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"I'm my mother's daughter, I'm my husband's wife, I'm my child's mother, I'm nothing else": Resisting traditional Korean roles as Korean American working women in Seoul, South Korea

Helene K. Lee

Dickinson College, P.O. Box 1773, Carlisle, PA 17013-2896, USA

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SYNOPSIS

In recent years, return migration trips to the ancestral homeland by diasporic individuals have been increasing, often framed as a search for roots and a sense of belonging and home. This study offers a gendered analysis of return migration based on the work narratives of second-generation Korean American women in the South Korean context. Through an examination of the experiences within the South Korean labor market, the study found Korean American women relied heavily on dominant notions of white privilege and patriarchy that upheld a hierarchical relationship of the US to South Korea. These interlocking ideologies constructed the US as a modern, gender egalitarian country that has achieved gender equality, while South Korea remained constrained by traditional patriarchal attitudes and practices that left little room for successful women in the workforce. In response, the participants create new identities that highlight their agency as the ideal cosmopolitan worker in a rapidly globalizing South Korean economy.

Introduction

As a recent college graduate, Paula,[1] a second-generation Korean American, first came to South Korea through a Fulbright teaching fellowship. Throughout her childhood, Paula had grown up with a strong sense of pride in her Korean heritage. As she explained, "My parents had already instilled in me, you're American-born but you're still Korean blood. […] Going to Berkeley helped me realize that there are some Korean aspects to me, but coming to Korea really affirmed that." After two years of teaching, Paula moved to Seoul where she found a teaching position at an exclusive Korean high school with a rigorous all-English curriculum where most graduates held aspirations of attending a high status college or university in the US. Initially, Paula decided to live with maternal relatives, but cultural conflicts led to tensions that eventually ended with her uncle asking her to move out. But instead of having a direct conversation with her, he talked to her mother in the US about the situation, who then relayed the information to her. Paula said, "my uncle asking me to move out. I think it is Korean because Korean males don't feel comfortable. Even that, then I realize they don't understand me and my individualism and how I would be so hurt by that. […] To them, I have no identity, […] I don't have a role in this society. It's crazy, because I'm my mother's daughter, I'm my husband's wife, I'm my child's mother, I'm nothing else."

Paula's story captures the ways in which gender becomes key area of conflict for Korean American women as a result of return migration projects to South Korea. Her ending statement – to be recognized as an individual outside of her family roles – is framed within a discursive construction of South Korea that remains rooted in traditional Confucian gender ideologies. Paula's experiences also reflect the openings in this particular moment in the South Korean labor market that attract return migrants like herself to take advantage of white-collar, professional job opportunities that rest on the cultural capital of foreigners, as South Korea transitions into a more globalized society. It is for this reason that this article focuses on the narratives of second-generation Korean

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American women and the ways that their search for belonging in the homeland is complicated by gender and racial ideologies at work.

Previous research in the East Asian context has examined how co-ethnic returnees to Japan, China and South Korea are excluded from a sense of full cultural citizenship despite their common ancestry and perceptions of a shared homeland (Kibria, 2002; Kim, 2008; Louie, 2002; Roth, 2002; Siu, 2007; Tsuda, 2003). Constant mistakes and misunderstandings stemming from lack of cultural and linguistic fluency as well as dress, mannerism and behavior mark these return migrants as foreigners rather than one of the family. While these studies have focused on the intersection of ethnicity and nationality, they do not adequately include a discussion of gender as a complicating factor in the construction of transnational identities.

This article builds on this extensive body of work to include a gendered and racialized analysis of the ways second-generation Korean American women negotiated patriarchy and racialized notions of American as white within the context of the South Korean workplace. Drawing upon a framework that links transnational studies perspectives with work on racialized femininities and gendered ethnicities in the US context, this study examines the ways patriarchy and ideologies of white privilege within the workplace shaped identity formation for Korean American women as middle-class, skilled labor migrants in the context of South Korea's larger globalization project.

The article is presented in three sections. The first section centers on the outsider status of Korean American women in gender segregated, patriarchal South Korean workplaces as a result of hiring practices as well as interactions with co-workers that mark them as "too American" to be authentic Koreans because of their overly aggressive and independent behavior. The second section focuses on the ways Korean American women struggled with assumptions of an authentic American identity rooted in whiteness by South Korean employers and co-workers that marked them as "too Korean" to be true Americans. The confrontations with patriarchy and white privilege produced new narratives for Korean American women who actively distanced themselves from the presumed traditional characteristics of submissive, obedient Korean femininity. The third section concludes with the ways Korean American women asserted their American identities as economically successful professional workers in South Korea's globalizing labor market.

Theoretical overview

Because social, political and economic lives are increasingly established in more than one nation-state simultaneously, the expanding field of transnational studies explores the ways immigrant communities adapt to pressures of both assimilation and cultural pluralism. Research has focused on the ways diasporic communities simultaneously integrate aspects of their "host" country while maintaining strong political, economic and cultural ties to their "home" country (Clifford, 1994; Glick Schiller, Basch, & Szanton Blanc, 1992; Khagram & Levitt, 2007; Levitt, 2001; Vertovec, 2001).

Within this conversation is a specific focus on return migration that refers to movement of diasporic individuals back to the "motherland" undertaken in part to clarify ethnic identity as well as to deepen transnational ties[2] (Kibria, 2002; Louie, 2002; Maira, 2002; Wolf, 2002). Armed with expectations of finding a sense of belonging and acceptance based on a primordial sense of ethnic identity, many of the return migrants in these studies were not seen as "ethnic" enough because of their lack of familiarity with language, customs and rules of etiquette. The trips home often bring up questions of "true authenticity," rooted in idealized notions of culture that "is ultimately part of a larger politics of authenticity in their lives" (Maira, 2002: 116).

Diasporic individuals have also experienced this "politics of authenticity" in the context of labor migration to the homeland. Work by Roth (2002) and Tsuda (2003) focused on the experiences of *nikkeijin*, or ethnic Japanese living abroad, in this case, Japanese Brazilians who were recruited to Japan primarily for manufacturing jobs in 3-D (dirty, dangerous and difficult) industries. While many of these migrants identified strongly as Japanese in Brazil, the return to Japan and the reactions of their Japanese co-workers and larger Japanese society challenged the authenticity of their ethnic identities. Rather than being embraced into the fold, these Brazilian Japanese were often seen as foreigners and in turn, many chose to highlight their allegiance to Brazil in their style of dress, dance and language, demonstrating how "[t]ransnational migration can be destabilizing and disorienting as much as it can be enabling and emancipatory." (Tsuda, 2003, p.140). What is common across these studies on diasporas is the sense of liminality, located in a perpetual state of transition of not being "authentic" subjects in the countries they call home as well in their ancestral homeland. While the intersection of ethnicity, race and nationality becomes the crux of this tension, little attention is given to the ways gender complicates the politics of authenticity.

The intersections of gender and race have been the focus of studies that analyze the ways gendered ethnicities and racialized femininities emerge in relation to dominant femininity racialized as white in the US. Much work has centered on the construction of Asian American femininities in various second-generation ethnic communities, such as Filipino Americans (Le Espiritu, 2003; Wolf, 2002), Vietnamese, Chinese and Korean Americans (Kibria, 2002; Pyke & Johnson, 2003), and Indian Americans (Maira, 2002). Notably, Pyke and Johnson found that their second-generation Korean and Vietnamese American women participants constructed ethnic realms as sites of gender oppression and patriarchy while mainstream settings, largely read as "white," were seen as sites of gender equity (41). The current study aims to insert a gendered analysis into transnational identity construction and to extend the intersectional work on racialized femininities into a global framework, particularly within a non-Western context. By analyzing the narratives of second-generation Korean Americans, I aim to understand the salience of gender and labor within the context of return migration projects to contemporary South Korea.

Globalization in South Korean context

In more racially homogenous East Asian countries like South Korea, the concept of the nation and its subjects has been constructed around an ethnonationality based on the tight