Transient Labor: Past and Present of Young Female White-collar Work Force in South Korea

YEWON HONG
Comparative Literature and Culture, Yonsei University; dalibong@naver.com; yewonhong@yonsei.ac.kr

DUSTIN HELLBERG
Department of English Language and Literature, Yonsei University; dchellberg@gmail.com

Abstract: The paper aims to investigate transient labor pattern of young South Korean women by employing qualitative method, interwoven with the analysis of theoretical texts from Judith Butler and Cho Han Haejoang, and historiographic texts that show how female workers integrated into Korea's patriarchal labor market. Women's transient labor is analyzed through different historical figurations of 'working' women, who constantly 'do' gender, conforming to the State's nation-family trope. With 1988 Equal Employment Law, accompanied by Seoul Olympics, the changes seemed to appear, however, contemporary corporate culture continues to marginalize female workers through taboo and sanctions, which shaped the performativity of idealized working women. In turn, office girls reenact the traditional feminine ideal, or become 'flowers' in the offices. Some young Korean women enjoy relative freedom from being bread-winner and are allowed to pursue alternative career. Yet, the alleged female empowerment under recent regime of neoliberal self-portfolioization and so-called 'spec' accumulation only helps the reproduction of female subalternity, which leads to the question of female education and its unfulfilled promises.

Keywords: transient labor, female labor, neoliberalism, self-portfolioization, agency, (post-)feminism, South Korea

I. Introduction

My female boss openly said during lunch that I should fulfill the military obligations like my male peers and learn how to behave in front of my superiors, including herself. She compared my attitude to that of a male temporary worker who already served in the military, and suggested that he well-conducts himself. Even before I said something, she was ridiculed by her male subordinates who told her...

* Yewon Hong, first author and corresponding author; Dustin Hellberg, co-author
that no one would want to date a woman who went to the military (Anonymous female interlocutor from top-tier university in Seoul, 22, personal communication, December 2015).1

With the abolition of gender discriminatory policies in workplace in 1988, along with Seoul Olympics, it seemed that young South Korean women will have better chance than their predecessors of becoming something more than simple assistants who worked until their marriages. In fact, a research conducted by National Statistical Office and Ministry of Gender Equality and Family in 2014 says that female students outnumbered male students in college entrance rate since 2008, and almost three quarters of the entire female high school graduates had enrolled in college-level education in 2014. Numerous seminars on female power and leadership, carried out by already established, if rare, female executives, encourage ambitious young women in their 20s and early 30s to challenge their limits and ultimately become 'global leaders'. Growing numbers of young female college graduates in South Korea aspire to become full-functioning members of multinational corporations, only to face the reality of corporate culture that excludes women to large degree. In 2016, according to the United Nation’s "glass-ceiling index" that measures equal treatment in work places with criteria such as wage gap, and paid maternal leave, South Korea scored 25.00 out of 100, which was far below the average of OECD countries ("The best-and worst-places to be a working woman", 2016). Thus, it is still common to see young women leaving their positions in companies.

In order to understand why today's ambitious young women clearly with more education and encouragement repeat the similar labor pattern of their predecessors, it is necessary to consider different representations of female labor in history of South Korea, since any act one performs is "an act that had been going on before one arrived on the scene (Butler, 1988, p.526)". Various historical figuration of 'working' women, from Chosun dy-

1. The fragments of the interviews are used throughout the research in order to allow readers to get glimpse of the transient labor pattern and the gender performativity of young (over-)educated women. Butler's notion of gender performance is best observed in innocuous and unprepossessing circumstances because women are not necessarily pressured overtly into this behavior. Instead, it's a subtle conditioning that is best revealed in casual conversation, informal interviews and day-to-day activities.