasingly credentialized and thus reliant on educational capital. As a result, the gap between manual and nonmanual labor increased (Kim B. 1993, 244), as did income differentials between those with and without a college education (peaking in the mid-1970s) (Koo 1984, 1035). Finally, real advances in the long struggle to abolish the status hierarchies—a struggle that began in the last century and was thwarted by Japanese colonialism—also bolstered mobility in this early period.

¹⁵Much of the recent work on social mobility in South Korea draws on this survey. Unfortunately the concerns and scope of the survey—intragenerational, occupational mobility—were limited such that surveyors did not gather, for example, information about the workers' parents; these oversights have drastically limited the scope and significance of South Korea's key mobility studies.

¹⁶Koo (1984, 1031) maintains that the distributive figures for this period are good because of the rather sudden increase in full employment following the disruptions of the Korean War in conjunction with the sudden rapid growth of the industrial sector.

Korea's independence (from colonialism) opened a social space for individuals' social capacity (vs. ascribed status positions) (Pak M. 1995, 536); to what extent, however, South Korea's postcolonial, divided reality continued to thwart this project—a query of Mrs. Kang's—remains an important question. Over time, however, the horizons of mobility narrowed and class differences became more distant; Mrs. Kang's story—the larger promise of her educated brothers than of her educated sons—is telling of this trajectory.

Studies of mobility through marriage concur with these findings: the immediate post-War years saw the highest chances of upward mobility through marriage, while later increasing educational homogamy prevails (Pak K. 1993, 51; Pak S. 1991).¹⁷ It is not surprising that mobility through marriage should accompany increasing openness of occupational mobility, because, with men's expanded job horizons, women could bargain on the potential of a man's personal and educational attributes independent of his family background (Kendall 1996, 102); indeed, stories of a wealthy girl whose parents marry her to a promising son of a poor family are not uncommon. Conversely, there is the trope of the pretty and well-bred girl who wins a man above her social standing; in such cases, her charm and beauty are critical attributes for the attainment of upward mobility—we will see that Mrs. Kang regrets not having made such a marriage. It is also not surprising that apparent mobility through marriage should accompany this era of radical post-War dislocation, because the immediate family circumstances (occupation, wealth, and the like) of many young people were discordant with their class upbringings and identities—as was the case with Mrs. Kang.

The narrowing of educational mobility opportunity over the post-War era similarly echoes the trend towards a less open society. Although studies report increases in both educational opportunity (Chŏn and Kwŏn 1991, 532; You 1981, 68) and in the value of educational capital over the early years of the immediate post-War period (especially in the 1970s) (Koo 1984, 1034),¹⁸ they caution that such figures do not necessarily indicate increases in open mobility because of the concurrent escalating correspondence between social background and educational achievement (see Chŏn and Kwŏn 1991, 532; You 1981, 68). The value of education was also compromised because society was increasingly unable to subsume the surge of high-school and college graduates in jobs commensurate with these educational credentials (Oh 1975, 116–17, 132, 146). Several studies argue that educational increases for women are even weaker indicators of open mobility, because their educational attainments are more closely determined by class background than those of men (Pak K. 1993, 53; Sŏl 1994, 249).

In the 1980s and 1990s an increasing sense of the collapse of real mobility opportunities strengthened an emergent class consciousness. Economic slowdown in conjunction with political and discursive transformations limited both actual mobility opportunities *and* the belief in them. First, there was the slowdown of structural changes—the stabilization of South Korea's occupational structure, rates of rural exodus, industrial expansion, and GNP growth. Second, the inflationary economy of the 1970s and 1980s led to an increasing gulf between landowners and the propertyless; indeed, there was an escalating sense among many people that it was

¹⁷See Kendall (1996, 102–3) on colonial period marriage and mobility.

¹⁸From 1945 to 1964, for example, the number of high school students increased by a factor of 12.61 and the number of college students increased by a factor of 18.24 (Oh 1975, 116).

too late even to dream of buying a domicile (one of Mrs. Kang's greatest sadnesses) (Han 1993; Koo 1984, 1034). Third, with the rapid expansion of education into the 1970s and through the 1980s and 1990s, the value of a college education declined, guaranteeing neither employment nor a middle-class life (Söl 1994, 252, 266). These shifts have called attention to the advantages of class resources (economic, symbolic, and social) beyond education and employment (Chang 1991; Koo and Hong 1980). In this vein, Koo (1987, 109) refers to the frustration of the middle class, which is better educated than—but deprived relative to—the capitalist class.¹⁹ Fourth, unleashed from both the constraints of decades of authoritarian regimes and the austere culture and ideology of dissent (Abelmann 1996, chap. 9), the life-style and consumption of the upper class have become increasingly visible in the 1980s and 1990s (Cotton and van Leest 1996; Nelson 1996; Paek 1993). Taken together, these increasing inequalities and visibilities have made for heightened awareness of inequalities of opportunity and of the advantages of class resources.

For those people dissatisfied with their life-styles and horizons, there is a keen sense of having somehow “missed the boat”—of not “riding the waves” of the times (Abelmann and Lie 1995, chaps. 2 and 3; Song 1985). Indeed, the combination of real mobility opportunities in the early post-War years and enormous post-War structural growth made it so that in some cases infinitesimal differences of fortune or achievement produced vast gulfs in standards of living and class horizons, making for the “melodrama” of South Koreans’ mobility (Abelmann n.d.).²⁰ There is a growing sense that those who have made it have done so backed by privilege and illegitimate deeds.²¹ People have become increasingly incensed at the favoritism, graft, network hiring, and kickbacks that spurred the development that has been so publicly celebrated. In response to an outraged citizenry, the “democratic” regimes following the widespread civil unrest of the 1980s have had to bow to popular pressure and expose the enormous social economy of political patronage (Jung and Siegal 1985, 380). These sentiments reflect many South Koreans’ strong sense of social justice, a “strong principle of meritarian justice” (Jung and Siegal 1985, 403), as well as their approbation at relative impoverishment (Song 1985). Indeed, it is not an exaggeration to say that this combination of factors has made many South Koreans somewhat dissatisfied with their place in life and convinced that their attributes and achievements should have taken them further—to an extent, Mrs. King embodies these frustrations.

This portrait of social mobility over the post-War period reveals that social mobility and its ideological effects are hard to measure and document. “Class” positions (the units of analysis in the measurement of mobility) have ambiguous social meanings that demand considerable refinement. Furthermore, even with some consensus on class categories, mobility itself is difficult to measure. We have observed that in spite of the real and ideological play of watersheds over the immediate post-War era, the extent to which these transformations really signify long-term changes in opportunity structure is unclear. For example, apparent educational or marital mobility does not necessarily signify society’s openness, because short-term downward

¹⁹In his observations of the 1950s and 1960s, Byung-hun Oh (1975, 136) made the same point about the salaried middle classes in relation to the *nouveau riche*.

²⁰I am grateful for discussions with Kim Byoung-Kwan on this point. See also Glaser and Strauss (1971, 171) on the importance of “temporal aspects on social mobility.”

²¹Interestingly, this is reminiscent of the popular sense during the colonial period that individuals succeeded only through collaboration with the colonizers (Pak M. 1995, 537).

mobility brought on by temporary social dislocations can mask long-standing class resources. And, we can query whether “pre-modern” status distinctions really had no sway in the post-War era, or whether wartime dislocations and the land reform truly disrupted class standing and resources (see Kim K. 1996, 206). Finally, individual mobility lives in part in the narratives of its representation, which are inextricable from the collective histories and public ideologies that have inscribed recent history.

I turn now to a consideration of women and class in South Korea in order to expand upon this mobility perspective. The consideration of social mobility is transformed by moving beyond men's productive labor to include women and households.

Women, Patriarchy, and Mobility

Social Mobility . . . is again and again studied as if the world was peopled by bachelors.

(Thompson 1981, 297)

Here I explore women's contribution to class culture and reproduction so as to fine-tune our understanding of post-Korean War social mobility and contemporary class identities. The vast majority of statistical studies of mobility record the formally productive activities of men, subsuming the class positions of households under the productive lives of their male household heads—what Abbott and Sapsford (1987, 10) call the “malestream position” (e.g., Goldthorpe 1983). These gender and employment biases ignore the important contributions of women, including their own employment (when relevant), the nonwage earnings they often control and contribute, and their symbolic inputs as well (Abbott and Sapsford 1987; Crompton 1993; Sørensen 1994; Walby 1986, 31).²² These gender and production biases lead us to query to what extent women can have class identities—and, correspondingly, social and political consciousnesses—quite distinct from their husbands *and* to what extent men's and household identities are fashioned by women.²³

A gendered understanding of social mobility and class identity shifts our attention in several ways. Households are best considered not as composites of individuals uniformly characterized by men's productive activities at a particular moment in time but as often the meeting place of fractured class memories, identities, and horizons. Furthermore, familial configurations—within and beyond the residential household—contribute to the production and maintenance of the household's class identity and habitus. That is, economic and extra-economic inputs from beyond the residential household determine household standing; although somewhat diminished today, these inputs have been extraordinarily important over the course of South Korea's recent history.²⁴ The kinship and cultural configurations of Confucian

²²Most often when women are included it is often only women who work in the formal economy (Walby 1986, 26–27). Also excluded are the small minority of women who do not marry.

²³As Annemette Sørensen (1994, 31–33) summarizes in a review article on women, family, and class, there is a vast divide between those studies that integrate women merely through the consideration of their individual class position and those works that shift the focus of analysis from the individual to the family. Traditionally, scholars who wanted to incorporate women into the measure of family class standing considered whether it was the woman or man whose employment determined the identity of the household. In recent years, however, some studies undertake a so-called “joint classification” of the household, thus observing the joint contributions of men and women (Sørensen 1994, 41–44).

²⁴Interestingly, Myung-hye Kim (1995) found that in the case of South Korea extrahousehold inputs are more important for higher-income than for lower-income families.

patriarchy as both a social and ideological system are critical for understanding the ways in which women contribute to class standing and reproduction: critical here are women's virtue as a sign of household status and the general patrilineal organization of society.

Regardless of whether married women formally participate in the labor market, and in spite of South Korea's patrilineal, patriarchal social organization and cultural orientation, women can bring numerous class resources to marriage: their own class backgrounds (including their mothers' and fathers' productive activities), which can include both symbolic, and in some cases material, resources and capital (Abbott and Sapsford 1987, 6, 92); their own educational histories and resources; and their own premarriage work-histories. All of these, we will see, were critical resources that Mrs. Kang wielded in her married life. Also, women who work after marriage, like Mrs. Kang, bring their incomes and maintain their work identities (see Kim S. 1997, 166 ff.). Furthermore, "nonworking" women often contribute extra-wage incomes and investments. Thus women's class (economic and symbolic) and educational resources, and their past and present employment experience, combine with their current wage and nonwage incomes in the production, expression, and maintenance of their own, their husbands', and their households' class locations and identities.

The Western social mobility literature is surprisingly silent on the intergenerational mobility of women—the position of their current households measured in relation to their natal households and the productive activities of their parents. This bias is even more extreme in the South Korean case, where the weight of patrilineal social organization and cultural ideologies can obscure the importance of a woman's natal family both in theory and in daily life as well. Sadly, even studies that pay some attention to intergenerational mobility of women mirror these biases because they limit their scope to the correspondence of women's husbands' and women's fathers' occupations *only* in the case of working women (Cho 1990; Pak S. 1991).²⁵ These limitations are unfortunate because the relationship between women's work and their fathers' work, and the relationship between the work of the husbands and fathers of unemployed women are also significant measures of women's (and households') mobility and class identities.

It is also important to consider the contribution of women's premarriage educational resources and identities to their class identities after marriage. Women neither forgo their own educational attributes, nor acquire their husbands' educational credentials with marriage. This said, however, in many cases women's premarriage education is a vague indicator of social standing because of the general exclusion of women from formal education until recent decades—this is certainly the case for Mrs. Kang (Thompson 1993, 32). The educational levels of older women in particular often do not bespeak their family backgrounds, and thus we cannot necessarily count their educational hypergamy as evidence of upward mobility; such is the case of women whose husbands' education levels are not unlike their brothers (here Mrs. Kang is a counterexample). Younger women's educational levels come closer to reflecting the class standing of their natal families; their work experiences and aspirations, however,

²⁵Confirming the sense of increasingly fixed hierarchies described above, these studies demonstrated high levels of correspondence between women's fathers' and husbands' class positions for the growing new middle classes (including professionals and office workers), reaching, for example, a 42 percent convergence in 1990 (Pak S. 1991).

typically do *not* represent these educational levels (Pak K. 1993; Söl 1994, 249). That is, until very recently, women's high levels of education (particularly college) have seldom translated into high-level participation in the labor force. Although educational resources are variously signified across the generations, we can see that patriarchy operates in both cases, either to withhold education or to withhold job opportunities commensurate with educational levels. Interestingly, however, women's education has become increasingly important to family class reproduction. A woman's educational resources contribute to the maintenance of her family's class distinction and ensure and enhance quality education for her children (Kim M. 1992, 168 and 1993, 80; Moon 1990).

Although women's work experiences both before and after marriage are critical to their class ideologies and horizons after marriage, their labor/market experiences before marriage have been largely ignored in the general social mobility literature (Abbott and Sapsford 1987; Martin and Roberts 1984). In the South Korean case, lower-class women have been consistently employed and central to household's basic economy (Kim M. 1993; Kim S. 1997), and in recent years women's formal labor market participation has increased across the class spectrum. Interestingly, studies demonstrate considerable discordance between wives' and husbands' employment, particularly in Seoul where they occupy similar labor niches in only 32 percent of the cases—leaving room for variable class identities within families (Pak S. 1991). This is not surprising because of the aforementioned gaps between women's educational qualifications and employment horizons, such that their jobs and identities can be quite distant.

Beyond women's formal employment, their informal labor and extrawage contributions are also critical to households' class positions and identities at both ends of the class spectrum: women's contributions may include piecework at home for the lower classes, and for the middle and upper classes real estate and stock investments as well as extraeconomic contributions. It has been documented that in the lower classes women's incomes exert considerable influence on household identity (Kim M. 1995), although women's contributions are not necessarily evenly evaluated by both husband and wife.²⁶ For the upper classes, it is well known that women's nonwage earnings often far exceed those of their even quite prosperous husbands and strongly affect household identities and horizons (Kim M. 1995 77, 79). As Myung-hye Kim (1995, 82) argues, it is a gross distortion to refer to "unemployed" upper-middle-class women as "housewives."

Finally, in addition to being economic contributors, women are the managers of patrilineal kinship groups and the nurturers of social networks that are critical to the production and reproduction of class standing, including their children's employment and marriage opportunities and their husbands' professional standing and advancement—what Hanna Papanek (1989) calls "family status-production work." These contributions are particularly critical in the case of South Korea's upper classes (Kim M. 1995, 72, 75–79; Yi 1993). We can thus observe the ongoing legacy of women's symbolic contributions to the maintenance of premodern elite status (Cho 1986; Deuchler 1977; Haboush 1991).

This review of social mobility and gender for South Korea has sketched a range of parameters that contribute to a more accurate rendering of class identities and social

²⁶One study showed that women estimate their effects on social standing to be larger than men do; both women and men think that household standing is more affected by women with high income streams (Park and Hong 1994).

mobility histories. It would be a mistake to conclude from these discussions of women's often autonomous class attributes and contributions that in order to remedy the existing social portrait we need only to include women separately in statistics. Rather, we need to reconfigure our understanding of men's and households' class standing, mobility, identities, and horizons as well, because they cannot be isolated from the economic and symbolic contributions of women (see also Abbott and Sapsford 1987, 54, and Sørensen 1994).

I now return to Mrs. Kang to illustrate this paper's approach to class identities and its findings on post-Korean War social mobility. Mrs. Kang's social mobility stories illustrate the importance of transgenerational family history, family form and networks, employment history, and narrative to the understanding of her and her family's class identities and horizons.

A Woman's Mobility Story

I talked with Mrs. Kang each time over her black sewing machine. The room was mostly dark except for a light bulb covered with a magazine page photo of autumn foliage that dangled over the sewing machine. In a rented room abutting a narrow side street in a primarily working-class neighborhood, she and her husband run a laundry (barely large enough for the two of them and a customer or two); raised off this room are their two-room living quarters—the second a room added on only in recent years. Mrs. Kang has three sons. The eldest is a college-graduate high-school teacher. He is married and Mrs. Kang watches his infant during the day. The second son began but did not finish college and recently emigrated to New Zealand. The third son, who just finished his compulsory military service, is studying to become a teacher. With no formal education herself and having labored and lived modestly over her entire adult life while suffering the abuses of a violent husband, Mrs. Kang prides herself on having raised three successful sons and at least one teacher (“although I dreamed of making a professor of one of them”). Neighbors praise her for this feat; her eldest son once proclaimed to me that his mother's name should be recorded in the annals of history. She quietly nodded and said that hers is a life worth recording—a chronicle of *kosaeng* (suffering) for which “there are no words.” Central to her class identity is her success in educating her sons against considerable odds.

Mrs. Kang's premarriage class and her educational, occupational, and material resources have been critical to the course of her adult married life and the nature of her class identities and horizons. As an elementary school graduate, Mrs. Kang's father was one of the most educated people in their small unprosperous coastal village. Her father's family were *yangban*, which means, she said, “that at some point in the past we did not live so badly.”²⁷ She recalls that her paternal grandfather had once even owned some land. It was perhaps these attributes that facilitated her family's early exodus from the village—they were the first to leave. The extended family (her parents, paternal grandparents, and paternal aunts and uncles) left so that her father could avoid labor conscription to Japan; their rural emigration was thus an effort to secure a better future in the politically turbulent times of World War II under Japanese colonialism. Most of the remaining village families emigrated later under less auspicious circumstances.

²⁷Because *yangban* was a distinction of lineage background, it was often not an indication of prosperity.

Mrs. Kang imagines that her family history might have been different, however, if her father had been afforded more education. It was her *yangban* grandfather's drinking that prevented her father from going further in his schooling. In Seoul the family did hard labor (excepting the times her father started small business ventures): "What else could people like that do?" She attributes her father's zeal for his sons' education to his own resentment of his father's drinking, which so limited his own horizons; in Seoul, every comfort was sacrificed to scrape together her brothers' school fees. Although Mrs. Kang and her sister remained uneducated, they were not excluded from her father's and natal family's *yangban* history and identities. Most of the time she attributed their lack of education to her family's patriarchal ideologies, but sometimes she explained that it was also a contingency of timing—that her father had failed in business just as she might have gone to school. In this way, mobility stories straddle the vicissitudes of times and timing. With three of four brothers college educated, Mrs. Kang never thought not to educate her children: "It was my own thing entirely—it had nothing to do with my husband."

Although completely unschooled, Mrs. Kang is literate and adamant about the importance of keeping informed; she was an avid reader of fiction in her youth, and throughout her busy adult life she has always made time to peruse the newspaper headlines and read the editorials—"the most important part of the paper." It is because she reads and keeps up, she explains, that she is broad-minded—"a person can become broad-minded either from education or from 'upbringing.'" She frequently complained to me about housewives—like many of the women in the neighborhood group she gathers with periodically and like her brothers' wives—who are completely ignorant of the world's goings-on. She does not feel a bit inferior to those high school and college-educated housewives who "know nothing": "What have they made of their opportunities?" These women—and even her husband!—she says, have no idea that she is entirely unschooled. Furthermore, she is confident that if she had been educated she would have become a "truly great woman"—"If only I had not missed my *ttae* [time or moment] in life to study." She does, however, in a different vein wonder why she was not one of those little girls one reads about in novels or primers who get themselves educated against great odds, "begging at the school window to be let in." Although she is self-conscious of family assets beyond education (of her family's transgenerational class history), she often spoke of her achievements in isolation of these contributions.

In sum, when thinking about her upbringing and education, Mrs. Kang bears and claims, if obliquely—and not necessarily consciously—her grandfather's *yangban* identity, her father's educational values (although he was himself a laborer), her literacy and self-styled worldliness, and her brothers' educational achievement and social standing. Interestingly, this aggregate of class capital surfaces neither in her own nor her husband's current occupational status, nor in her late father's occupational or social standing. Furthermore, it surfaces only intermittently in her own mobility narrative. We can see, however, that her own class identities and horizons are fashioned through multigenerational memories and family history, the class maps of her natal family (her brothers), and cultural capital independent of formal schooling. Although these features are quite invisible in any of the standard indicators of class or mobility, they are critical to an understanding of the class identities and horizons of Mrs. Kang and her family.

Also noteworthy is that none of these class attributes can be discovered through consideration of her husband; indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that Mrs. Kang has resided in a class space almost entirely independent of her husband. Her husband,

also unschooled, was from a family with “no *yangban* pretensions” and was really poor (“poor even among poor of that era”). She recalls that she was so naive at the time of her marriage that she did not even think to check into his educational level or employment history; it seems that his shared religious (Catholic) background, the seeming promise of his job at an American military base, and the apparent prosperity of his brother (who negotiated the marriage) sanctioned this otherwise unlikely marriage.²⁸ And she cannot quite believe that she turned away educated and skilled suitors who were “attracted by my beauty.” She thinks of her husband, who, she explains, has been discriminated against as a “*sangnom*” (a derogatory term for commoners), as having suffered the injuries of class. Indeed, she attributes his abusive nature, senseless pride, and character flaws to his extreme childhood poverty.²⁹ Moreover these were aggravated because he married above his station—“something that is damaging to a man’s pride.” Throughout her marriage, she has struggled for domestic harmony so as to foster a healthy environment for her children. She worked hard to nourish her husband’s frail ego and to preserve his stature in the eyes of her children.³⁰

The occupational and material resources Mrs. Kang brought to marriage have also contributed to her married adult trajectory and identities. She began working as a young girl, selling vegetables on the city streets. At seventeen she found work at a western clothing factory, where she began as an errand girl (shining shoes and so on) and later found her *ilsaeng* (life’s work) as a sewing machinist. Because she made significant contributions to the family—she often speaks of providing clothes for her younger brothers and sisters—she felt “useful” and never thought to consider her life as pitiable. She worked at the factory until her marriage at twenty-four. It was her sewing machine experience—“my skill”—that led her and her husband to open a laundry (where she also mends clothes) after his early employment ventures all came to ruin. The laundry—“something one could do with very little capital”—was her idea, and she is matter-of-fact that she was the one who got it going and made it work. She decided that her husband would never amount to anything on his own but that under her supervision he could be diligent. Hence, the couple’s self-employment—steady but modest—can be credited to Mrs. Kang’s premarriage work experience, continued diligence, worldliness, and savvy manner with her clientele.

Mrs. Kang’s material resources during childhood were limited. In Seoul, her grandparents and parents pooled their earnings and, as the eldest daughter, she also contributed hers. Sporadically, however, there was some extra cash when one or another of her father’s business ventures was going smoothly, and there were even several years when the family owned a home. In fact, it was with money from *her own* parents that she and her husband bought a modest home when they married; she says that although women are understood to sever material ties with their natal families, the relations are in fact ongoing—“How can a daughter really become a *nam* [a stranger]; of course they tell us to go to that house [the husband’s] and die there, but. . . .” Shortly after marriage, however, a business venture shared by her father and

²⁸Stories of marriage deception are quite common in Korea. For an example, see Kendall 1988, chap. 2.

²⁹For a discussion of the relationship between personality and social standing, see Abelman forthcoming a.

³⁰See Abelman forthcoming b for a discussion of shared cultural narratives in South Korea that portray weak men made ineffectual by the social cultural dislocations of Korea’s twentieth-century history, and correspondingly strong women who have had to carry families through hard times.

husband collapsed, and both she and her parents lost their homes. Since that time, she and her husband have not owned a domicile. Although the inputs from her family have been modest over the years, her squarely middle-class brothers have helped out from time to time with her sons' tuition; Mrs. Kang is certain that she would have educated them in any case but that "it would have been that much harder." There were also small material contributions from her husband's siblings, two of whom were somewhat prosperous as young men working at the American military base; in fact, when she first met her husband he was living with one of these brothers who had procured him an American military base job which he made little of and eventually quit: he was not, she regrets, one of those who used opportunities afforded by American military base employment to land a lucrative career—an often-told tale.

In the scheme of things, Mrs. Kang has received few lasting material contributions from her own or her husband's family, and furthermore in her stories she pays scant attention to what she has received. She complains that her eldest and most prosperous brother has shared little of his wealth with family members: "Both he and his wife are not the sorts who suffer for the *chiban* [extended family]." She disparages that it is her youngest brother who looks after her elderly mother because her eldest brother—who should by all cultural rules assume this responsibility—is too "narrow-hearted." She complained several times about the televised ceremonies that award prizes to widows who have remained chaste and successfully raised and educated their children alone.³¹ Typically, she explained, they are widows who received all sorts of real financial help from their natal families: "How can their situation be compared with mine?" The patriarchy and patrilineal bias of families have impacted her sons' lives as well. The first son's wife lost both of her parents when she was quite young, and in a recent distribution of her parents' assets she was given nothing—in spite of contemporary changes in the inheritance law that should have ensured her an equal share. Although Mrs. Kang's first domicile, as well as her husband's first postmarriage productive activity, were secured by her own parents, she considers herself a woman who has made it on her own.

Mrs. Kang's perceptions of post-War social mobility are crafted between the specificities of her own story and the collective narratives of South Korean development. She explains, "poverty then and now is the same, except that it is perhaps a bit more visible today because of television and the like." She thinks that, on the one hand, there are more jobs available today, but, on the other hand, education seems to guarantee less and less: "A college degree, as long as it is not from some *sisiban* (flimsy) school, is an absolute necessity, but it does not promise anything." Her oldest son, who graduated with a high school teaching degree in Korean (language and literature), managed to find a job, but she fears that those days are over and that her youngest son who will soon graduate with the same degree, might not find a job. She explains that she and her husband have neither the connections nor the money to make payoffs to get him a job. She is even more pessimistic for those without education. She thinks that people like her middle son and brother who did not receive a college degree, for example, are better off leaving South Korea for countries with greater opportunity. She applauds her son's emigration to New Zealand: "I tell him, 'go there, suffer, and live well'—What options does he really have?" She has heard that in New Zealand the discrepancies between the rewards and prestige for white- and blue-collar workers are not as large as they are in South Korea. Likewise, the brother who did not finish college followed his wife's relatives to the United States,

³¹Widow chastity, a long-standing Confucian virtue, remains to some extent a social ideal.

where they started a laundry that has not been very successful. Mrs. Kang speculates that by the time he and his family arrived in the United States, the economy was such that it was “too late” for a newcomer to really succeed. In a similar vein, she is convinced that it is getting harder and harder these days for a poor child to succeed in school: “It used to be that the poor children did best.” When her own children were in school, they could not afford any of the after-school training and programs that are the *sine qua non* of middle-class schooling in recent years, but they made up for their disadvantages in part by directing their studies not to their passions and interests but to the least competitive college entrance examination topics of the time—teaching and Korean language.

Although Mrs. Kang is proud of her work history, confident that it is easier to get ahead through self-employment (small businesses), and convinced that such work is “more independent and fun,” she realizes that “it does not bring social recognition.” She thinks that it is white-collar occupations reached through educational credentials—the ones she charted for her children—that win a person respect. For a woman in her shoes, the only way to win recognition, she explains, is to educate her children well.

Mrs. Kang thinks that in the past there were real windows of opportunity, like the one at the American military base that her husband managed to miss (“Some people got really rich off of those jobs”) or the chances to go work in Saudi Arabia. She really admires those “great” men who went to Saudi Arabia who knew how to “seize the opportunities of their place and times.” But as with the case of her husband, she knows that for some people the degradation of poverty itself can stop a person from seizing such opportunities. She realizes that even the timing of rural emigration (very early in the case of her own family) can affect mobility trajectories; for example, her husbands’ siblings who remained in the countryside have not fared as well as those who came to Seoul. Similarly, although Mrs. Kang acknowledges that real estate investments have afforded people incredible opportunities, she says that one has needed both money and “smarts” to be able to play in that arena.

Central to Mrs. Kang’s sense of narrowing horizons today is the drastic housing situation in South Korea, whereby those without capital can barely dream of purchasing a domicile (see Nelson 1996). Several years ago she and her husband purchased an apartment outside of the city, but they could not afford to live there because they purchased it with the *chōnse* (renters’ lump-sum down payments that are often exorbitant) of the tenants to whom they immediately rented the apartment; she is dismayed that she toiled a lifetime and is still not able to afford a ‘room of her own.’ She muses that it will take decades for her eldest son and his wife (who both work) to be able to afford an apartment. These days she watches their infant—leaving her sewing till the late night—because the only thing she can contribute to their housing quest is “my own body’s labor.” One of the things about young women today that angers Mrs. Kang is that they “pretend to work because they want to [i.e., for self-enrichment].” They should, she thinks, tell it like it is: “After all, they work because otherwise their families would have no chance of affording an apartment and a middle-class life.” Interestingly, in this complaint she is offended by women’s false claims both because she thinks that ideally they should take care of their children, and because such claims obscure the reality of the narrow prospects for less advantaged people in South Korea today.

In sum, although her sons have garnered the educational trappings of the middle class, in today’s South Korea—after decades of real estate inflation, with declining values of a college education, and with escalating unemployment for the college-

educated—they are not ensured the middle-class life she toiled to provide them. She is hopeful for her eldest son, who found a job early; reconciled to her second son “suffering” abroad; and worried whether her third son’s educational qualifications alone will procure him a job.

Mrs. Kang’s narrative is distinguished by several obfuscations that reflect the mobility and gender ideologies of her times. Although her mobility story reveals the importance of transgenerational class and cultural resources, her narratives of personal triumph often ignore them. In this way, she brings individual ardor and attitude to the center of her explanation. This is not to say that Mrs. Kang thinks of South Korea as an open society; rather, she is fully aware of the particular moments and spaces that have facilitated mobility opportunities. Similarly, in spite of the fact that the story of her own family mobility reveals the absolute centrality of her contributions, in her day-to-day family and work life she has worked hard to make her own real inputs—work, decisions, know-how, intelligence—invisible. She has done this in the interest of nurturing her husband’s ego, fostering domestic tranquillity, and ensuring her sons’ healthy development and education. She has thus reproduced patriarchal social relations by supporting her husband’s role as family head. Women, she thinks, need to make everything work and to manage their husbands’ delicate egos. She seems to reserve more sympathy for men burdened by twisted characters than for women, who, she thinks, “should rise above their circumstances.” Mrs. Kang often explained the variable class fates of the members of her family, such as those of her father’s brothers, her own siblings, or her husband’s siblings, in terms of the diligence, upbringing, and assets of their wives. She is matter-of-fact—as are most of the women I interviewed—that it is women who determine the course of families: “When a woman marries poorly, she is the only one who suffers, but when a man marries badly, it is the whole [extended] family that suffers.”

While Mrs. Kang feels triumphant at having succeeded in spite of her husband’s domestic violence, she has little sympathy for women who have not been equally triumphant—those who have not exercised their education (the housewives in her midst) or those who have been inhibited by their lack of class resources. She once criticized the weakness of character of a woman we spoke about who did not seize opportunities to marry up because she was too ashamed of her humble origins. Although on the one hand Mrs. Kang is aware of the importance of class background and capital, on the other hand she seems to think that women should be able to succeed (for their families) through their own self-styled grit, determination, psychological acumen, and worldliness. Thus, although she has labored her whole life alongside an abusive husband in order to care for her family, she objects to women’s employment for the sake of personal fulfillment, and she is adamant that a “family cannot have two heads.” Indeed, in her stories and ideologies patriarchy figures culturally and ideologically beyond its more obvious structural and organizational effects.

Conclusions

Mrs. Kang’s narrative illustrates that in any consideration of a household’s mobility it is critical to observe a woman’s economic, symbolic, and memory resources. Women are “classed” subjects before and during marriage. We have seen that many aspects of Mrs. Kang’s premarriage life are relevant: her natal family’s class standing

and even multigenerational class memory, her educational experience and values, and her family's material resources and contributions. In one sense, although Mrs. Kang is a propertyless, unschooled woman whose tiny business might not even render her a petite bourgeoisie, she shares the horizons and identities of her college-educated brothers. Furthermore, we have seen that her class identity and aspirations are quite independent from those of her husband. And although she does not share the luxuries of her neighbor and sisters-in-law housewives (property, freedom, and time), she is sure that hers is the more worldly and impressive existence. We have also seen the important play of patriarchy as it affects the education, early economic activities, family networks, and gender ideologies of women.

Mrs. Kang's mobility story underscores the complexities of her own and her family's class identities and mobility horizons. Through Mrs. Kang's social mobility history and its narrative evocation, we can observe: (1) the limitations of subsuming her own or her family's class position under her husband's occupation; (2) the importance of a transgenerational perspective to the understanding of the particular shape and culture of families; (3) the subjective nature of Mrs. Kang's understanding of social mobility; and (4) the centrality of gender norms and ideologies to both her life path and her understanding of that path. Mrs. Kang understands that many personal resources are flexible in their determinacies; that is, they are potentially but not necessarily enabling—or, alternately, potentially but not inevitably damaging. It is, then, the fabric of personal destiny, personal proclivities, social life, and structural factors that set these determinacies. The perspectives and findings of this paper challenge the clean break with the past that is often assumed by developmentalist understandings of post–Korean War South Korea.

Class identity and horizons are neither the exclusive province of men nor of temporally isolated individuals. Gender, families, households, transgenerational factors, and nonmarket elements are critical to any understanding of class. People's class identities are delicate matters that reside between genealogical memories and genealogical experiences, and the goals and aspirations for the next generation. The productive activities of any woman's husband are but one narrow measure of her own or her family's situation. This is especially the case for South Korea's post-War history, in which rapid structural change and early mobility opportunities have made family situations at one moment or another mere way stations between transgenerational memories and imaginaries.

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