

***Yŏgong* between the Compulsion of Production and Modern Desire**

Christian Caiconte
(The University of Sydney)

Abstract

The aim of the paper is to investigate the structural and subjective roots of precarious life in the developmental state of the Republic of Korea, from the 1960s to the 1980s. The units of analysis are narratives by Korean factory women [여공 *yŏgong*], which can be found in literary works, autobiographies, memoirs, and other publications. The paper starts by briefly deploying a theoretical framework for the study of subjectivity based on the psychoanalytic categories of drive and desire. These categories then serve as a blueprint to distinguish between, on the one hand, the objective form that capitalist social relations take at the textual level and, on the other, *yŏgong*'s transgressive appropriation of particular signifiers of modernity. The analysis of the dynamics of *yŏgong* subjectivity suggests that these workers' struggle for modernity—their desire for education, fashion trends and labor activism—also unintendedly reinforced the compulsions of an immiserating developmental unconscious.

Keywords: desire, developmental state, developmental unconscious, drive, Korean women workers, Lacanian psychoanalysis, precarious life, *yŏgong*

Introduction

In this paper, I maintain that the surprising economic development experienced by the Republic of Korea between the 1960s and the 1980s cannot be understood exclusively as the result of a well-planned statist “variety” of capitalism, nor it can be identified with hegemonic ideas or discourses alone. Such projects would be limited to describing the outward forms of Korean developmentalism, without actually grasping why those forms *arose historically* in the first place. With this in mind, I suggest that the intensity of Korea’s industrial take-off, this developmental excess, can be better understood as the result of contradictions generated by historically determinate social practices or relations. These practices do not simply correspond, however, to those motivated by ideological frameworks such as nationalism, militarism, or religion. They also include, crucially, objective forms of economic activity—forms that slowly emerged from Korea’s traumatic interaction with powerful regional and global historical tendencies. My argument is that the specific, excessive form that the exploitation of labor-power takes in developmental Korea is marked less by the conscious decisions of the individuals involved in the process than by the functioning of a quasi-autonomous economic imperative—namely, the compulsion to produce *for profit* which, in the case of Korea, I call the “developmental unconscious.”

But how could Korean workers, the direct producers of Park Chung Hee’s developmentalism, even withhold the objectifying demand of capitalist production? Part of the answer, I claim, lies in the slow and contingent way in which modern knowledge and technology were imposed on the minds of Korean individuals. Yet, far from constituting the enforcement of a static logic “from above,” this process entailed the gradual subsumption of peasant agriculture and artisans under the new requirements of the universalism of modernity.¹ Thus, to talk about the absolutization of modern efficiency and productivity in Park’s Korea means, first and foremost, to talk about the result of decades of constituting practice, that is, the bodily and mental activity not only of capitalists but also of workers themselves, many of whom were young, peasant women.

It is in the agricultural society of colonial Korea, however, that one finds the roots of an industrialization process significantly dependent on female labor. As Soon-Won Park indicates, the country's industrial expansion in the mid-1930s generated a steady increase in the number of Korean women workers in light industries such as textiles and food processing.² These workers, moreover, were concentrated in the age group 15 to 24 "because of patriarchal strictures against married women working outside the household and the custom of early marriage."³ Indeed, although married women in 1920s Korea were able to find some industry-related jobs,⁴ the subsequent development of manufacturing compelled companies to recruit poor peasant girls.⁵ While most of these low-paid young women entered the textile sector, where they in fact constituted the bulk of the workforce,⁶ an important fraction of them were employed in food processing and chemicals. In 1935, for instance, of the total number of female industrial workers in Korea, 49 percent were in textiles, 26.7 percent were in chemicals, and 18.3 were in food processing.⁷ This is in contrast to the total male industrial workforce, of whom only 6.3 percent were in textiles, while the rest were hired mostly in food processing (33.4 percent) and chemicals (25.1 percent).⁸

In rapidly industrializing Korea, on the other hand, the percentage change in the number of women employed in manufacturing increased at a similar rate to their male counterparts. Thus, if in 1960 only 4.9 percent of all female workers held industrial jobs, this proportion grew to 22.3 percent in 1980 (an increase of 4.6 times).⁹ In comparison to this, of all male employees, their share in the same occupations rose from 5.7 percent to 22.7 percent between those years (an increase of 4 times).¹⁰ The inclusion of women in the industrial workforce throughout the developmental years did not mean, however, their liberation from the hierarchical Confucian social norms that characterized *Chosŏn* Korea. From colonial times, they would not only have received lower wages than male workers,¹¹ but would also have suffered discrimination from a society unaccustomed to their new roles as *yŏgong* [여공] or factory women.¹²

By piecing together various narratives—autobiographies, literary works and other publications—of factory women during Korea's

developmental era, I investigate the specific unconscious mechanisms (unconscious drive and desire) through which their precarious life became naturalized and sublimated in a context of rapid disintegration of traditional modes of social existence. More specifically, I pay attention to the linguistic practice¹³ that these texts represent, i.e., the symbolic and imaginary strategies that served Korean women workers to “resolve,” at the level of the signifier, the contradictions and traumas they faced. Ultimately, then, the paper shows that capitalism’s purported structural necessity for gender inequality, or for any other qualitative form of social practice, is a questionable argument.¹⁴ My analysis of the narratives of Korean factory women shows, on the contrary, that their differential position in developmental society was not *per se* the source of oppression but *became* oppressive in the face of the capitalist logic of accumulation; that is to say, when subsumed under the latter’s *indifference* towards qualitative specificity.

Lacan’s Categories of Drive and Desire

Drawing on Karl Marx’s *Capital* (1867), psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan theorized social excess as the relentless search for the surplus-object. This is the unattainable object that remains in the field of the Other, standing behind all objects pursued by the I, by consciousness. As we know, Marx “discovered” this surplus-object through a dialectical analysis of capitalism—for him, the excessive productivity of labor ultimately shows that the true aim of capitalist production is not a particular use-value, nor an exchange-value, but the endless production of surplus-value.¹⁵ By the same token, the rise and fall of wages is not to be associated with the conscious judgement of particular capitalists, but with the unconscious drive, the “law,” of self-valorizing capital.¹⁶ As Marx puts it: “Just as man is governed, in religion, by the products of his own brain, so, in capitalist production, he is governed by the products of his own hand.”¹⁷ Eventually, Lacan equated Marx’s discovery with his theorization of the object *a*, the object-cause of desire.¹⁸ Specifically, through the concept of enjoyment (*jouissance*), Lacan reframed the excessive productivity of labor as the excessive performance of the working and desiring *subject*,

reasserting the idea that the subjects of capitalism work and enjoy not for themselves but for the Other, for the historical symbolic authority which is capital. In such a move, Lacan expanded upon Marx's "materialist theory of the subject," which rejects both the empiricist and idealist reduction of subjectivity to consciousness.¹⁹ Accordingly, subjectivity is now theorized as *the contradictory unity of socially embedded unconsciousness and consciousness*; these are two forms of thought, two dimensions of subjectivity, which can be differentiated through careful analysis.²⁰ We may further define the dimension of unconsciousness, following Slavoj Žižek, as "the form of thought external to the thought itself—in short, some Other Scene external to the thought whereby the form of the thought is already articulated in advance,"²¹ whilst the realm of consciousness would correspond to the "internal" thought processes of the self-aware, knowing subject.²² What is important at this point is to highlight the originality of the Lacanian subject in terms of its distancing from naturalistic, asocial conceptions of an independent consciousness, thought or ego. The enjoyment I am referring to here is not, therefore, only that of personal satisfaction or pleasure. At that level of analysis, one has access to a "naïve understanding of *jouissance*" that merely corresponds to the immediate, empirical aspect of unconscious desire.²³ Enjoyment also has a primary or structural form which, in dialogue with Marx's discussion of wage labor and surplus-value, as alluded to above, Lacan called *surplus-jouissance*.²⁴ I argue that a holistic study of capitalist precarity should not overlook this paradoxical enjoyment, that of capitalist drive and desire, especially if we accept Fabio Vighi's claim that "in capitalist modernity, wage labor informs the totality of our subjective existence, *including its unconscious mode of enjoyment*."²⁵

Lacan's homology between the critique of political economy and psychoanalysis is not restricted to clarifying Marx's materialist approach to subjectivity, however. Rather, it stresses the *linguistic* determination of such reinterpretation: once the relevance of language is acknowledged, capitalist excess can finally be discerned in the domains of writing and speech, showing how the interrelation between economic compulsions and transgressive practices is also expressed at the level of the subject's written and spoken narrative.

Now, to grasp the textual acts of Korean women workers not only as imaginary resistances to the injustices of modernity but, most importantly, also as the very re-enactment of such a context, I resort to the aforementioned psychoanalytic distinction between the enjoyment of the drive and of desire.²⁶ The unconscious drive, on the one hand, signals the systemic enjoyment derived from the compulsion to “work hard,” the point at which individual practice and the repetitive dynamic of capital coincide. In this position, in other words, the subject “surrenders” her search for autonomy, so to speak, and now considers herself as the direct embodiment, indeed the object, of the Other’s demand. Lacan would explain the unconsciousness of the drive as a sort of “external” level of subjectivity: “[the subject] cannot say ‘I’ at this level. Things present themselves, on the contrary, as ‘coming from the outside.’”²⁷ Furthermore, the drive points to the subject’s fixation on a single object of devotion, which is what distinguishes it from desire—while desire “slips” between one object and another (neither of them being final or absolute) the drive “circulates” around its chosen object, which is material and therefore “lacks nothing.” As Žižek points out, the actual object of the drive in capitalism is money exchanged for labor-power, or the circulation of money as capital “which propels forward the entire capitalist machinery.”²⁸ The profit-maximizing behavior of the owners of capital, as well as the toil of the direct producers (laborers), reflect that compulsiveness engendered by the drive.

In unconscious desire, on the other hand, the subject, exhausted and injured due to immoderate factory work, rebels against the official mandate to sacrifice herself for the nation, doing so through the desire for accessible objects of modernity. In contrast to the repetitions of the signifying chain which structures the drive, then, the chain of desire allows the “mapping of the subject” by means of the articulation of disparate signifiers or objects.²⁹ The enjoyment of the desiring subject therefore amounts to the surpassing, as it were, of the *poussée*, pressure or drive.³⁰ Instead of implying an “outside” of production, however, objects such as new clothing trends, education and even labor activism will prove indistinguishable from the imperative of capitalist modernization, that is, the discourse of the Other. Desire is

thus fundamentally a desire for the Other (i.e., an *unconscious* desire), an Other who is supposed to have “something” (the object *a*) that the subject lacks. In the subject’s conscious discourse or narrative, however, this relation of subjection does not appear as such but, to use psychoanalytic terminology, is fantasized, usually communicated as the purported autonomy or resistance of the subject against the alterity of the Other. Yet it is this very unattainability, this privation, of otherness which nourishes desire, keeping it alive.

The psychoanalytic notions of drive and desire allow me, then, to understand subjectivity as a process, as a dynamic unfolding. This means that an individual’s subjectivity is not fully submitted to the logic of capitalism (drive) nor totally independent from it (desire), but the result of the conflict between both unconscious tendencies. In this way, I avoid reducing the analysis of *yōgong*’s narratives to the description of their fixed, idealized psychic spaces, discerning instead the structural contradictions that these texts reveal. As I show below, such structural contradictions are not simply those of the capitalist unconscious,³¹ but those of one of the geographical “species” of that global “genus,” so to speak: the modernizing/immiserating Korean developmental unconscious.³²

The Indifference of the Developmental Drive

To speak of the indifference of capital is to emphasize that the excess that manifests itself on the surface of social and subjective life is ultimately based on the self-expansion of a signifying logic, the logic of value. Being indifferent to manifoldness and otherness, value moves “on its own” by exchanging itself—money as the “general form of objectified labor”—for itself—labor-power.³³ The key idea here is that this indifference is not only a feature of capital itself but, more importantly, of the worker who “looks upon the *particular content* of his labor with equal indifference.”³⁴ Put another way, indifference is also the name for the “sabotage” of consciousness by the capitalist drive, which takes place *within* the subjectivity of the worker as a result of a historically specific “misunderstanding”—subjectivity is “this looking at the economy and its

own subjectivity as if both were not only separate but naturally given.”³⁵ Thus, the everyday reaffirmation of value occurs not primarily through class-based domination (as the conscious decisions of capitalists) but, fundamentally, through quasi-natural, unconscious practice: the endless circulation of money as capital, which involves both the processes of production and circulation, and *both the exploiters and the exploited*.

My argument, once more, is that developmental precarity, because of its historically determinate form, cannot be understood in terms of the social control exerted by a specific social group (for instance, the Korean capitalist class) over the rest. Rather, the central category of social oppression should be identified in the language of value itself, the “abstract and dynamic form of social domination characteristic of capitalism.”³⁶ Thereby social categories such as class, gender, race or others can be analyzed in their historicity, considering their social and historical constitution. As evidenced by the two texts below, the first an extract from Shin Kyung-Sook’s *The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness* [외판방] (2015) and the second an interview with a former *yŏgong*,³⁷ the identity of factory women in industrializing Korea was usually suppressed when faced with the systemic compulsion of developmental capital.

As Cousin and I turn into skilled workers, our names disappear. I am Number One on the Stereo Division’s A Line, and Cousin is called Number Two. This is what Foreman shouts.

“Number One and Number Two, what are you guys doing? You’re holding things up.”

Even if I am not called Number One, my name no longer exists. The name that I have been called for sixteen years cannot come work with me at the company because I am sixteen years old.... When someone calls me this I do not realize it’s me they’re talking to and fail to respond. Only when Cousin pokes me on the side do I lift my head, with a slow “Y-yes.”³⁸

The *jaedansha* [재단사] would never refer to us by name, it seemed that it would be humiliating for them to do so. It was always “Number Three Machinist,” or “Number Five Shida.” I felt that

I had no dignity, no identity. I was treated as though I were not human at all, but a “thing.” There was no difference between me as a person and the sewing machine that I was attached to.³⁹

In itself, a name implies the subject’s relation with the otherness proper to kinship relations. One is named using another’s name. The form of subjugation under the capitalist Other, however, is of a different sort. In capitalism, I have said, domination is indifferent to the content of the worker’s labor—it involves relations between “things.” Modernity as the identity of productivity and progress relates only to the otherness that is inscribed in its own language, such as “Number One on the Stereo Division’s A Line” or “Number Three Machinist.” The re-enactment of such totalizing logic by people themselves is only possible through a particular social arrangement, that of the wage relation, which “quantifies everything.”⁴⁰

While it is undeniable that the abusive behavior of the above-mentioned foreman and *jaedansha* (tailor) reflects to some extent the gender hierarchies present within the factory, I should stress here that both narratives do not portray oppression first and foremost in terms of the qualitative traits of their authors, for example, their gender. Rather, what these narratives denounce is the actual form of such oppression, which, as seen, is highly compulsive, quantitative, and abstract: by demanding efficiency and shouting empty, meaningless names, the foreman and the *jaedansha* indifferently *enjoy* modernity. “It would be humiliating for them to do so,” though, if they had to refer to their young assistants by their real names, that is, considering them in their difference. But the unconscious developmental enjoyment aimed at profit maximization is definitely not expressed only by those with a certain amount of power in the workplace. The following quotes are informative in this regard:

I tried to convince myself to be responsible for my family and four younger siblings and told myself to carry out my duty as the oldest.... I felt so proud of myself for helping my seven-member family... and thus, I began to enjoy working.⁴¹

I see as my priorities an immediate increase in wages; the introduction of a new scheme for retirement payment; an annual bonus scheme for skilled workers; improvements to our dormitories, and the introduction of an education programme for the 90% of women workers who have received no more than primary school education.⁴²

The first text above corresponds to an autobiographical essay written in 1975 by Won Yong-wuk, who at that time had worked as a factory woman for thirteen years (she was thirty). Her essay, titled “I am a Textile Worker,” was the winner of an autobiographical essay contest for women workers and was eventually published by the government magazine *Nodong* [노동].⁴³ The second text, on the other hand, emanates from a speech given by Han Soon-nim in 1974, the same day she was elected to the position of president of the newly established trade union of the Bando Textile Company.⁴⁴ A year later, on the occasion of the union’s annual meeting, she declared: “We must be prepared to sacrifice ourselves for the achievement of high productivity because economic success is the only way to protect our nation from communist invasion.”⁴⁵ What I am attempting to show with these references is, again, that the peculiar or “miraculous” pace of Korean late industrialization had less to do with the conscious decisions of the people who were involved in the process than with the immense, if alienated, social powers that had been developing in the country since the beginning of the twentieth century.

By pursuing particular goals such as contributing to their families or the unions they led, as is the case in the previous narratives, these Korean women could not help but inadvertently reproduce the excessive logic that was the underlying source of their problems. These are examples of linguistic manifestations of the abstract social determination that I earlier identified as Korea’s developmental drive. The alien language of modernity through which the *yǒgong*’s unconscious intentions are articulated, however, also harbors dynamic acts of developmental transgression that challenge the more repetitive and circular nature of the capitalist drive.

Desire and the Limits of Developmental Excess

Unsurprisingly, the modern ideals for women that pervaded Korean developmental society had their roots in the intricate cultural developments of its colonial years, an era marked by the emergence of the *sin'yŏsŏng* [신여성] or New Woman discourse. Founded on the New Woman movement of the 1920s and early 1930s, the *sin'yŏsŏng* as a symbolic formation concentrated several signifiers of modernity already contained in the (initially Western) modern worldview, including notions of freedom, education, fashion (hairdo and clothes), and the city as the center of progress, among others.⁴⁶ As Kyeong-Hee Choi pointedly notes, though liberating and empowering in appearance, these notions, which formed the aspirations and ambitions of Korean women at the time, were actually in many ways indistinguishable from the language of the colonizer, thus entailing “a certain degree of colonization of the mind.”⁴⁷

Although no longer subjugated by the direct power of Japan, post-1960s Korea would certainly remain connected to the chain of signifiers mentioned above. The specific ways through which modern knowledge evolved under new developmental circumstances, however, are yet to be clarified. A petition signed by ten thousand women workers in protest to oppressive working conditions at the Pangnim Textile Company in 1976 stated:

In the dark shadows of this pride and glory, we women workers, young and weak, have for too long worked too hard and experienced too much pain. Our one reason for working is to help our poor parents. We want to wear a student's uniform, but instead we have left our beautiful homes in the country and have come to the strange surroundings of Seoul to work in a factory. We came to earn money, but it has been more difficult than we thought possible.⁴⁸

Recall that symbolic action is a fixed representation of reality as much as it is a genuine act of practice, or, better yet, of socially and linguistically determined practice. The analytical task is therefore twofold—to define to what extent the text posits itself against its own social framework

by resting on certain structural premises, as well as to uncover how, through this resistance, the text also reasserts such a framework. In relation to the excerpt above, let us first look at the difference between what factory women wanted—to wear student uniforms—and what they actually found in “the strange surroundings of Seoul”—an exploitative wage system built on hard work and pain.

I have already noted that the temporary and unskilled status of the labor of many Korean women workers resulted in extremely low wages, but there is more to this situation. For instance, employers made sure to keep women performing labor-intensive tasks by naturalizing them, that is, by arguing that such work was inherently female—thus there were duties that supposedly required “delicate and nimble fingers,” or traits such as patience or sharpness, all of them considered typical of women.⁴⁹ Also, male-dominated trade unions only worsened the issue, as they tended to endorse a male breadwinner model for wages anchored in the idea that male workers were “by custom responsible for the livelihood of the family.”⁵⁰ It is not surprising, therefore, that the universality of money initially appears to the *yōgong* of the Pangnim Textile Company as an expression of a repressive Other, or, put differently, as an everyday object that is both unavoidable and immensely hard to get.

The definition of money as the privileged embodiment of the object *a* of the capitalist drive now leads us to the second element of the quote presented above, namely, the desire for student uniforms. To repeat, the minimal structure of desire is that it orbits around, and always lacks, the object *a*; the desire for a collection of empirical objects basically aims to cover up this lack. I have already touched upon the variety of visible signs of “female liberation” that are part and parcel of modernity’s chain of signifiers, including hairstyles and fashion items such as Western dresses and handbags, to mention a few.⁵¹ As such, the uniform is a commodity and can therefore be understood as an object of desire, but it is also a special commodity in the sense that it relates not only to fashion but, crucially, to the capacity for labor. Let us consider the following interview of a Korean factory woman in the late 1980s:

I wish I could be an office worker. If I could bribe someone to

get that position, I would. I know that I get more money here with overtime, since office jobs don't have any overtime pay. But money isn't everything. I hate the way people call us *kongsuni*. They don't say anything like that to office workers. Even though factory work is respectable, it is still low status. I try very hard not to look like a factory worker. I try to wear clothes like office workers do, but people somehow know that I am a *kongsuni*.⁵²

Here, the desire for an office job and the outfit that goes with it conceals at least two traumas: that of being called *kongsuni* [공순이] and that of hard-earned money.⁵³ The higher status of office work, in other words, appears clearly differentiated from the elements it tries to deny. Yet, what is the actual meaning of “clothes” in this play of signifiers? What is the actual, provisory “synthesis” that this text provides? Once we dismiss the existence of a sort of “thinking substance” behind the narrative,⁵⁴ we can move towards the discernment of its *social form*: the significance of “office clothes” as an object of desire is given by the very thing the subject denies, that is to say, the means of the capitalist Other, wage labor and money. In this case, we see how the desiring subject circumvents but does not fully escape the “fetish-character” of money, which, as Elena Louisa Lange succinctly explains, “quantifies that which ‘by nature’ had been impossible to quantify in societies where social relations are not entirely mediated by money—the physical and mental capacities of humans.”⁵⁵

Fundamentally, the desired clothes function as a displacement, a strategy of the ego aimed at resisting the ruthless logic of value. With this in mind, it can be maintained that the text above, understood as practice, involves the interrelatedness of at least two sorts of reproduction. First, there is the reassertion of the subject, in the sense that her imaginary position is confirmed the moment she declares that “money isn't everything,” having, however, *money-mediated* office work in mind. Second, there is the re-enactment of the object, i.e., the objective universality manifested in money and “hard work.” This narrative is then the result of the contradictory relation between the object and the subject, between the social and the personal. As against this assessment,

an approach that insists on the indeterminate ground of subjective experience, the materiality of the body or the concreteness of its reproductive capacity would inevitably fall into its opposite, that is, into “an empiricist focus on the immediately given.”⁵⁶

I can now turn to the desire for knowledge that is central to the Pongnim Textile Company petition discussed above. First, I shall briefly contextualize the production of knowledge and education in 1970s Korea in relation to its years under Japanese rule. According to Kenneth M. Wells, the greatest continuity in the country “between the late nineteenth century and the 1920s was a belief in education.”⁵⁷ The determinations of such belief, though, evolved as fast as Korean society did. In the colonial context, Koreans strongly linked education to the improvement of living conditions, as well as to broader notions such as national identity and liberation. Support for these ideas, however, varied between men and women. For instance, although some male activists and public figures explicitly encouraged education as a means of female emancipation, they were mostly interested in enhancing Korea’s chances to achieve national independence.⁵⁸ It should be added that this was just one expression of Korea’s anti-colonial ethnonationalism, which presupposed a homogeneous ethnicity based on common ancestry, territorial boundaries and shared language and culture.⁵⁹ Through local church networks, some female activists, too, contributed to the expansion of education, in this case promoting activities among rural women—these included courses on health and hygiene, kitchen management and diet, home economics and child-rearing practices.⁶⁰

The education desired by the women workers of the Pongnim Textile Company was ingrained in these same metonymies of modernity. In 1970s Korea, however, education no longer ideally referred to modern life (as in colonial times) but was now part of modernity in its actuality, in its objective existence. The passage below, from Shin’s *The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness*, captures the new nature of education that I am attempting to explain. It narrates the moment in which Oldest Brother, one of the novel’s characters, scolds Cousin, who resists the idea of applying to the special high school classes for industrial workers organized by the company where they both work. At some point, resigned, Cousin picks

up an application form and then turns to the protagonist:

“Why are you going to school?”

I go blank at Cousin’s question. I have simply thought that is what one has to do. Cousin is the first person to ask why that is. Unable to answer why I’m going to school, I say to Cousin that it would be nice if we could attend school together. “Besides, if we get admitted, the company is going to pay the tuition.”

Cousin snorts. “You think the company is trying to do us a favor? They’re doing it for tax benefits. And if we go to school, we won’t be able to work overtime.”⁶¹

Pursuing an education in Park’s Korea is, above all, a matter of fact. Its substance conforms to the logic of progress and enlightenment. Having an education is a strong status marker that is both physical and abstract, but also possibly attainable and therefore highly desired by factory women. Some of them, such as Cousin, could eventually reject it, either due to physical exhaustion after a day of factory labor or disinterest. However, if they sought to survive in the city they would have to, in Lacanian terms, shift their representation to another signifier—for instance, choosing to work overtime. It is clear, then, that the “resolution” provided in the previous text (Cousin decides to fill out the form) is essentially reified, abstract. Regardless of which of the two options Cousin and the protagonist choose, they will continue on the “road to modernity,” the precarious condition of their bodies will remain in the background, and, ultimately, money will continue to circulate as capital.

Chang Nam-su’s autobiography *The Lost Workplace* [빼앗긴 일터] (1984) offers a much more explicit critique of education, again from the standpoint of a former factory woman. While in Shin’s novel education as a capitalist object of desire still retains its symbolic strength, Chang’s narrative resolutely defies the systemic foundations of this object. In both accounts, therefore, the mechanism of modern desire is expressed through the individual’s bond with education. But only in the latter case is that bond significantly eroded, signaling the advent of socially sensitive critical thinking. One day Chang travels from Seoul, where she

works, to her hometown in the countryside, meeting old friends during her stay. There, when having a conversation with her neighbors, she reflects on the hardships of city life, emphasizing its everyday contrasts and absurd circumstances:

Ha, you folk think that city people live well, but do you know anything about how poor people in the city scrape by? . . . Towering skyscrapers, gorgeous things for sale, glittering department stores, university kids and chauffeured cars, my God it's indescribable. But in the midst of all that we the children of peasants go to make our living and our life is misery. Picture to yourselves, amid the bright faces of students toting their satchels to school, the sallow faces of workers off to the factories. When students take the bus, they have special coupons and the conductresses, even though they are working people themselves, bend over backward to serve them, but we who pay the full fare, do you know how rude they are to us? I hate Seoul.⁶²

Being not only the material proof, i.e., the symptom, of the contradictions of Seoul's modern mirage but also, and this is crucial, being fully aware of it, one can ask whether Chang Nam-su's narrative constitutes a form of symbolic action that could be called transgressive. I will argue that this could certainly be the case, although not in the Lukácsian sense of "class consciousness."⁶³ Let us start by saying that Chang's description of the situation on the bus contains a significant critical insight: that the educational system does not provide any meaningful response to structural injustices but, on the contrary, only reaffirms them. She can then end her attachment to education as an object, understood here as a particular embodiment of the Other, and move on to the next, perhaps one that is more revealing of the Other's own lack. In another section of the same text, it becomes evident that she has chosen critical knowledge (knowledge about the failure of the social system) as her new desired object. Her approach to this object, however, will prove problematic when considering her intuition about the social significance of labor. At some point she says:

[w]hen I came to Seoul and became an ‘industrial soldier’... I was all the time haunted by the conviction that I was an utter nobody in this society, just a tiny cog in a massive machine.... Of course, that sort of thinking disappears naturally once your eyes are opened to the truth that it is we workers who are the driving force of change in society’s historical progress.⁶⁴

To what extent is this statement transgressive, in the sense of providing an alternative to the desire for education? One way to answer this question is by highlighting the antinomic structure of the text. First, we see that Chang successfully identifies, if for a moment, the status of labor as the place of contradiction in capitalism (the subject transformed into a “tiny cog”). In other words, she is able to see that her representation as an “industrial soldier” is ultimately a semblance, the form of truth imposed by the government. This part of the narrative is indeed transgressive if we read it as a successful refutation of the discourse of the developmental Other through the recognition of a certain contradiction. In the second part, however, we see how she challenges the mystification in question (again, the “industrial soldier” label) by offering just another “truth,” in this case, the collective action of workers. Despite her initial awareness, then, Chang still ends up reaffirming, albeit unconsciously, the workings of the structure: by hypostasizing labor as the driving force of change in society, she inevitably defines it as socially indeterminate, thus overlooking its *wage form*, which is the very means through which the system she criticizes achieves social validation. The wage relation here remains a blind spot in the struggle, the transgressive desire, of the *yōgong*, an objectifying relation that, if subverted, “would abolish the very logic that produces and reproduces the *subordination of use-value to value*.”⁶⁵

Conclusion

The analysis of the *yōgong* narratives has allowed me to raise two central arguments regarding their overall precarious existence in developmental Korea. First, I have maintained that their precarity is an

outcome of historically specific unconscious practices performed both by the dominators and the dominated. Although in those years the practices inherited from colonial patriarchy were certainly conspicuous in social life, these explicit practices of oppression, I emphasize, have a particularly *capitalist* form already determined unconsciously by the wage relation and the market. Put differently, the *yŏgong*'s gender specificity became oppressive and thus part of their experience of precariousness due to the compulsive nature of profit-maximizing processes. Second, and derived from the above, I have shown the insufficiency of an approach to Korean gendered precarity centered on one-way relations of power, reproduced exclusively by the conscious decisions of those who enjoy the dominant position. Essentially, such an approach has no access to the objective and subjective *dynamics* of the experience of capitalist exploitation, an experience inadvertently reaffirmed by the thoughts and actions of the *yŏgong* themselves.

In examining the various linguistic practices of Korean factory women, I have stressed the difference between everyday objects of lack, such as consumer items or education, and some peculiar objects that instead of being openly desired are disavowed, such as money or factory job positions. This second group of objects, I argue, has structural priority over the first: these are objects of compulsion and repetition, the drive-objects on which the entire developmental apparatus rests. Yet the social function of money and labor-power, although totalizing, did not completely dictate the movement of Korea's developmental society—due to the immiseration of life they generated, the imperatives of productivity and efficiency were in fact constantly transgressed. I have resorted to Lacan's notion of unconscious desire to represent analytically this same mode of subjectivity, transgression, although in a non-universalist manner, grasping it as a constitutive moment of a socio-psychological whole.

I have also shown, however, that in their refusal and reaction against the abstract demand for progress, the *yŏgong* could not help but reproduce their precarious living conditions. The harsh reality of women workers in developmental Korea, I have argued, can be better understood as the material effect of the covert functioning of a developmental

unconscious. The implications of the present study, which attests to the genesis of Korea's problematic historical tendency towards abstraction and quantification, are certainly crucial for current theorizations and empirical analyses of working conditions and labor activism in the country. The symbolic and imaginary practices discussed here could, for example, be read as historical precursors of the diverse social processes that form what Jiwoon Yulee has recently called "progress by death."⁶⁶ Yulee's research on *chaebol* [재벌]-led financialization, which severely threatens the "vital time of social reproduction," actually resonates strongly with the negative consequences, both for the body and the mind, of what I identified above as the *sinyōsōng* discourse, the modern capitalist language of female liberation in colonial Korea. In the case of contemporary Korea, Yulee demonstrates that: "While the shortened/reduced social reproduction time is celebrated in the mainstream media as a form of liberation from toil for upper-middle-class consumers, contingent and migrant workers experience [this process]... through the *fatal* expansion/fluctuation of labor time as a form of dispossession and violence."⁶⁷ Recognizing the existence of an absolutist economic logic, or an immiserating developmental unconscious, that secretly co-opts the conscious decisions of Korean policymakers, capitalist managers and workers alike may help redirect the productive forces of Korean society towards a form of growth that is not only "green" or "digital" but also humanly sustainable.

Notes

¹ The historicity of modernity qua category has naturally guided the academic debate toward the production of a plethora of related concepts that attempt to grapple with its inherent complexity. In relation to the study of Korean modernity, for instance, one finds ideas such as “compressed modernity,” “militarized modernity” or a modernity based on social struggles. See Kyung-Sup Chang, *South Korea under Compressed Modernity: Familial Political Economy in Transition* (London: Routledge, 2010); Seungsook Moon, *Militarized Modernity and Gendered Citizenship in South Korea* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005); Hagen Koo, “Modernity in South Korea: An Alternative Narrative,” *Thesis Eleven* 57, no. 1 (1999): 53–64.

² Soon-Won Park, *Colonial Industrialization and Labor in Korea: The Onoda Cement Factory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 25. According to Park, in 1931 Korea’s three main industries were textiles, food processing and chemicals.

³ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁴ Janice C. H. Kim, *To Live to Work: Factory Women in Colonial Korea, 1910–1945* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 60.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 63. See also Soon-Won Park, 23–24.

⁶ Janice Kim, 63.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Kyung Ae Park, “Women Workers in South Korea: The Impact of Export-Led Industrialization,” *Asian Survey* 35, no. 8 (1995): 744.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ As Janice Kim points out, in Japanese-ruled Korea the salaries of Korean female workers were negatively affected not only by their sex but also by their ethnicity: at that time, “Japanese workers’ wages were double that of Koreans, and men earned twice as much as women.” Janice Kim, 57.

¹² The massive growth of factory women since the 1930s in Korea prompted the emergence of a new vocabulary to represent the rapidly changing reality of work. Newspapers and magazines of the time, for instance, referred to them as *yŏgong*, or “female factory operatives.” See Hwasook Nam, *Women in the Sky: Gender and Labor in the Making of Modern Korea* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2021), 3.

¹³ As Fredric Jameson maintains, people’s narratives can be grasped as modes of constituting practice, i.e., as symbolic acts whose main function is to provide a symbolic resolution, a provisory “synthesis,” to an underlying social contradiction. See Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Routledge, 1983), 27; Fredric Jameson, “The Symbolic Inference; Or, Kenneth Burke and Ideological Analysis,” *Critical Inquiry* 4, no. 3 (1978): 509. In a text, then, we find an analytically useful form of activity, *the activity of language*, or “symbolic action,” as Jameson also puts it.

¹⁴ Here I am following a line of reasoning already explored by the tradition of

Marxism-feminism. See Ellen Meiksins Wood, “Capitalism and Human Emancipation,” *New Left Review* 1 167, no. 1 (1988): 3–20; Lise Vogel, *Marxism and the Oppression of Women: Toward a Unitary Theory* (Boston: Brill, 2013), 141ff; Martha E. Giménez, *Marx, Women, and Capitalist Social Reproduction* (Boston: Brill, 2019), 94ff; Elena Louisa Lange, *Value without Fetish: Uno Kōzō’s Theory of “Pure Capitalism” in Light of Marx’s Critique of Political Economy* (Boston: Brill, 2021).

¹⁵ Karl Marx, *Capital Volume I* (London: Penguin, 1990), 449.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 771.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 772.

¹⁸ See, for example, Jacques Lacan, *Desire and its Interpretation: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VI* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019), 313.

¹⁹ Samo Tomšič, *The Capitalist Unconscious: Marx and Lacan* (London: Verso, 2015), 5–6.

²⁰ Slavoj Žižek, *Incontinence of the Void: Economico-Philosophical Spandrels* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2017), 189.

²¹ Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 2008), 13.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Tomšič, *The Capitalist Unconscious*, 217.

²⁴ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XVII, The Other Side of Psychoanalysis* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007), 80–81.

²⁵ Fabio Vighi, *Unworkable: Delusions of an Imploding Civilization* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2022), 47. Emphasis in the original.

²⁶ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XI, The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1981), 184–85; Tomšič, *The Capitalist Unconscious*, 5, 122–23; Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2013), 496–97; Žižek, *Incontinence of the Void*, 189.

²⁷ Lacan, *Desire and its Interpretation*, 394.

²⁸ Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 497.

²⁹ Lacan, *Desire and its Interpretation*, 476.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ See Tomšič, *The Capitalist Unconscious*.

³² Building on Marx’s *Capital*, I define immiseration as the worsening of the *overall situation* of the worker in capitalism, a situation that is not limited to a particular distribution of income or wealth: “within the capitalist system all methods for raising the social productivity of labor are put into effect at the cost of the individual worker It follows therefore that in proportion as capital accumulates, the situation of the worker, be his payment high or low, must grow worse.” Marx, *Capital*, 799. This notion of immiseration therefore includes the constant production of new forms of physical and mental degradation “even in the case of an increased standard of living,” as Michael Heinrich notes. Michael Heinrich, *An Introduction to the Three Volumes of Karl Marx’s*

Capital (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2004), 129.

³³ Marx, *Capital*, 1015.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 1013. Emphasis in the original.

³⁵ Frank Engster, "Subjectivity and Its Crisis: Commodity Mediation and the Economic Constitution of Objectivity and Subjectivity," *History of the Human Sciences* 29, no. 2 (2016): 78.

³⁶ Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 356.

³⁷ Some would claim that an important distinction should be made between qualitative data collected through an ethnographic interview with a female worker and that gathered from a literary fiction about factory life. That said, however, Shin's *The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness* still contains elements of the author's life experience as an industrial worker that, in my opinion, are worth analyzing. For a similar assessment of Shin's autobiographical novel, see Christine Hyung-Oak Lee, "Kyung-sook Shin's 'The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness,'" *The New York Times*, September 18, 2015, accessed January 29, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/20/books /review/kyung-sook-shins-the-girl-who-wrote-loneliness.html>.

³⁸ Shin Kyung-Sook, *The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness* [외판방], trans. Ha-Yun Jung (New York: Pegasus Books, 2015), 49.

³⁹ Chun Soonok, *They Are Not Machines: Korean Women Workers and Their Fight for Democratic Trade Unionism in the 1970s* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 85–86.

⁴⁰ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse* (London: Penguin, 1993), 838.

⁴¹ Kim Seung-kyung, "Productivity, Militancy, and Femininity: Gendered Images of South Korean Women Factory Workers," *Asian Journal of Women's Studies* 3, no. 3 (1997): 16.

⁴² Chun, 151.

⁴³ Kim Seung-kyung, 16.

⁴⁴ Chun, 150.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 153.

⁴⁶ Kyeong-Hee Choi, "Neither Colonial nor National: The Making of the 'New Woman' in Pak Wanso's 'Mother's Stake 1,'" in *Colonial Modernity in Korea* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 228–29.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 241.

⁴⁸ Chun, 122.

⁴⁹ Theodore Jun Yoo, *The Politics of Gender in Colonial Korea: Education, Labor and Health, 1910–1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 113.

⁵⁰ Nam, 122.

⁵¹ See Choi; Yoo.

⁵² Kim Seung-kyung, 20.

⁵³ As Hagen Koo explains, the derogatory labels of *kongdori* (factory boy) and

kongsuni (factory girl), which emerged in Korea in the 1970s, stand for an “extremely contemptuous attitude toward and demeaning status of physical labor.” See Hagen Koo, *Korean Workers: The Culture and Politics of Class Formation* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2001), 62. In general, these labels signified a lack of education, hygiene, and the untimely integration of young labor into production lines. It should be added that the use of *kongsuni* was much more widespread compared to its male version, and that it was also linked to the portrayal of factory women as given to sexual immorality. See Ruth Barraclough, *Factory Girl Literature: Sexuality, Violence, and Representation in Industrializing Korea* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 73; Kim Seung-kyung, 10; Nam, 127.

⁵⁴ Here I am paraphrasing Samo Tomšič, *The Labour of Enjoyment: Towards a Critique of Libidinal Economy* (Berlin: August Verlag, 2019), 137.

⁵⁵ Elena Louisa Lange, “Gendercraft: Marxism–Feminism, Reproduction, and the Blind Spot of Money,” *Science & Society* 85, no. 1 (2021): 45.

⁵⁶ Giménez, 113.

⁵⁷ Kenneth M. Wells, “The Price of Legitimacy: Women and the *Kunuhoe* Movement, 1927–1931,” in *Colonial Modernity in Korea* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 204.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Jin-kyung Lee, *Service Economies: Militarism, Sex Work, and Migrant Labor in South Korea* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 15.

⁶⁰ Wells, 205.

⁶¹ Shin, 71.

⁶² Chang Nam-su, *The Lost Workplace* [빼앗긴 일터] (Paju: Changbi Publishers, 1984), 46, quoted in Barraclough, 66–67.

⁶³ Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Merlin Press, 1971).

⁶⁴ Chang, 7, quoted in Barraclough, 62.

⁶⁵ Lange, “Gendercraft,” 63. Emphasis in the original.

⁶⁶ Jiwoon Yulee, “Progress by Death: Labor Precarization and the Financialization of Social Reproduction in South Korea,” *Capital & Class* 47, no. 3 (2023): 361–82.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 376. Emphasis in the original.

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