

## **The Changing Role of Cultural Studies in South Korea**

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### **Abstract**

In this article, we chart the main characteristics and key problematics in youth studies and cultural studies in contemporary South Korea. In particular, we delve into the radically altered conditions of youth under neo-liberal rule in order to grasp the pressing youth question from several inter-connected and strategic standpoints. In doing so, this work endeavors to present some crucial concepts and key discursive strategies that can help reformulate youth and cultural studies as viable forms of social intervention.

**Keywords:** Hell Chosun, Korean youth-at-risk, structure of feeling, youth cultural studies

## Introduction

With the Korean economy experiencing a marked downturn for nearly a decade, the unemployment rate amongst young people has steadily increased, reaching 12.5% in February 2017, the highest since the financial crisis of 1997-1998.<sup>1</sup> As a direct consequence, young Koreans are now under enormous pressure as they seek various modes of adaptation and survival in the hostile environment, a pressure that middle-aged Koreans in their youth rarely encountered. These emergent collective experiences, both material and emotional, are confronting engaged scholars, intellectuals and activists with a clear set of issues to describe, understand, and potentially transform in a socially positive direction.

Although this project does not offer a series of detailed case studies that diagnoses the specific situations from which the youth suffer, our goal is wide-angled and inclusive. What we would like to do first is to present a series of theoretical examinations of “the youth question” by means of a critical exploration of the recent Korean intellectual work within cultural and youth studies; and second, to explicate the rise and contribution of a more refined cultural analysis of the emotional characteristics and embodiments of Korean youth as a necessary goal of intellectual inquiry.

## Setting the Scene: “Hell Chosun” and its Implications

Up until the late 1990s in South Korea—before the financial-cum-social crisis of 1997-98 took place— the majority of college graduates could look forward to entering a marketplace of stable job choices; and the collective social trajectory was one toward a lifetime employment that was emotionally gratifying and not particularly hard to achieve. However, the persistent downturn of the Korean economy over the last 20 years has largely shattered this once widely-shared belief in social and economic progress. In short, the once triumphal rhetoric of “the Miracle of the Han River” has now entirely dissipated.

In its place, the new generation of twenty-somethings has awakened to the recognition that its future prospects may actually be dimmer than those of its parents, while no effective or far-reaching solutions in

sight. As a consequence, young Koreans are scrambling for whatever opportunities exist in order to secure and hold down jobs, even part-time or irregular ones. To many, in the midst of rising competition and shrinking possibilities, being selected for the more stable and well-paid job sectors seems like the equivalent of winning the lottery. In consequence, the insecure state of the job market has become a major social issue not only for engaged intellectuals and academics but also for politicians and policy experts.

Not surprisingly, a variety of discourses promoting “self-help”, “self-care,” and “self-development” have become popular, winning significant affective power and appeal from many of the young.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, many of these discourses cannot shake the mood of persistent social pessimism. In the midst of this grim and worrisome situation, the well-known feminist anthropologist Haejoang Cho (2016) has coined the term “The Give Up Generation” to describe those young adults who express a growing sense of disbelief in, and resentment toward, the larger society.<sup>3</sup>

In this context, the phrase “Hell Chosun” (or “Hell Joseon”) has come to offer an expressive stand-in for all the collective feelings of doubt and misery that exist in Korean society, drained as it is of hope for meaningful change, especially for young people. As a noteworthy discursive construct, or as a sometimes parodied and yet still emotionally charged term, Hell Chosun has spread rapidly from its beginnings in the depths of online communities to its now pervasive place in the life worlds of many young Koreans. In a relatively short period of time, this term has generated a number of heated disputes and even conflicts. Under the more general rubric of Hell Chosun, a variety of interconnected expressions have also flourished. These include “raising the bamboo stick,” “hellish peninsula,” “no-o-ryok,” and “golden spoon.”<sup>4</sup> Many young people now use these expressions to denounce the once-honored collective belief in hard work and conscientious effort. In this way, young people have begun to imply that those who currently enjoy the blessings of economic growth rarely extend their compassion or aid to others and show a strong reluctance to share social wealth with the younger generation.

As evidenced by a whole series of articles, special reports, and reviews

devoted to this strange phenomenon, the majority of conservative media outlets experience a pronounced difficulty in understanding the new mood of emotional cynicism.<sup>5</sup> Two types of conservative critiques have emerged in order to comprehend the Hell Chosun phenomenon. The first criticizes the concept for its self-centered, flawed or superficial diagnosis. For example, the majority of newspaper articles and editorials tend to emphasize the fact that the general situations of most young Koreans—both in terms of education and opportunities and in the existence of major forms of social and informational infrastructure—are in fact far better than that of their predecessors. The second criticizes the concept of Hell Chosun by admonishing the youth for being lazy, undisciplined, and insufficiently motivated. They point out that young Koreans in the past faced even tougher situations. These earlier generations chose to overcome their hardships by means of a strong personal and work ethic and by putting in a tremendous amount of hard work.

In contrast, the progressive newspapers have produced several long-running investigative reports on the current state of Korean youth as a way of placing the emergence of Hell Chosun. Collectively, these reports tend to be more sympathetic. Here, the phenomenon is treated as a form of collective failure or as the outcome of socially-structured inequality. From this perspective, the pervasive bulldozer-style pursuit of modernization and economic progress has been achieved at the expense of a sustainable welfare system and fairer networks of wealth distribution. According to the progressive press, it is this misguided set of choices on the part of politicians, businessmen and policy-makers that has served to bring Hell Chosun into being. Naturally, this new and emotionally-charged buzzword has stirred a number of heated public disputes. All in all, Hell Chosun reflects a set of symptoms that suggest the need for forms of rigorous, self-reflective intellectual intervention.<sup>6</sup>

### **The Reformulation of Youth Studies in Korea**

In response to these long-running socio-economic difficulties, a number of scholars have shifted their intellectual perspective from a so-called “culturalist” approach to a search for a new set of more sociological

and anthropological approaches in order to take the socio-economic conditions and the unstable emotional structures of Korean youth more seriously.<sup>7</sup> New studies that focus more on forms of reappraisal and a greater responsiveness have attempted a more multifaceted analysis of the life-worlds of young people, especially their changing dispositions, collective feelings, and life perspectives. Some scholars have also launched more extended and empirically conscious projects. They have utilized alternative intellectual resources by examining work-related social practices, economic and institutional factors, and other macro-social factors that construct the lives of ordinary young people.

The emergence of this alternative and self-reflective critique was first signaled by the publication of Woo Sukhoon and Park Kwoni's *The 880,000 Won Generation (palsippalmanwonsedae)* (2007). Written in a clear and accessible style, the book soon became a bestseller. Using a loose form of discursive analysis, the study took a quite different, self-reflective position when compared with more conventional youth-related research. With its title that roughly translated into US dollars as "the \$830-a-month generation," the book was considered seminal because of the way it focused critically on the destitute conditions of Korean youth and their drastically changed ways of life during a severe economic downturn. As a discursive construct, as Qiu and Kim note, the book's title "is nuanced with the feeling of self-pity because, with tuition costing almost 10 million Korean won (approximately US\$7,850) a year, Korean students believe they will be paid only small salaries after graduation" (2010: 634).

With its powerful "reality check," the book signaled the end of the dominant myth of a high-growth society as well as the radical erosion of job security for young people. The book self-consciously expressed a strong "participatory" impulse, especially regarding the precarious lives of youth, manifesting a clear political agenda. At the same time, the book called on young people to enact a more awakened, critical, and solidified response to their changing situations and urged the younger Korean generation to formulate their own agendas and strategies in order to change their lives. In a way, this text was more like a timely politicized pamphlet. After the publication of *The 880,000 Won Generation*, youth and cultural studies in Korea took a significantly new turn.

### “Governmentality” as an Intellectual Construct in Korea

By governmentality, Michel Foucault (2010)<sup>8</sup> refers to those sets of embodied principles, practices, strategies, large-scale techniques and forms of knowledge, that activate a particular form of political rationality historically mobilized for the purpose of governing the population. In attempting to chart alternative forms of analysis, those Korean researchers who launched youth-related analyses also started to adopt and utilize the Foucauldian notion of “governmentality.”<sup>9</sup> As the reign of neoliberalism consolidated its hold following the financial crisis of 1997-98, the Korean educational sector was also beginning to undergo a radical transformation. By engaging with studies of neo-liberal governmentality, progressive scholars began to examine the highly regimented and detailed self-management practices of young people as job seekers, particularly the ways in which they seek to demonstrate their “job-readiness.”<sup>10</sup> As Hong and Ryoo (2013)<sup>11</sup> note, intellectual discourses emphasizing “self-improvement” (*jakikwanri*), “self-cultivation” (*jakikyebal*), raising “globally competitive talent,” and “excellence in education” have all become widespread in Korean universities. Nowadays, young Koreans are inundated by market-driven value formations that encourage a “culture of competitiveness and self-governing.” Neo-liberal norms are often also propagated by the mainstream media and educational institutions as “inherently positive and innovative” virtues.<sup>12</sup> These widely-shared practices of self-fashioning tend to aggravate the situation for young people, since it is always possible to demand even more “accumulated proofs” or “symbolic tokens.” In this way, the situation further reinforces a fierce competition amongst young people, amplifying the state of “youth at risk.”

Often relatively powerless to obtain the external “markers of adulthood” like secure jobs or stable marriages, young people appear increasingly to measure their progress by engaging in survival games, emotionally numbing themselves through an accumulation of self-blame, a deep-seated restlessness, and a diminished set of social contacts. These peculiar collective sentiments constitute what Lauren Berlant (2011) calls the “cruel optimism” in the minds of the younger generation in Korea.<sup>13</sup> Young people often put passionate care and excessive effort into making

plans to secure a stable job. And yet many appear also to recognize that their excessively laborious work may never be rewarded. These young people tend to—or perhaps pretend to—believe that their goals are achievable, even though many of them continually stumble. Their painstaking effort to increase their future employability and thereby obtain the “good life” paradoxically reinforces a culture of intensive competition.

One major criticism of the more popular studies of neo-liberalism is that they tend to conceptualize it as a towering homogeneous conceptual construct. Rarely do such studies note the possibility of neoliberalism exhibiting internal cracks, imbalances, or inconsistencies.<sup>14</sup> Nonetheless, a variety of social groups—including labor unions, progressive intellectuals, and civic organizations—have gradually become aware of the destructive effects of neo-liberal rule. In particular, progressive scholars have undertaken a number of detailed case studies and forms of fieldwork that attempt to pursue both embodied and non-conforming responses to the neoliberal dominance.<sup>15</sup> Some young people have started to organize independent associations that take direct action to place labor-related agendas in the public realm. For example, the ‘Youth Union’ is an organization that seeks better treatment of young workers as well as new legislation to protect the rights and interests of young people working in the service industries. It is clear that not all young people wholeheartedly express support for the neo-liberal mode of living, even while their lives may be strongly influenced by neo-liberal forms of governmentality and so-called “common sense.”

Many young Koreans have become disoriented by the absence of alternative scripts and truly meaningful choices. However, the majority has not yet found a concrete institutional articulation that would allow them to re-imagine their life courses. In this context, we find it imperative to begin exploring the “pockets of resistance” in which a certain number of youth groups have begun to enact their alternative practices. Neoliberal discourse exhibits certain fissures and problematic strains, and the social forces—the leaders of the major conglomerates and their attendant policy circles—that seek to safeguard and advance the neoliberal vision can be challenged by a coalition of public intellectuals,

labor unions, and civic groups. The hegemonic politics of the neoliberal agenda in Korea is neither static nor assured.

At this juncture, what seems essential is to substantiate some more rigorous forms of analysis as well as a variety of differentiated case studies of young people and their “psychic life” under neoliberal rule. These case studies need to focus their attention on the complicated and contradictory states of mind in which the youth live, states that are mostly ignored in mainstream social science. For instance, work can be undertaken that offers various “thick descriptions” and “location-specific projects” examining the embodiment of neoliberal social managements in different work sites and among socially-differentiated youth groups in terms of class, gender, and locality.<sup>16</sup>

### **Pragmatics and Survival Strategies**

In recent years, there has emerged a trend toward more empirically-oriented work on the state of youth under neo-liberalism.<sup>17</sup> This strand of research has been carried out by a diverse range of scholars, including sociologists, feminists, cultural critics, and practitioners of cultural studies. Some of this work has tackled the various “survival strategies and pragmatics” formulated and adopted by young adults. Using a diverse array of qualitative methods—in-depth interviews, focus groups, self-reports, narrative analysis, and participant observation—this kind of work aims at capturing the changed conduct and mindsets of young people, particularly as they prepare strenuously for potential employment. Such of this work has focused on the significance of the social disciplining of the conduct of young adults and their self-management as job seekers. The work is especially concerned with critically analyzing popular discourses that preach the values of self-innovation and self-motivation in the risk-prone neoliberal social atmosphere.

Nonetheless, at the same time, this society-wide neoliberal turn is often not perceived as oppressive, at least on the surface level.<sup>18</sup> In a way, young people recognize that they do need to cultivate employable, enterprising, and creative attributes. They do recognize the significance

of an ethic of self-reliance and personal accountability. To a significant degree, neoliberalism smoothly constructs a suite of preferred life forms and shared work ethics. Young adults voluntarily spend time building and cultivating creative potential and self-driven initiative to update their capacities and responsiveness for their future employers. In the face of deepening uncertainties, to borrow the words of Haejoang Cho, “they [have] grown accustomed to a highly calculated micro-management of self, with guidance and support from mothers and private tutors. Efficiency and effectiveness are important virtues for this generation. Therefore, this generation regards the cultural experiments of the new generation [of the 1990s] as a waste of time and energy.”<sup>19</sup> For the majority of college students, taking part in campus group activities, and especially undertaking public or political activities, is considered to be socially regressive or useless—if not a serious impediment to their career-building agendas.

Higher-level college students spend a lot of time, energy, and money in upgrading their English competence, and they also involve themselves in various internships, off-campus apprenticeships, and other extracurricular business-related labor. This kind of concerted routine is not for all youth: usually it is the students from middle-class or upper-class families who can best manage these activities to enhance their future social positions and to build social and cultural capital. This process often includes meticulous time-management, disciplined routines, and carefully coordinated performances. It also means acquiring knowledge of business-related norms structured through neoliberal human management. Nowadays, young people see these labor-intensive practices as embodied in the accumulation of “specs” [specifications]—a varied “must-list” for demonstrating one’s qualifications and proving one’s job-readiness.<sup>20</sup>

As Seo points out, the young job seeker makes every possible effort “in order to improve and refashion the [entrepreneurial] self in desirable and prescribed ways.”<sup>21</sup> The active pursuit of a kind of ‘neoliberal citizenship’ is thus manifested “in the obsessive pursuit of personal fulfillment and the incessant calculations necessary to achieve it,” even in the context of relentless competition, increased vulnerability, and a pervasive fear

of failure. One critic has referred to this dire situation as a “fierce arms race” among the young.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, Korean students nowadays carefully write and rewrite their resumes and letters of application, all the time strategically considering and calculating the professional and emotional appeal of their work.<sup>23</sup> Some of them even invent stories of their formative experiences, adding dramatic narrative elements to their job letters. In a self-mocking manner, some applicants now call these letters “self-made novels” [*jasoseol*].<sup>24</sup>

Several recent exploratory studies have focused their attention on the lived realities of Korean youth utilizing a detailed form of empirical-cum-discursive analysis. For example, both Lee and Han have written studies of the ways in which college students manage their off-campus activities. Their analyses discovered how these students legitimize their efforts as a way of becoming accustomed to business knowledge, while demonstrating their understanding of business-related repertoires and concepts.<sup>25</sup> These students tend to express a strong aspiration for having a “feel for the game” even before they enter the business world. In this respect, these students are subsumed into the dominant neo-liberal logic as they use the same logic to strategize ways to evade and shield themselves from the deep uncertainty they carry. Despite their outward conviction that “life is a business venture,” many of them harbor ambivalent feelings concerning their precarious status, revealing the vulnerability, angst, and distress they still secretly experience.

Oh’s sociological research (2013) has examined the collective sentiments and feelings of many college students: a number of them consider the practice of discrimination by earned status and “specs” both rational and natural.<sup>26</sup> Students who attend prestigious universities often emphasize the idea that the socially-accredited distinctions and discriminations of university rankings are valid and ought to be taken seriously by the job market. These strong feelings of entitlement based on symbolic markers are a noticeable trend on the Internet. An observer who visits certain popular college-oriented Internet sites can witness these daily-staged symbolic confrontations, with each group claiming their superiority in terms of status, prestige, and university ranking. This widespread strategy of staging social distinction is sometimes as much

a twisted expression of the highly unstable emotional states that the participants of the game of survival play.

Other forms of exclusionary acts also exist. For example, in recent years, on the Internet, there has developed a noticeable trend toward making excessively offensive and threatening comments towards social and ethnic “others.” A curious visitor to the notorious website *Ilbe* [*Daily Best*] can readily find widely-supported abusive attacks on and vilification of women, progressive intellectuals, migrant workers, refugees, and other social minorities.<sup>27</sup> In a way, these reactionary, emotionally-charged practices appear to have a socio-economic grounding in the highly unsettled conditions faced by contemporary youth. Certain youth groups appear to seek out symbolic scapegoats or moving targets to release their anger and frustration. Some of these contemporary cases, taken from amidst the highly disturbed and yet shared psychic life of young Koreans, need further exploration. To the extent that the mainstream social sciences rarely engage with the youth question and their peculiar structures of feeling, scholarly research that explores these issues would mark a ‘spirit of care’ for marginalized adolescent Koreans.

### **The Question of Survival and the Politics of Emotion**

In recent years, there has also been a florescence of scholarly studies on the emotional and affective aspects of young people, particularly those who are experiencing near-chronic states of frustration, resentment, disillusionment, and uncertainty. In the past, this problematic was only scantily pursued even in those youth-related studies that carried out advanced cultural analysis of the life situations of young people. The majority of intellectual endeavors in the field of sociology and cultural studies have tended to focus on generational differences and generation-specific features as these served to construct particular non-traditional cultural identities, spectacular performances, or expressions of radical (sub)cultural difference. In recent years, however, progressive scholars have brought in a differentiated problematic, forming new analytic constructs centered on the concept of youth in crisis. For example, Kim

Hong Jung has provided an influential framework for youth studies by focusing on adolescent cultural feelings and mindsets.<sup>28</sup> As a cultural sociologist, Kim has creatively probed a range of popular resources—novels, poetry, photo images, television dramas, and webtoons—as a way of foregrounding and decoding young people’s collective experiences and emotions. He argues that contemporary Korean youth embody something like a socially-constructed “heart” [*maeum*]—or, to use a Foucauldian term, “regime of the heart”—that, in a socio-historical sense, is quite new. Kim (2009) proposes an alternative way of capturing and highlighting the inner psychic life of adolescent youth by articulating the effects of neo-liberal practices, especially those business-centered norms, ideas, and guidelines provided by expert media and corporate opinion.<sup>29</sup> In Kim’s theoretical framework, these practices create a “neo-liberal regime of truth” legitimized and backed by powerful social forces. The concept of *maeum* represents an attempt to describe the socially salient workings of emotions, habitus, and practices among the youth. Kim strategically deploys this concept as a multi-perspectival construct for inquiry and criticism. Young people acquire and utilize emotional styles, localized intelligence, and social capital, together with social habits and cultural repertoires, through which they respond to their social and ontological insecurity.

At one level, Kim’s notion of heart or *maeum* is theorized as “the source of cognitive, emotional, volitional agency, which generates [concretized] social practices,”<sup>30</sup> and he attempts to flesh out this concept by infusing a range of keen observations and supple conceptual maneuvering on the various yet interconnected everyday cultural practices. He also looks at the mobilization of emotions enacted by many young adults as they desperately try to formulate their own responsive strategies, performances, and specific accomplishments as self-created captains steering their less-than-seaworthy ships. In this way, he endeavors to find an alternative route to come to terms with the complicated psycho-social conditions of young people, avoiding both a conventional, ideological critique and a purely textual analysis. Instead, his unique project, a self-reflexive sociology of emotions, looks at the dynamic and concretized interactions between the “economization

of subjectivity” and the constructive roles of embedded adolescent structures of feeling.

In his approach, Kim re-conceptualizes and concretizes the concept of emotion through the work of Pierre Bourdieu. Here, emotion is not constructed as a passive reaction to outside influences and forces but instead is conceived as a socially cultivated form of practice and intensified bodily act that carries specific socio-historical bearings and material imprints.<sup>31</sup> For Kim, Korean youth, as a collective, tends to embody idiosyncratic patterns of practices, habitus, and traces that reflect the specific “regime of the heart” that converge on the survivalist neo-liberalist modes whose material effects are felt in their daily routines.<sup>32</sup>

From his readings of their activities and affective adolescent states, Kim extracts four different “ideal types” formed by the social groups discoverable among contemporary adolescent Koreans. The first ideal type is the social group that enacts various practices of “survivalism” (*saengzonjuui*). This first group continually seeks to manage its work-related skills and to amass a range of resources to repackage themselves out of fear of an uncertain future and their potential social disposability. In doing so, they also tend to claim and legitimize whatever conduct, strategies, and attitudes they deem necessary for career-building and managing life’s many risks. Nonetheless, even though this first group of youth expends an extraordinary amount of effort to upgrade their qualifications, they rarely make any move that feels completely safe or assured.<sup>33</sup>

A second group attempts to form a sense of co-presence (*gongzon* 共存) with their social peers by taking part in activities that rarely produce material or institutional compensation. For instance, some college students participate in campus literary circles or book clubs to further their knowledge and to form common bonds with others. Moreover, they might decide to perform public or communal services instead of working on their job-related skills for future employment. Crucially, these self-conscious choices now cut against the grain of popular wisdom among a majority of college students in that these unconventional activities take up the time and energy needed for career advancement. Kim suggests that this type of social life, nowadays shared by only a small fraction

of Korean adolescents, is reminiscent of the more traditional sense of solidarity or community more widely available in earlier epochs. This form of social existence now appears to possess a degree of non-conformity or defiance of the dominant neo-liberal social grammar or habitus.

The third group exhibits a de-territorialized form of social existence (*talzon* 脫存), one which self-consciously evades the ubiquitous pressures and demands of the dominant modes of neo-liberal social management. This group expresses a radical sense of retreat and willed escape from the precarious state faced by the majority of Korean youth.<sup>34</sup> The Japanese social phenomenon of *hikikomori* may be useful in comprehending this group. The sense of a willed escape inherent in this mode of social existence tends to be one performed by isolated subjects: the adolescent in question remains holed up at home and relinquishes or avoids almost all social contact, both with potential peer groups and even with other members of his or her immediate family. This type of adolescent becomes severely withdrawn from the ordinary flow of life and intensely paralyzed by profound social and psychological fears. Such a mode of social existence represents an example of a purposeful “disappearing act” (*sarajim*) from the public realm and everyday life. The individuals in this group tend to exhibit a range of psychosomatic symptoms and in some cases genuine mental illness. Such symptoms appear to derive from a sense of sheer isolation and the difficulties of coping with the heavy burden of parental expectations and disappointments.

Finally, the fourth group tends to exhibit or perform a range of narcissistic or self-indulgent forms of conduct and actions (*dokzon* 獨存) born out of a perennial sense of boredom, restlessness, and precariousness. Kim examines this last group in terms of cultural “tribalism.” An individual in this group may choose to pursue one or other specific hobby as a “connoisseur”—the Japanese concept of *otaku* comes to mind—in which he or she seeks to achieve a deep and passionate immersion within certain cultural milieus, styles, or tastes. This highly self-conscious response to the risky nature of the social surroundings is sometimes expressed through a fanatic devotion to the collecting and consuming of certain commodities such as promo

dolls, art toys, or various fandom-related goods. By means of such self-stylization, the group member is able to embody a somewhat different form of “refusal” of—and temporary escape from—the pressures of neo-liberal rule.

Kim’s four ideal types offer an informed and viable conceptualization of some of the distinctive modes of living that exist among contemporary Korean youth. Admittedly, this work represents less a form of extensive empirical analysis and more a kind of nuanced and attentive rumination on some distinctive characteristics of young people’s acts, emotional practices, and coping strategies. Nonetheless, despite its shortcomings, Kim’s work sheds valuable light on both the experiential conditions and the collective dispositions of contemporary Korean youth. His work captures some of the highly contradictory impulses, desires, and emotions as well as the fractured subjectivities of young Koreans through a careful and yet highly imaginative approach within cultural and youth studies. Due to the fact that there still exists only a handful of culturally-nuanced studies on the habitus and emotional dynamics of young people, Kim’s path-breaking work is a valuable catalytic resource to those who wish to explore further. At the same time, his work needs to be enhanced through more extensive case studies that can articulate other pertinent socio-cultural factors including gender, class, locality, and sexuality.<sup>35</sup>

## Conclusion

As we have suggested, the dominant neo-liberal discursive construction of an entrepreneurial self has had a tremendous impact on the existential and emotional states of contemporary Korean youth. Nowadays, the preoccupation with the meticulous management of the autonomous self as both everyday task and shared pseudo-ritual is so habitually ingrained that the majority of young people consciously distance themselves from the realm of larger public and political issues.

For many Korean adolescents and young adults, participating in social activities or engaging in public discussion is considered “quite burdensome” or “too costly” while “social critique is increasingly

replaced by self-critique.”<sup>36</sup> Ironically, many young Koreans spare little time and energy to take critical approaches to the very structural factors that have rendered their social existence precarious. From a related angle, the symbolic tug-of-war between the younger generations and their parents appears to be becoming more salient. The Hell Chosun phenomenon is a collective outcry against the disturbed and frustrated condition of a Korean youth that appears to be “at risk.” In the meantime, many politicians, educational experts, and government officials seem ineffective and unresponsive towards the youth question. Within the educational institutions, the majority of scholars may collectively be aware of the issues surrounding this society-wide problem. Obviously, some will tend to hold and reproduce neoliberal ideas, while others may prefer simply to act as onlookers.

For progressive scholars, however, the unstable conditions of the younger generation pose an unavoidable set of dilemmas. One way of responding to this challenge is for progressive scholars and intellectuals to pursue much more reflexive forms of intellectual analysis and rigorous critical projects in order to better understand what is taking place. Such projects would certainly include, among other things, more empirically detailed, conceptually fine-tuned, and more refined cultural, discursive, and ethnographic analyses.

By self-reflectively illuminating and engaging with the changing socio-economic situations of young people, Korean scholars can aim to contextualize the struggles against neoliberal modes of life and work disciplines, and help envision the possibilities of alternative forms of politics and social scripts for youth. In doing so, they need to draw on some of the major participatory impulses and critical analytical resources that exist in spite of neoliberal social conditions. Such a series of intellectual projects will offer a highly challenging form of “cultural politics” in itself. Critical youth studies should not lose sight of the larger ideological and discursive effects of neo-liberalism and its pretense of normalcy and orthodoxy, in spite of its violence, while venturing outside the narrowly defined domain of popular culture.<sup>37</sup>

A number of scholars have worked on a collective understanding of the ways in which youth has become an object of flexible yet highly

predatory modes of neo-liberal disciplinization across geographical boundaries. At the present time, the subject of youth is constantly foregrounded both as a strategic means of socio-economic mobilization and as a symbolic and imaginary battleground where different social forces and political actors, including media institutions, political parties, and think tanks, attempt to (re)construct varying versions of it for political gains.

As we have illustrated in this article, some recent cultural studies projects in Korea demonstrate that youth, as a key discursive category, needs to be interrogated, repositioned, and substantiated through more multifaceted approaches. Researchers need to bring both a sharp awareness and to undertake some careful conceptual maneuvering in order to grasp the inner turmoil and peculiar emotional underpinnings of many youth-at-risk. This task requires progressive scholars and intellectuals to seek out more concretized ethico-political, theoretical, and empirical projects that are able to challenge the mainstream approaches within the social sciences. Too often, these mainstream approaches disregard the existing pain, anger, and frustration felt by many young adults driven to participate in the games of extreme survival.

It is our hope that this exploratory essay of youth under neoliberalism and the state of cultural studies in contemporary Korea can become both an immediate resource and an intellectual catalyst for the important work to come.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Hankyoreh Daily*, March 5, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Sang-Chin Chun, "Sociology of Self-Help: What Alternatives Can We Advise Other Than Self-Help?," *Culture and Society* 5 (2008): 103-40; Juhee Chun, *Studying Harder, Becoming Poorer* [우리는 왜 공부할수록 가난해지는가] (Seoul: Saihaengsong, 2016); Hee-eun Lee, "Precarity and Hope in Digital Labor: In-depth Interviews on the Off-campus Internship Experiences of College Students," *Korean Journal of Information and Communication* 66 (2014): 211-41; Yunhyung Han, *No Country for the Young* [청춘을 위한 나라는 없다] (Seoul: Across, 2013); Jongyul Choi, "Sociology of Bokagwang: A Narrative Analysis of Local University Students' Stories," *Korean Journal of Sociology* 51, no.1 (2017): 243-93; Seon-Gi Kim, "The Cultural Politics of Discursive Construction of

‘Younger Generation’ - Critical Analysis on the Discourse of ‘Younger Generation’ since 2010,” *Media and Society* 24, no. 1 (2016): 5-68.

<sup>3</sup> “The Give Up Generation” refers to those who have seemingly abandoned the quest for love and the desire for a stable marriage with children, due to the pervasive uncertainty about the economic future. In recent years, this theme has been widely covered both in the area of journalism and in cultural criticism.

<sup>4</sup> The terms require some elucidation. The phrase “hellish peninsula” refers to South Korea as a Dante-esque inferno on earth; “raising the bamboo stick” signifies a symbolic act of rebellion. Both of these terms carry a primarily rhetorical and symbolic force rather than indicating any genuine form conscious of systematic rebellion or collective resistance from below. The phrase “golden spoon” is a euphemism for those born into socially secure upper echelons of Korean society. It parodies those who do not have to worry about widespread economic hardship or an uncertain personal or familial future. The Korean expression “no-o-ryok,” is a parodic expression for “effort” in Korean [*noryok*]. In Korean usage, it is both pronounced and written intentionally differently in order to deliver a sense of sheer resentment-ridden cynicism, emphasizing that no matter how much one tries, one’s efforts cannot change very much.

<sup>5</sup> Junghoon Chung, “The N-generation of Hell Chosun and the Justice Principle of No-o-ryok” [헬조선의 N포 세대와 노력의 정의론], *Culture and Science* [문화과학] 86 (2016): 132-54; Kwonil Park, “Hell Chosun, Catastrophic Discourse Maintaining the System” [헬조선 체제를 유지하는 파국론], *Hwanghae Culture* [황해문화] 90 (2016): 73-95; Young-Hyun So, “Dreaming of Escaping Hell Chosun,” [헬조선에서 탈조선을 꿈꾼다는 것], *Creation & Criticism* [창작과 비평] 44, no. 2 (2016): 292-308.

<sup>6</sup> Taesup Choi, *The Surplus Society* [잉여 사회] (Seoul: Ungjinjishikhouse, 2013); Aerin Kim et al., “On Analyzing the ‘Hell-Chosun’ Phenomenon in Contemporary South Korea,” *Korean Journal of Communication and Information* 80 (2016): 40-114; Woochang Lee, “The Origin of the ‘Hell Joseon’ Discourse - A Study of the Narratives of Progress and the Subjects of History in Korea, 1987-2016,” *Society and Philosophy* 32 (2016): 107-58.

<sup>7</sup> By a “culturalist approach,” we refer to a range of scholarly works and projects that have attempted to illuminate the main characteristics and active role of youth culture, popular culture, and subculture(s) by means of semiotics, fandom analysis, and ethnography. Concretely, this means both that strain of subcultural work that stems from the work of “the Birmingham School” as well as of certain other Anglo-American cultural theories. In discussing the irruption of new types of cultural sensibility in Korea since the 1990s, a number of cultural critics adopted these various theoretical frameworks and methodological tools. Over the course of the last decade, however, the radically altered socio-economic conditions of youth have resulted in a significant reappraisal of this once-dominant culturalist approach and a self-conscious search for alternative frameworks and problematics. Keehyeung Lee, “On the Use of Generation as Discursive Construct and the Implications of Generational Politics in South Korean

Society,” *Sai* 9 (2011): 137-79; Seon-Gi Kim, “Younger Generation,” 5-68; Dongjin Seo, *The Will to Self-Managing, the Will to Freedom: The Self-Managing Ethic and the Spirit of Flexible Capitalism in South Korea*, ed. Jesook Song (New York: Routledge, 2010), 84-100; Dongwook Song and Keehyeung Lee, “A Cultural Analysis of the Varying Modes of Survival and the Particular Structures of Feeling among Young Adults in Contemporary South Korea in an Era of Fierce Competition and Widespread Social Uncertainty,” *Korean Journal of Information and Communication* 84 (2017): 28-98.

<sup>8</sup> Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller eds., *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015); Mitchell Dean, *Governmentality: Power and Rule in Modern Society* (London: Sage, 2009). Jack Bratich, Jeremy Packer, and Cameron McCarthy eds., *Foucault, Cultural Studies, Governmentality* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2003).

<sup>9</sup> Dongjin Seo, *Freedom of Will, Will to Self-Develop* [자유의 의지 자기계발의 의지] (Seoul: Dolbekae, 2009); Min-Jung Kwak, “Rethinking the Neoliberal Nexus of Education, Migration, and Institutions,” *Environment and Planning A* 45 (2013): 1858-72; Joohwan Kim, *Co-opted Resistance* [포획된 저항] (Seoul: Imaejin, 2017); Younghan Cho, “Re-reading Neoliberal Transformation in South Korea through ‘Conjunctural Economic Analysis,’” *Communication Theory* 8, no. 2 (2012): 22-64.

<sup>10</sup> Nancy Abelmann et al., “College Rank and Neo-liberal Subjectivity in South Korea: the Burden of Self-development,” *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 10, no. 2 (2009): 229-47; Sojin Park, “Anxious Lives in the Period of ‘Self-Management’ and ‘Family Management’—Neoliberalism and Neoliberal Subjectivity,” *Economy and Society* 84 (2009): 12-39; Jesook Song, *South Koreans in the Debt Crisis* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

<sup>11</sup> Sung-Hyun Hong and Woongjae Ryoo, “Becoming a Global Talent in the Era of Unlimited Global Competition,” *Communication Theory* 9, no. 4 (2013): 4-57.

<sup>12</sup> Sukjin Chae, “Technology, Labor, and Precarious Lives,” *Korean Journal of Communication and Information* 79 (2016): 226-59; Lee, “Precarity and Hope,” 211-41; Hagen Koo, *The Muddled Middle Class in Globalized South Korea*, ed. Youna Kim (London: Routledge, 2017), 107-118.

<sup>13</sup> Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

<sup>14</sup> Keehyeung Lee et al., “A Cultural Analysis of Self-introduction Letters by Young Job Seekers,” *Korean Journal of Information and Communication* 72 (2015): 7-51; Kwak, “Rethinking,” 1858-72.

<sup>15</sup> Haejoang Cho et al., *The Betrayal of No-o-ryok* [노오력의 배신] (Seoul: Ch'angbi, 2016); Jongyul Choi, “Sociology of Bokagwang,” 243-93; Joohwan Kim, “Social Enterprise and Neoliberal Governmentality in South Korea - Focusing on Governing the Social,” *Economy and Society* 110 (2016): 164-200; Kim, *Co-opted Resistance*; Chun *Studying Harder, Becoming Poorer*; Youna Kim ed., *Routledge Handbook of Korean Culture and Society*

(London: Routledge, 2017).

<sup>16</sup> Seok-Choon Sohn, "A Critique on the Critical Communication Studies and Journalism Focused on the Neoliberalism in Korea," *Korean Journal of Communication & Information* 45 (2009): 49-76; Hong and Ryoo, "Unlimited Global Competition," 4-57; Woongae Ryoo and Jin Woo Park, "Neo-liberal Discourses on Competition Permeated in the Survival Format Program: Focusing on an In-depth Interview with the Producers," *Studies of Broadcasting Culture* 24, no. 1 (2012): 139-65.

<sup>17</sup> Cho et al, *The Betrayal of No-o-ryok*; Chae, "Technology, Labor," 226-59; Lee et al., "Self-introduction Letters," 7-51.

<sup>18</sup> Kim, "Social Enterprise," 164-200; Kim, *Co-opted Resistance*.

<sup>19</sup> Haejoang Cho, "The Spec Generation Who Can't Say 'No': Overeducated and Underemployed Youth in Contemporary South Korea," *Positions* 23, no. 3 (2015): 446.

<sup>20</sup> Amy Levine writes the following on the practice of "spec-building" and its implications in South Korea: "Spec is a 'Konglish,' or hybrid Korean-English word, that abbreviates 'specification.' Korean youth spend considerable time and energy collecting these, which are the building blocks of their resumes or CVs. One university student recently told me that he does not follow the news regularly because he spends all his free time getting specs. Another student told me that specs have replaced concern for politics or international affairs. Still another student said that Korean politics are "too depressing" and she does not expect much to come from it so it is more practical to focus on things she can control such as her own specs." Quoted in Amy Levine, "Neoliberal Education and Its Discontents in South Korea," *Social Science Space*, September, 26, 2014; Cho, "The Spec Generation," 437-62; Park, "'Self-Management' and 'Family Management,'" 12-39.

<sup>21</sup> Seo, "Self-Managing," 84-85.

<sup>22</sup> Choi, "The Politics of Youth Movement" ['청년운동'의 정치학], *Culture and Science [문화과학]* 66(2011): 15-50; Song and Lee, "Structures of Feeling," 28-98.

<sup>23</sup> Chun, *Studying Harder, Becoming Poorer*.

<sup>24</sup> Song and Lee, "Structures of Feeling," 28-98.

<sup>25</sup> Lee, "Precarity and Hope," 211-41; Sun Han, "The Governmentality of Becoming Economical," *Korean Journal of Information and Communication* 57, no. 3 (2013): 431-54.

<sup>26</sup> Chanho Oh, *We Say Yes to Discrimination* [우리는 차별에 찬성합니다] (Seoul: Kaema Kowŏn, 2013).

<sup>27</sup> Chung, "The N-generation of Hell Chosun," 132-54; Woochang Lee, "The Origin of the 'Hell Joseon' Discourse - A Study of the Narratives of Progress and the Subjects of History in Korea, 1987-2016," *Society and Philosophy* 32 (2016): 107-58.

<sup>28</sup> Hong Jung Kim, "Survival, Survivalism, Young Generation from the Viewpoint of the Sociology of the Heart," *Korean Journal of Sociology* 49, no. 1 (2015): 179-212; Hong Jung Kim, *Sociological Pa-sang-ryok* [사회학적 파상력] (Seoul: Munhakdongne, 2016).

<sup>29</sup> Hong Jung Kim, *Sociology of the Mind* [마음의 사회학] (Seoul: Munhakdongne,

2009).

<sup>30</sup> Kim, *Sociological Pa-sang-ryok*.

<sup>31</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Acts of Resistance: Against the Tyranny of the Market* (New York: Free Press, 1998); Sara Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion* (London: Routledge, 2014); Ben Highmore, *Cultural Feelings: Mood, Mediation, and Cultural Politics* (London: Routledge, 2017).

<sup>32</sup> Kim, "Survival, Survivalism," 186.

<sup>33</sup> Haejoang Cho and Jeffrey Stark, *South Korean Youth across Three Decades*, ed. Youna Kim (London: Routledge, 2017), 119-33.

<sup>34</sup> Kim, *Sociological Pa-sang-ryok*.

<sup>35</sup> Song and Lee, "Structures of Feeling," 28-98.

<sup>36</sup> We have borrowed this felicitous expression from Christina Scharff, "The Psychic Life of Neoliberalism: Mapping the Contours of Entrepreneurial Subjectivity," *Theory, Culture and Society* 33, no. 6 (2016):116.

<sup>37</sup> Choi, "Sociology of Bokagwang," 243-93.