INTRODUCTION

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It can be a creative adventure for modern men to build a palace, and yet a nightmare to have to live in it.
Marshall Berman, All That Is Solid Melts into Air, 1988

The title of this book is meant to be playful. “Under Construction” evokes the language of contemporary gender theory in its assertion that masculinities and femininities are perpetually constructed and reconstructed in the busy unfolding of histories (Butler 1993; Caplan 1987; de Lauretis 1987; Ortner 1996; Scott 1986). As a pun, “Under Construction” also evokes a palpable Korean condition. Since the late 1960s, the entire south Korean urbanscape has been quite literally under construction: torn down, rebuilt, extended, elaborated, reconfigured. Anyone who has lived in Korea in these years will have encountered that condition of modernity where, in Marshall Berman’s apt citation of Marx, “all that is solid melts into air” (Berman 1988). Over the last three decades, lives have been refashioned on the shifting ground of urbanization, industrialization, military authoritarianism, democratic reform, and social liberalization. In this process, class and gender identities have been “construction sites” for new definitions of home and family, work and leisure, husband and wife. Construction metaphors come readily to mind when describing these experiences. In this volume, Cho Haejoang speaks of middle class wives who created a modern lifestyle that was as coarse and hastily fabricated as the Korean economy itself, and June Lee equates the ailing bodies of white-collar men with the disastrous rush-hour collapse of Seoul’s Sõngsu Bridge as parallel symbols of a flawed modernity.
The term “modernity” is invoked in these pages as a broadly recognizable view of the world that has been rendered into many different languages and read through many different historical moments. As an ideological position, modernity implies a receptivity to social and technological innovation and a repudiation of the past, perceived as stifling and irrational tradition. The objects of these valorizations, however, are not fixed but are fluid, variable, and sometimes contradictory (Baudrillard 1987; Rofel 1994, 1999; Kendall 1996, ch. 3 for Korea). As a cultural expression and ideological stance, “modernity” may be distinguished from “modernization,” the measurable material processes of industrialization, technological innovation, expanding capitalist markets, and rapid urbanization. Modernities are the cultural articulations of modernizations as self-conscious experiences and discourses, judgments, and feelings about these experiences (Felski 1995, 12–15; Berman 1988, 16–18). A voluminous literature now documents, quantifies, and analyzes the process of Korean modernization. The living of Korean modernity is subtler stuff and has received far less attention.

In Korea, no less than anywhere else, modernities are gendered innately and consequently vary with the “multiplicity of diversity of women’s (and men’s) relations to historical processes” (Felski 1995; Rofel 1994). The modernity of a middle class Korean housewife is not identical to her white-collar husband’s modernity, her mother’s or her daughter’s modernity, or the modernity that impinges upon the life of a woman worker in a south Korean electronics plant. We emphasize the different ways Korean women and men “did” modernity in the 1990s and how a specifically Korean experience of modernity and its postmodern discontents inscribes their diverse experiences of masculinity and femininity. Generational histories, ideologies, relationships of class, structures of employment, family obligations, and the fun-house mirror of media representations frame the subjectivities of the women and men described in chapters on middle class life, office and factory work, and sexual experimentation. At the same time, contemporary Korean understandings of gender and sexuality are realized within the global reach of popular culture, heightened consumption, and portable notions of “modernity” and “middle class” that have been described in other places, both Western and not (Miller 1994; 1995). We offer one more resounding counter-example to the homogenized presentations of “third world” or “non-Western” women that have prompted deserved critiques (Grewal and Kaplan 1994; Mohanty 1988; Ong 1988). This volume is part of a decisive turn in the anthropology of gender, from its early quest for the ultimate causes of female subordination to a fine-tuned analysis of the historical, cultural, and
class-based specificities of gender relations (Moore 1988; Ortner 1996; Silverblatt 1991) and the tension between gender as an ideological construct and gender as a lived experience (Moore 1994, 58).

Berman (1988) defines modernism, the artistic expression of modernity, as a particular subjective act, as “any attempt by modern men and women to become subjects as well as objects of modernity, to get a grip on the modern world and make themselves at home in it” (p. 5). Broadly speaking, this struggle to “get a grip” engages all of the subjects of this volume, from the ambitious middle class housewives of Cho’s and Abelmann’s chapters to their sexually rebellious daughters, described by So-Hee Lee. Engagement is found in women office workers’ mild resistance to a demeaning term of address (Janelli and Yim, ch. 5), among young men who actively reject the dominant notions and practices of masculinity as epitomized by corporate life (Seungsook Moon, ch. 4), and in the disgruntled ruminations of their elders (June Lee, ch. 3). For some of the subjects of these essays, and most of the authors, the prospect of making oneself at home in the modern has dissolved into the necessity of coming to terms with toppled certainties and tarnished optimism, of living with a condition of flux and contradiction that some would describe as postmodern (Jameson 1984). Others, Berman among them, would see doubt and uncertainty as the very stuff of modernity (Berman 1988, 9–10).

With some backward glances, this volume witnesses the particular turn that south Korean society made in the 1990s. From the 1960s through the 1980s, Korean life had been marked by rapid industrialization, tight political control, public discourses of hard work and personal sacrifice in the name of national development, and a rising climate of political dissent. It was also, despite intense political frustration, a period of optimism marked by a sense that things would get better because, by all visible markers of material life, things were palpably improving. Indeed, south Korea was judged a miracle of rapid economic development, marked in the 1980s by the nation’s entry into the ranks of the Newly Developed Nations and celebrated in its hosting of the 1988 Olympics. The 1990s saw a return to civilian rule, a loosening of censorship and social control, and with global economic success, the emergence of a full-blown consumer culture. The broad-based Democracy Movement that had sparked the imagination of a generation receded, a victim of its own success. The militancy of the 1980s is recollected in Cho Haejoang’s and So-Hee Lee’s discussions of how the politicization of Korean university campuses gave women social ideals that now seem irrelevant to their younger siblings. So-Hee Lee suggests that changes in the social mood from campus militancy in the 1980s to a 1990s
youth culture preoccupied with questions of self-realization and sexuality has meant that among younger Korean women, siblings separated by even a few years engage the world through very different expectations and desires. As Cho notes in her chapter, the second-wave Korean feminism of the 1980s was also a casualty of the affluent youth culture of the 1990s.

The men and women who are the subjects of these essays simultaneously celebrate and condemn the enhanced opportunity for consumption possibilities, from luxury apartments to plastic surgery. Chapters by Nancy Abelmann and June Lee describe how members of a successful middle class deride the materialism of the present moment, mustering nostalgia for what they remember as a time of common hardship and sacrifice. Disillusionment is very much in evidence. National campaigns to foster appreciation for the overworked and underappreciated male breadwinner mask anxieties about shrinking market competition and vanishing job security (June Lee and Seungsook Moon in this volume). These discourses have become even more intense since the Korean market crash in November 1997 because business failures and massive layoffs belie a progressive teleology and the government’s capitulation to conditions imposed by the International Monetary Fund (I.M.F.) is read as a national humiliation. We witness the vertigo of a society that has come to question the social costs of its own swift success, posing its critiques and frustrations in gendered imagery: the avaricious middle class housewife, the alienated and ailing middle-aged father, the sexy young wife on the make.

But how valid is a study built on an image? How real are the gendered subjects of advertisements, films, and the popular press? Does a novel about youthful sexual experimentation or a television serial about an adulterous wife tell us anything about the behavior of young Korean women? Would the novels of Jaqueline Susann inform a Korean anthropologist about American life? Readers accustomed to apprehending modernization through the hard data of statistics and broad-based surveys will probably be uncomfortable with some of the material discussed in this volume. Modernities are the cultural expressions of complex industrial societies, and as such, modernities are most widely articulated through various forms of mass media: advertisements, films, popular literature, magazines, and television programs. People respond, not always predictably and never uniformly, to what they see and hear. In south Korea today, the media is a ubiquitous presence; it cannot be ignored in any wide-ranging discussion of contemporary Korean life. The issue is not in the verifiability of, say, a sensationalized survey published in a popular magazine or a semi-autobiographical novel. Indeed, June Lee goes to great lengths in her chapter to show how
the supposedly hard data on middle-aged Korean men’s “world’s highest mortality” was, at best, a loose reading. As in Janice Radway’s (1984) canny study of the romance novel or Beth Bailey’s (1988) mapping of changing American courtship patterns through a reading of women’s magazines, Cho Haejoang, June Lee, So-Hee Lee, and Seungsook Moon use the products of popular culture to tell us not so much what people do, but how they understand, articulate, and argue about social practice. The following chapters provide many added examples of how media portrayals raise possibilities, stoke anxieties, and engender new lexicons of behavior. Our authors, in their different ways, show a dialogic tension between the production and public reception of media-generated gender talk.

Legacies That Engender: The Chaeböl and the Military

Being “modern” (hyŏndaejŏk) has engaged Korean women and men for several generations. The colonial cities of early twentieth-century Korea (1910–1945), with their businesses, department stores, schools, and cinemas, introduced new social practices into the domains of work, education, and consumption (Eckert 1990, ch. 15; Robinson 1994). In this volume, Cho suggests a more insidious legacy in the “feudalistic authoritarianism” that permeated the modern efficiencies of the Japanese Empire, leaving genealogical traces in the structure of postcolonial Korean education, police, business, the military, and in the mass mobilization campaigns of the Park Chung-hee era (1961–1979). The conditions of work and domesticity that frame the lives described in these pages were even more immediately a product of the Republic of Korea’s history after the Liberation in 1945. The imposed division of Korea by occupying Russian and American armies, the subsequent solidification of two hostile states through the fratricidal tragedy of the Korean War (1950–1953), and global Cold War security interests made the U.S.-supported military a major force in south Korean life. Seungsook Moon has described how the shadow of a hostile north Korea across the Demilitarized Zone provided a rationale for three decades of authoritarian rule by military men in civilian dress and allowed the influence of the military to shape vast domains of everyday experience in south Korean life (Moon 1998a, b, and in this volume).

Some analysts of south Korean development emphasize the positive consequences of military mobilization, suggesting that the army prepared rural men for proletarian life, that it “taught them time orientation and
subjugation to formal authority” (Koo 1990, 677). (It might also be noted that in the 1960s and 1970s, the subordination of daughters within the Korean family was deemed sufficient preparation for the discipline of the factory [S. Kim 1997].) Military service is a nearly universal passage rite for Korean men, a necessary marker of adult masculinity (Moon in this volume), and a unifying experience evoked by men who have little else in common than a nostalgic taste for certain songs and re-creations of military cuisine (Nelson 1996, 13). In “The Production and Subversion of Hegemonic Masculinity: Reconfiguring Gender Hierarchy in Contemporary South Korea,” Seungsook Moon argues that universal conscription naturalizes masculine privilege. Having defended the nation from the omnipresent threat of attack by the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (north Korea), men are considered “true citizens,” a status that few Korean women attain. The state bestows upon men the status of legally recognized heads of domestic units as well as granting them other privileges, including assigning them a higher starting rank in public sector employment (Moon, ch. 4). Men who passed their military service as officers are hired into some private corporations largely on the recommendation of their commanding officers (Janelli and Yim in this volume). Gender asymmetry is manifest in many domains of social practice, from the significant underrepresentation of women in all branches of government to the difficulties that women face when they apply for passports because their loyalty is more suspect than that of former soldiers (Moon 1998b, and in this volume; Soh 1991).

Many of the distinctive hierarchical and disciplined practices of Korean chaebŏl, the conglomerates that have dominated the Korean economic landscape for the last several decades, take the military as an unacknowledged model (Janelli with Yim 1993). While it is widely believed that military service leads to subsequent business success (Moon in this volume), and at least one published first-person account makes this link explicit, many young workers have found it disappointing that company life is so similar to that of the military (Roger Janelli, personal communication, 30 December, 1998). The term “kunsamunhwa” (military culture) is invoked to criticize the extension of essentially military practices into other domains of social life (ibid.).

The chaebŏl are the products of a dynamic alliance between capitalist interests and the state, which favored them with low-interest loans in specific industries and controlled labor unrest, allowing the chaebŏl to grow at phenomenal rates. Not only do the chaebŏl employ a significant segment of all Korean labor, management, and clerical workers, but, owing to their early success, the chaebŏl’s organizational structure was widely emulated by
small and medium-sized enterprises (E. Kim 1997). The chaebol have thus had a profound influence on the gendering of work and domesticity and on the construction of new social classes. By fostering a large managerial class, the chaebol created a dominant image of clean, respectable middle class employment (Moon 1990). By requiring long working days followed by long evenings of work-related socializing, the chaebol also set the terms for a middle class lifestyle that rigidly dichotomized work from domesticity and the male salary earner from his wife and family. The consolidation of work space by the chaebol into corporate centers separated from most employees’ residences by a long commute reinforces this sense of separation and compounds the difficulty of combining work with domestic tasks.

Mary Brinton and her colleagues found that in Taiwan, which shares many cultural assumptions with Korea and Japan but where government policies have encouraged smaller enterprises, businesses are scattered through the landscape closer to employees’ residences, and far greater numbers of married women work (Brinton, Lee, and Parish 1995). Thus, while Korea would seem to replicate Japanese middle class life (Imamura 1987; Vogel 1968), the exclusion of married women from the workplace is not an inevitable product of East Asian or “Confucian” gender assumptions but a consequence of specific economic policies that receive traditionalist rationalization after the fact.

Patterns of doing business and socializing within the chaebol (often difficult to distinguish) reinforce the notion that managerial work is a masculine activity. Accounts of chaebol life describe the critical importance of group carousing, sometimes combined with varying degrees of sex play, as a means of building solidarity among coworkers, and at the higher levels, for furthering business deals and gaining the good will of government officials (Janelli with Yim 1993; Janelli and Yim in this volume; Shin 1991; Yi 1993, 1998). One of Hei-soo Shin’s (1991, 141) businessman informants summarized the strategy behind these encounters: “Drinks make all men become friends, especially when they get naked and sleep with women.” With the marked expansion of the Korean economy in the late 1970s and through the 1980s, the entertainment industry grew at a phenomenal rate, fostering a distinctive style of work-related play that encouraged many white-collar men to come home only to sleep (Shin 1991; Kim 1998; Yi 1993). The wife of a middle-aged manager told June Lee (in this volume) that if, in the long years of her marriage, her husband came home before midnight and sober, she marked it on the calendar. For his part, her husband saw his work, both sober and intoxicated, as dedicated to the important task of Korean development.
Okpyo Moon finds a metaphoric equivalence between the white-collar employee and the scholar-official of dynastic times who attained his position in the world of public affairs through a series of competitive examinations and slowly advanced through a hierarchical structure (Moon 1990). She suggests that both scholarship and corporate work are perceived as “clean” endeavors, performed with pen and paper (or computer) at a great remove from the dust and fury of the marketplace. Ironically, the image holds even when this clean work involves commerce on a global scale such that the chaebol leaders have themselves failed to shed the taint of the entrepreneurial activities that built their fortunes (Eckert 1991; Janelli with Yim 1993, 99). This equation of the corporate employee and the scholar-official makes a public virtue of corporate life, a perception fostered within the chaebol by daily practices and rhetoric that underscore the important patriotic mission of the enterprise (Janelli with Yim 1993, 111). Men like Park-sangmunim, the middle-aged manager who is the subject of June Lee’s chapter, describe themselves as having sacrificed their particularistic involvement in family life “for the sake of the nation.” The white-collar men interviewed by Eunhee Kim Yi (1993, 1998) speak of time spent with wife and family as “an indulgence.”

Korean government directives explicitly define a woman’s primary responsibility as facilitating her husband’s work “in society” (Moon 1998a), a principle internalized by many housewives (Yi 1993). Seungsook Moon (in this volume) holds that this ubiquitous view—men do (and are entitled to do) the critical work of society—is the basis of contemporary Korean patriarchy, the legal and emotional privileging of husbands over wives. But from the perspective of the middle class Korean household, these are patriarchies without patriarchs. According to Cho Haejoang (in this volume), women create and perpetuate middle class Korean culture. The rigid spatial gendering of work and domesticity vests wives with basic responsibilities for consumption, investment, education, and the range of activities that Hanna Papanek describes as “status reproduction work” (Kim 1992, 1993; Moon 1990; Papanek 1979; Yi 1993). Nancy Abelmann’s recent work suggests that class positions are by no means fixed with marriage, but are continuously negotiated through the ambitions of married women, the investments they make, and the educations and marriages they secure for their children (Abelmann 1997a, b, and in this volume). The role of the middle class wife as family manager is at least tacitly acknowledged by the chaebol, who routinely dispense wages not into their employees’ pockets, but into family bank accounts (Janelli and Yim 1996). Given the social demands placed on white-collar men, and the necessity of maintaining face through
generous hospitality, this arrangement also encourages thrift while allowing a colleague to blame his penny-pinching wife for his slender allowance of pocket money with all stereotypes preserved intact.

**Doing “Public” and “Domestic” in Korea**

Some observers of the middle class Korean family have posited a continuity with the domestic life of the old yangban nobility where women managed the inner quarters (nae) while men performed acts of propriety and distinction in the “outside” (woe) realm (Lett 1998, 209; Moon 1990; Yi 1993). Such a conflation permits members of Korea’s new middle class to see themselves as modern-day yangban vested with a reassuring sense of cultural continuity and a “traditional” rationalization for gender asymmetry. This appeal to the past elides important distinctions between older familial arrangements and contemporary middle class life. Superficially, past and present genderings of nae and woe would seem to replicate Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo’s early notion that the distinction between public and private (or domestic) realms is the root cause of women’s subordination to men (Rosaldo 1974). A purported universal principle, transmitted through a distinctive Korean custom, “explains” the seeming inevitability of gender discrimination in the late twentieth century. But this is simplistic. A number of gender scholars, including Rosaldo in her later work, have argued against clear and absolute generalizations. They emphasize the variability of relationships among women and between women and men in different cultural milieus, and underscore the private realm as a place where many significant things transpire. Of particular importance to our discussion, they stress the historical contingency of any conceptualization of public and private space (Nicholson 1986, Rosaldo 1980). Anthropologist Sylvia Junko Yanagisako (1987) has shown how a seemingly commonsensical distinction between public and private may obscure significant distinctions in the meaning imparted to space and labor, even within the history of a single society or group over the space of a single generation.

In Korea today, masculine endeavors in the corporate world are deemed the work “of society” for which women offer domestic support. In dynastic times, the public personas of scholar-officials were never void of family and lineage identification, and the fruits of public accomplishment were returned to family and kin in a currency of officially meted honor or disgrace. Public identities were embedded in families and the domestic realm was accountable to the state (Ko et. al. n.d.). Moreover, most men,