

The Old Rhetoric of Emergent Motherhoods: Mothers' Heartfelt Care and Children's Education among South Korean Educational Migrants in Singapore

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Introduction

Advanced liberalism or neoliberalism brings with it a speeding up of the transformations of liberalism in which subjects are constantly invoked as self-contained, with a transportable self that must be produced through the developmental processes of personality and rationality. This self must be carried like a snail carries a shell. It must be coherent yet mutable, fixed yet multiple and flexible.^[1]

1. As Valerie Walkerdine astutely describes, a desirable form of neoliberal subject is a 'transportable' self. She uses the analogy of a 'coherent yet flexible' snail-like figure.^[2] The current economic changes under rapid globalisation—which are characterised by highly risky and changeable markets—have demanded potential workers develop themselves and their personal attributes so as to fit into the rapidly changing global markets.^[3] Similar to this image of a transportable self, South Korean (hereafter, Korean) children continuously move along and across borders with their mothers in an attempt to become capable workers in the future through overseas education. Such educational migration, typically referred to as 'early study abroad (ESA)' or *jogi yuhak*, therefore, can be viewed as one of Korean parents' endeavours to raise their children to be highly marketable commodities having 'bundles of skills,'^[4]—the desirable type of neoliberal subject who can fit into the rapidly changing world markets under globalisation.
2. However, unlike the typical image of a neoliberal subject—individuated self-entrepreneurs who are 'rational, calculating creatures whose moral autonomy is measured by their capacity for 'self-care,'^[5] the unit of 'self-care' required to make a neoliberal subject in Korea is extended to the family, more specifically to mothers in a gendered way. In other words, Korean neoliberal subject-making typically takes place in the family, as Koreans believe that children's success is mainly based on strategically orchestrated collaborations of family members.'^[6] In such 'family-entrepreneurs,'^[7] mothers are often called 'manager moms' (*maenijeo omma*) who plan and arrange their children's daily activities, including their schooling and other private lessons.^[8] Some Korean scholars even name this type of mothering 'neoliberal motherhood' which includes so-called scientific mothers and professional mothers who are equipped with a high level of scientific knowledge about child-rearing and education, as well as ways to best consume the array of services on the market.^[9] The image of a 'manager mom' is often considered to be linked to the dominant discourses of neoliberal personhood focusing on entrepreneurship, rationality, efficiency and

the marketisation of non-market relations.[10] Such cultural notions of 'manager moms' in fact parallel those of 'intensive mothering,'[11]—the cultural belief that requires mothers, especially upper-middle class women to intensively devote their time and energy to maximising children's capacities so as to achieve success in the future.[12]

3. Viewed from this vantage point, Korean migrant mothers, typically referred to as 'geese' mothers (*girogi omma*)[13] in Korea appear to be the epitome of 'manager moms,' who aggressively glean information from all sources, plan where and when to go for ESA and even accompany their children on the journey.[14] Then, how do these 'geese' mothers experience and make sense of their motherhood in transnational space? Are their experiences and understandings of motherhood different from or similar to the dominant discourses on neoliberal or 'rational' motherhood prevalent in Korea?
4. In this study I aim to examine the cultural logic of motherhood as understood and articulated by Korean migrant mothers who accompany their children on an ESA in Singapore. In doing so, I pay close attention to the migrant mothers' own interpretations and representations of their mothering practices in the transnational context. More specifically, I identify one prominent strategy, by which Korean migrant mothers try to validate and authenticate maternal care as a valuable resource for their children. This strategy is what I call 'emotionalisation,' through which mothers imbue their managerial roles with affective quality, while differentiating mother's uncalculating and self-sacrificing maternal care from that of commercialised educational services providers.
5. Despite the seemingly very rational, entrepreneurial roles that 'geese' mothers play, Korean mothers' expertise in their managerial roles for children is validated and authorised, *only if* it is enacted *with heart*, which is often called mother's 'heartfelt care' (*jeongseong*). Therefore, *emotionality*, [15] not rationality relating to motherhood appears to be the most essential component of transnational motherhood— a catalyst that is assumed by mothers to galvanise the link between children's personal resources and their actual educational outcomes. Thus, Korean 'geese' mothers still understand and frame their new transnational motherhood in the old rhetoric of motherhood, as mediated by Korean traditional notions of the family and gender where women's roles in the family are centred on offering 'emotional security' to family members.[16]
6. Hence, in this study I show an unexpected convergence between old and new practices of motherhood, whereby mothers are reconstituted and reconstructed as responsible subjects for children's acquisition of various academic and psychological skills that can be categorised as 'techniques of the self.' [17] The Korean migrant mother in Singapore, thus, represents the cultural contradictions of neoliberal motherhood, [18] the gendered notions of neoliberal subject-making wherein the unmarketability and emotionality of maternal care are believed to be the most valuable resources for mother to influence her child's self through transnational educational migration.

Methods and data

7. The present study is part of a larger ethnographic project on Korean pre-college migrant students and their accompanying families in Singapore, which I conducted between 2008 and 2012. This research comprised individual and focus group interviews with 53 students (between the ages of 8 and 18), 58 mothers (in their 30s through to their 50s), and two grandmothers (in their 60s and 70s); a total of 121 participants recruited by snowball sampling through personal networks. Most of the Korean students interviewed for this research came to Singapore with their mothers. However, some of them, especially at secondary level, have moved to Singapore as 'lone' students, without any accompanying parents. Such lone students usually stay with host families in Singapore—called 'home-stay'.^[19]
8. The data analysed in this paper draws primarily on in-depth interviews with the Korean migrant mothers, as I aim to explicate the mothers' own discursive constructions of their mothering experiences in Singapore. As a mother of two young children at the time of my fieldwork, I was always welcomed as an insider by the mother interviewees. Although I had moved to Singapore not for my children's education but for my own career, the interviewees and I had much in common, by sharing similar interests and concerns in terms of raising and educating children in Singapore. Being positioned as a fellow Korean mother (rather than a mere researcher), I was able to build rapport with the mothers quickly and easily, which helped me gain deeper access to the Korean 'geese' mothers' own understandings of their transnational motherhood experiences in Singapore.
9. I also conducted group interviews with a small number of mother participants in an attempt to combine my interviews with participant observation. As I grouped two to three mothers who were close friends with one another, each group interview session was arranged to be more like a gathering of friends—the mother participants were able to bring up and discuss their own issues that were not solicited by the researcher.^[20] In this way, I was able to observe their face-to-face interactions, in which the mothers shared and organised their own cultural specific experiences as 'geese' mothers in Singapore. The stories, narratives and talk-in-interaction generated through this type of group interview offer a glimpse into the ways in which the Korean migrant mothers align and realign themselves with both the emergent and traditional notions of motherhood in transnational space. All the interviews were carried out in Korean, and were recorded and transcribed accordingly. The interview excerpts cited in this paper were translated into English by the author.

An overview of early study abroad (*jogi yuhak*) and Korean 'wild-geese families' (*girogi gajok*) in Singapore

10. Since the mid-1990s, a large number of Korean pre-college-aged students have left their homes for international education and this type of educational migration is typically called *jogi yuhak* or early study abroad (ESA).^[21] The aspiration to learn global languages, especially English, constitutes the main reason for Korean students' ESA.^[22] Many Korean parents believe that their children's English education is the only educational investment for

guaranteed returns in the age of uncertainty.[23] In public discourses, such parental aspirations for children often translate into those of raising their children to become 'creative and competitive citizens' who are often called 'the global' (*segyein*) or 'global elites' (*global injae*).[24] The image of 'global elites,' in fact, largely conforms to the dominant discourses on highly competitive and confident neoliberal subjects who are responsible for marketing themselves through their own self-management and self-development.[25]

11. The type of ESA educational migration has forged a new form of transnational family; fathers remain in Korea as the breadwinners while mothers accompany their children abroad. These transnational split-households, commonly referred to as 'wild geese families' (*girogi gajok*), are often considered to strategically maximise their children's chances to accumulate desired cultural and linguistic capital through overseas education.[26] In this family arrangement, 'geese' mothers are usually described as competent 'managers' who rigorously collect information and make careful decisions about their children's ESA, and accompany their children abroad as well.[27]
12. In the past few years, Asian countries such as China, Singapore and the Philippines, have started to emerge as popular ESA destinations in addition to the conventional western destinations including the US and Canada. With China's rapid growth as a new and important global market, people have begun to recognise the importance of the Chinese language (Mandarin) as another valuable linguistic capital. Within this context, Singapore has become even more popular than any other Asian destination. As a multi-ethnic and multicultural society comprised of three main ethnic groups—Chinese, Malay and Indian—Singapore has implemented its strong bilingual policy by promoting education in the school children's mother tongue. Under this bilingual policy, English serves as the medium of instruction and administration, while Mandarin, Malay and Tamil are taught at local schools (also called government schools) for the students' mother tongue education.[28] Singapore's emphasis on bilingual education has attracted many Korean students and parents, as Koreans assume that they would be able to learn both English and Mandarin in Singapore.[29] Therefore, a growing number of Korean students choose Singapore local schools rather than international schools in the hope of acquiring the two languages through their ESA in Singapore.[30]
13. The majority of Korean 'geese' families in Singapore are largely middle or upper-middle class, although they seem to be relatively less affluent, compared to other 'geese' families residing in the conventional destinations of Korean ESA.[31] The ESA in Singapore is typically arranged for a relatively short time, about two or three years, and the families tend to go back to Korea or move further afield to other countries after their ESA in Singapore. Korean students' ESA in Singapore is usually promoted and facilitated by overseas education agencies called *yuhakweon*, who provide various services for students' migration and schooling in Singapore.[32] In practice, many agencies claim to provide step-by-step assistance to Korean students and their families as 'bridges to learning.' [33] For example, the agencies specialising in Singapore typically have their offices both in Korea and Singapore—the offices in Korea usually take care of students' preparation for overseas education by

providing information about schools overseas, counselling services and visa application processing services. The offices in Singapore provide various services for settlement, such as picking-up at the airport, arranging housing and, more importantly, helping students with their applications and placement tests. As many Korean students need to wait for their enrolment place in their school of choice, due to limited vacancies in local public schools, *yuhakweon* sometimes arrange and offer lessons for those students who are waiting for school registration.

14. Various learning centres called *hakweon* are another crucial educational industry that provides extracurricular private lessons for Korean migrant students in Singapore. In Korea, private tutoring and learning centres for core subjects such as English and mathematics have recently grown as an important strategy to enhance children's academic performance. However, its affordability depends on a families' social class.[34] Likewise, many Korean migrant students in Singapore also enrol in *hakweon* for supplementary education, which requires many 'geese' mothers to invest substantial amounts of money and time in addition to their children's regular schooling in Singapore. Similar to the findings on the relationship between socioeconomic status and educational strategies in Korea,[35] the 'geese' mothers optimise their human and economic resources to have their children spend more time in structured academic activities (such as private lessons in *hakweon*) under their close monitoring, which lower-class families in Korea cannot afford to do.

Manager moms, 'alpha' moms and 'geese' moms: Images of emergent motherhoods in Korea

15. As stated earlier, Korean 'geese' mothers are usually considered to be a typical type of 'manager mom,' who are greatly involved in children's education with full control over their children's daily routines and future plans for academic development. Mainly based on the images of highly educated, middle-class full-time housewives/mothers, the role of educational 'manager' has been further intensified over those of caregivers under the recent neoliberal changes in Korea.[36] Similar to the ideology of 'intensive mothering,' the dominant image of 'manager mothers' tends to obscure the class differences in mothering practices for children's social mobility, while emphasising mothers' capacity to manage their children's education 'as self-managed maternal citizens through their consumptive practices.' [37] Since the 1990s, the increasing privatisation and commercialisation of educational services under Korea's rapid educational reforms such as liberalising after-school education services and programs [38] have rendered parents, especially mothers, discerning consumers who need to make the right choices for their children in the midst of overflowing educational products and services.[39] However, the consumption of educational services may differ according to the families' class positions and economic resources. For example, So Jin Park and Nancy Abelman examine how Korean mothers in distinct class positions manage their children's English education in different ways, although the mothers share the dominant ideology of mother as a main actor for children's education and upward social mobility.[40] As Korean mothers have always been associated with the private sphere of home and children due to an existing strong patriarchal tradition,[41] mothers are

expected to make the right decision for their children, especially in terms of consumption of educational services and products.

16. In this context of increasing privatisation of education based on the individuals' choices, being a 'good' mother also means being smart enough to make strategic decisions for their children. In this age of information overload, in particular, mothers are required to be informative and competent managers who can aggressively design their children's future by providing a road map. Such 'manager moms' are also often called 'alpha moms,' those 'who are educated, tech-savvy...[and who view] motherhood as a job that can be mastered with diligent research.'^[42] This image of motherhood emphasises 'rationality' as 'professional' mothers who create and formulate their own ways of creating 'enterprising' children, based on their 'research.' This 'rational' motherhood often appears to be in contrast to the old image of 'fanatic mothers' (*geukseong omma*), whose involvement in children's education was often vilified as the mothers' excessive education fever was often termed the 'swish of the skirt' (*chima baram*).^[43]
17. As such, this emerging type of motherhood largely corresponds to the increasing tendency of the 'rationalisation' of everyday life. For instance, Annette Lareau claims that 'the rationalization of children's leisure is evident in the proliferation of organized activities with a predictable schedule, delivering a particular quantity of experience within a specific time period, under the control of adults.'^[44] Similarly, Korean mothers' careful arrangement of children's daily activities, especially in relation to children's intellectual development, is much more focused, and these intensified mothering practices are often called 'rational motherhood' in contrast to the affective nature of Korean traditional motherhood.^[45] For example, So-Jin Park argues that 'the task of "raising children" (*janyeo yangyuk*) could be fulfilled by other women, such as mothers-in-law or babysitters, the task of "educating children" (*janyeo gyoyuk*) could not: mothers are the only ones who should manage it.'^[46] Therefore, in the current neoliberal regime of motherhood, the discourse of 'rational motherhood' gains currency, emphasising the roles of mothers as planning and controlling the academic and intellectual dimensions of their children's lives.
18. Viewed from this perspective, 'geese' mothers readily appear as a paragon of 'manager moms' or 'alpha moms,' —rational Mothers who carefully plan and arrange children's migration. According to Uhn Cho, 'geese' mothers represent 'neoliberal and global motherhood' that emerges from the intersection between dominant neoliberal ideas of education with an emphasis on self-management, efficiency, and entrepreneurship, and patriarchal notions of instrumental motherhood (*dogujeok moseong*) that prioritise enhancement of children's upward social mobility.^[47] Thus, such rational and managerial roles that mothers play are often highlighted in both popular discourses and scholarly works on Korean motherhood in this era of globalisation and neoliberal transformations.^[48] Yet, at the same time, the stereotypical image of 'geese' mothers is often described as being highly competitive, selfish and calculating, while neglecting other members of the family (for example, their husbands and in-laws), which may lead to a dysfunctional family or 'family

deconstruction' (*gajok haechae*).^[49] This negative persona of 'geese' mothers with their excessive neoliberal tendencies is often considered to be oppositional to the traditional image of Korean mothers, who are self-sacrificing and give emotional security and comfort to other family members.^[50]

19. Against this backdrop, I will illustrate more detailed meaning-making processes of transnational motherhood based on fine-grained ethnographic accounts of Korean 'geese' mothers' own mothering experiences in Singapore. Once the Korean mothers have migrated to Singapore, their motherhood needs to be negotiated and reconstituted, as embedded in transnational space. I will focus on ways in which Korean 'geese' mothers understand and depict their own mothering practices as a valuable asset for their children's ESA in order to construct and present their identities, while distancing themselves from the negative stereotypes of 'geese' mothers prevalent in Korea. In doing so, I will identify the strategy of emotionalisation that Korean 'geese' mothers in Singapore employ and adopt in an attempt to valorise and glorify their presence in the transnational space.

Mother's 'heartfelt care' (*jeongseong*): Emotionalising motherly roles in transnational space

20. One of the main strategies by which Korean mothers valorise motherly roles as being most powerful and invincible resources for children's pursuit of educational development is to *emotionalise* their roles in transnational space. Unlike typical Korean 'manager mothers' who are greatly involved in their children's academic activities, many of the 'geese' mothers interviewed declared that they do not have full control over children's school work and activities, mainly because of their lack of language proficiency both in English and Mandarin.^[51] Although the mothers may have been competent managers who planned and arranged their departure to Singapore while they were in Korea, once they moved to Singapore, the mothers' roles are usually negotiated more into care-giving partly due to their limited competency in the two languages.
21. However, the 'geese' mothers' limited language proficiency does not really stop them from engaging in 'manager roles' in Singapore. Instead, the mothers try to enhance the value of their roles in different ways—in emphatic and embodied ways. For example, a mother of a 12-year-old boy and a 9-year-girl mentioned how she helped her children's Mandarin lessons, although she did not have any proficiency in Mandarin.

Well, you know, I don't know Chinese [Mandarin]. Since I don't know any Chinese, I decided and said to myself, 'Okay, let's copy all the [Chinese] words.' So I wrote all the words, and my arms [hurt because of writing]... (laughing). I copied exactly one whole book. I copied it exactly the same, not Chinese letters, but the letters written in English alphabet called... What is it? *Hanyu Pinyin*,^[52] right? Yes, *Hanyu Pinyin*. I copied all of them from one whole book. I copied all by my hands. But I was happy that I had something to do. So I wrote them down over and over again, and gave them to my kids. And I wrote again. Then, all of sudden, my kids were able to read without even looking at the words.

22. The excerpt above illustrates how the interviewee presents herself and how she was engaged in the simple and tedious work of copying out the whole Chinese book. She repeatedly mentions that she 'copied all of them by hands,' while emphasising how hard and

tedious it was to simply copy all the words from the whole book. Yet at the same time, she mentioned that she was 'happy' as she 'had something to do' to support her children. In the end, her effort was successful, as her children were able to read the Chinese book. The children's achievement, therefore, was not because their mother was a 'rational' or 'smart' manager, but because she dedicated all the time and physical labour to assisting her children despite her lack of competency in Mandarin. Such maternal care with all heart, which even accompanying physical pain is usually referred to as a mothers' 'heartfelt care' or *jeongseong*, the most distinctive component of mothers' care and, furthermore, their managerial roles.

23. Different environmental and social circumstances in Singapore also make Korean mothers feel as if they require more physical and manual effort to carry out their ordinary care work. As 'a global city, yet still within Asia,' Singapore is often conceived of as a 'comfort zone' by many Korean educational migrants.^[53] However, in the Korean mothers' own narratives of their everyday life in Singapore, the popular topics that frequently emerge are the mothers' physical difficulties and hardships due to Singapore's tropical weather and its expensive transportation system.
24. The following excerpt from a focus group interview with three Korean migrant mothers illustrates these points. At the time of the interview, the three mothers were sitting and waiting at their children's school to pick them up when the class ended. They were talking about how their lives in Singapore had changed in terms of transportation, grocery shopping, and the weather in comparison to Korea.

Mother 1: In Korea, children can use a school bus. And it's free. But there's no school bus here. It is so much trouble [for parents] to commute their children to school.

Mother 2: In fact, in Seoul, people don't walk. They drive even within a ten-minute walking distance. People [in Seoul] don't walk for twenty or thirty minutes, but here we do every day (to pick up children from the school) and even in this hot weather.

Mother 3: Right, people [in Seoul] don't walk even though the weather is nice.

Mother 2: And even if you go grocery shopping, you drive a car. But here I carry things over my shoulder [without a car].

Mother 3: You would not know how many Korean mothers complain about their shoulder pain. Here we carry a lot of heavy stuff and walk.

Mother 1: Yes, I cannot eat a watermelon, because it's too heavy to carry around [laughing].

Mother 2: If you'd like to eat watermelon, you have to take a taxi, and taking a taxi costs more than a watermelon! [laughing].

25. As shown in this excerpt, the Korean mothers tend to describe their care work in Singapore to be more physically painful compared to their domestic work in Korea. Such mothers' accounts portray migrant mothers as being patient, self-sacrificing and willing to endure such physical suffering and hardship for their children. This narrated excerpt also reflects the migrant mothers' notions of *jeongseong*, heartfelt care in the transnational setting. Viewed from the migrant mothers' perspectives, only mothers are able to offer heartfelt care; the

motherly care that is incommensurable with others, such as care provided by fathers and other commercialised service-providers.

26. For example, this distinctive emotional/embodied quality of mothers' care often leads them to justify why mothers, not fathers, should accompany their children abroad. As reported by Hakyoon Lee in her study of 'geese' mothers in the US, [54] many 'geese' mothers I interviewed in Singapore also echoed an idea of maternal gate-keeping, such as why mothers, not fathers, should take care of their children. The mother interviewees often emphasised distrust about their husbands, even though it is quite rare to find cases in which fathers accompany children to Singapore mainly due to their role as breadwinners. One mother I interviewed illustrated this point by complaining about her husband's lack of self-discipline. She pointed out that her husband 'cannot wake himself up early in the morning,' thus, he would not be able to care for children who need to wake up early enough to prepare for school. [55] As such, differences between father and mother are even more pronounced when it comes to the case of enduring bodily discomfort, such as sleep deprivation. The 'geese' mothers usually depict themselves as being patient, self-enduring and sacrificing, and such self-representations appear to be parallel to the Korean traditional notions of motherhood.

Making boundaries between mother and others: Learning centres, educational agencies and home-stays

27. The strategy of emotionalising motherly roles is even more emphasised when mothers make boundaries between themselves and 'others,' usually commercialised educational services providers. As briefly mentioned above, the main educational industries in Singapore typically include private learning centres (*hakweon*), overseas education agencies (*yuhakweon*), and home-stay host families.
28. Firstly, many 'geese' mothers compare their care with that of learning centres (*hakweon*) who do not provide fully personalised care for children. The migrant mothers believe that their children have improved in their academic performance in Singapore, and that it is mainly because the mothers are 'always with them for 24 hours, 7 days a week.' Sometimes, the mothers simply identified a 'huge difference' in children's performance, when they 'looked after' the children's academic work and when they don't. For example, Min-Jung, a mother of an 8-year-old girl mentioned:

Min-Jung: If a mother teaches her child, the child's academic performance is different. There is a huge difference [in a child's performance] between when mothers look after [children's study] and when they don't.

Researcher: Then, why is it different when a mother looks after [children's study]?

Min-Jung: Because mothers know their children best. And they take care of children with more attention. I mean, with more care and personalised attention. But for example, in learning centres, they just teach with no individualised attention. They can just lead a few smart students in class.

29. As such, mothers' more individualised and personalised attention to their children are the main factors by which these women create a boundary between learning centres and

mothers. This emphasis on individualised care tailored for each child, in turn, leads these migrant mothers to look for private learning centres that offer mother-like care and management for each student. Virginia Caputo illustrates in her study of Canadian mothers who wish to send their children to private schools because they prefer 'caring environments' that provide children with 'individualised attention' in ensuring a child's future success.'^[56] Korean mothers also look for those educational services providers who care about each student by providing more personal care and attention.

30. Secondly, overseas education agencies (*yuhakweon*) are most frequently pointed out as 'irresponsible' and 'careless' by Korean migrant mothers. Although most 'geese' families whom I interviewed migrated to Singapore with the assistance of overseas education agencies, they usually did not agree that the agencies had helped them with settlement. Most of the Korean migrants stated that they could not trust the agencies, and that the agencies were not very responsible for the families' settlement in Singapore. In particular, many Korean migrant mothers reported that the agencies were not reliable and trustworthy in terms of children's school registration and the placement tests necessary for school entry in Singapore. In most cases, the mothers themselves, not the agencies, resolved their children's problems with school registration. The mothers always emphasised their own efforts for their children's school registration and settlement in contrast to what they considered to be the poor services provided by agencies, which they believed were oriented toward their own monetary profit.
31. Again, mothers usually emphasised their effort in embodied ways, as illustrated in the following excerpt from my interview with Myung-Jin, a 45-year-old mother with two girls. When Myung-Jin first decided on ESA in Singapore, she arranged the two girls' applications to local schools in Singapore through an overseas education agency. But when they arrived in Singapore, Myung-Jin found that the agency had lacked responsibility and failed to arrange school registration for her two girls as she had desired:

Myung-Jin: When I asked them [the agency] to help us send my two girls to the same school, their first answer was 'it is very hard.' Because my older girl had to take a placement test, and the younger one didn't need to take it [because she was a 1st grader]. So the agency said that I needed to send my older one first because there was a vacancy for her grade, but the younger one had to wait for a while. But I didn't want my girl to stay home and do nothing. So I visited a couple of schools by myself, and submitted my daughters' applications. One school contacted me saying that they had some vacancies. And I visited the school and insisted, 'since I have two daughters, I need to send them together, no matter what.'

Researcher: So how did you communicate with them [at the school]?

Myung-Jin: Well, I brought my electronic dictionary with me [for English translation]. And I also used my gestures, and even used Korean words [laughing]. But still I was able to make myself understood [laughing].

Researcher: Are there any similar cases with other mothers?

Myung-Jin: Well. I also said to my neighbours. Don't trust agencies. One of my neighbours, her child stayed home for three months, while they just waited for their educational agency do the work for school registration. So I kept telling her, 'mothers should run with their own feet' (*ommaneun balro ttuieoya handa*: mothers themselves should do what needs to be done). But in the end, the mother did everything. Anyway, you cannot trust agencies. What they [agencies] want is money. They don't care about our children.

32. During the interview, Myung-Jin used the expression, 'mothers should run with their feet (*ommaneun balro ttuieoya handa*),' that is, the mothers themselves should do what needs to be done for their children. This embodied expression refers to mothers' devoted care, which often involves physical pain and hardship. Myung-Jin was successful in sending both her children to the desired school together as she intended, but her success did not come from her competency. Rather, even though she had a limited proficiency in English, and even 'used Korean words' and gestures to communicate with the school, she was successful, because she put tremendous effort into organising her children's school enrolment. Here again, the emotionality and embodiment of mothers' effort and care are emphasised over and above rationality, as the basic attributes of maternal care needed for their children's educational success in this transnational setting.
33. The third 'others,' who are frequently constructed as careless and irresponsible service providers are those 'home-stay' host families. The mothers' care and effort, especially in terms of providing home-cooked meals are often compared to others' carelessness, especially in relation to their children's home-stay experiences. For example, Joo-Hee, a mother of two children quit her job in Korea to join her children. In fact, her children had moved to Singapore one year earlier and stayed with a Singaporean host family. Joo-Hee told me that she decided to join her children because she found that the children often fell sick and thought it was due to their inadequate nutrition. She said:
- When I visited my children's Singaporean host family, they seemed to be nice. But the problem was with the food. I once ate together with the host family, but they served only one plate of fried noodles with no side dishes. So I asked a domestic worker [who worked for the family] cautiously, whether there was anything else, like a salad, or veggies, but the maid looked at me as if I was odd, and answered, 'No, it's all [for the meal].' And for breakfast, they provided just a little bit of cereal flakes. But eating cereal is okay only for one or two days [per week]. It is bad if children have to eat cereals every day, isn't it?
34. The problem of food and home-meals (*jib-bab*) with home-stay host families is repeatedly echoed in my interviews with the Korean migrant mothers, and I was told that this food problem is one of the main reasons why mothers need to accompany their children in a foreign land. [57] The Korean mothers frequently highlight their *jeongseong* in preparing full meals for their children's breakfast (which is typically comprised of rice, soup, and some side dishes) in contrast to their children's home-stay experiences of 'having one simple dish every day with no variety.' They often add, 'No matter how nice the home-stay is, if the child is not their own, they would not be able to do as much as mothers do for the child.' Therefore, in the mothers' accounts, heartfelt care is something that you can expect only from mothers, not from others.
35. As such, the 'geese' mothers whom I interviewed constantly made a clear boundary between themselves and others, by defining 'others' as those who are careless and not trustworthy, whereas mothers are the ones who are always attentive to their children's educational development and well-being. In this transnational setting, the roles of mothers are significant and powerful, not because they are competent managers based on rationality and entrepreneurship. Rather, the mothers' heartfelt care for their children is considered as the 'best' resource, and appears to be intensified compared to service-providers in the host

country. Therefore, the very *emotionality* and *unmarketability* of motherhood are the most distinctive attributes of these 'geese' mothers, through which they successfully 'other' educational services providers, while transforming mothers' presence in Singapore to be the most valuable resource for children.

Conclusion

36. Korean educational migrants in Singapore have moved across seemingly anxious geographical and psychological borders in an attempt to respond to current rapid globalisation. These Korean migrants, in the form of mother-child migrants, bring their own 'home,' their essential 'mother-child safe place,' [58] like a snail carrying its own shell. In the neoliberal order, Korean children's ESA can be viewed as one of the family strategies to enhance children's future capacity through the achievement of academic credentials and individual advancement. In this journey, mothers are required to become 'road-managers' for their children, by carefully calculating the benefits and costs of their transnational movements and trajectories. This type of transnational motherhood can be considered as an emerging type of motherhood based on rationality and entrepreneurship.
37. Often conceived of as a stressful border-crossing experience for children, the context of transnational migration requires Korean migrant mothers to redefine their roles from managers to primary caregivers. The mothers express their desire to provide their children with a home and a sense of belonging in an attempt to smooth their stressful border-crossing experiences. The mothers' lack of language proficiency that is required for competent management also leads them to define and redefine the roles of mothers in Singapore as simply 'being there' with children for psychological comfort and moral support. In addition, the migrant mothers tend to reconfigure and reframe their managerial roles in more embodied and emotional ways, and to underscore and glorify emotionality mediated by the Korean traditional notions of motherhood. In this context, the emotional quality of maternal care, as represented in the mothers' own notions of heartfelt care or *jeongseong* is highlighted as the most essential component of mothering in the context of transnational migration.
38. Hence, the two types of motherhood are in fact mutually constitutive rather than exclusive, as mediated by the neoliberal logic of 'self-governing subjects' [59] that focuses on self-development and self-cultivation. In the making of self-governing subjects, maternal care characterised by a mother's heartfelt care is believed to enhance her child's emotional and physical well-being, and constitutes the most essential emotional asset that children can utilise in the context of transnational migration. The glorification of the affective dimension of motherhood, on the other hand, further obscures any structural social inequality such as class and gender, which may constrain children's academic achievement and social mobility in transnational space. [60] For example, children's academic activities are usually organised and managed in discrete ways according to each family's different class position, which in turn may lead to each child's different academic achievements. [61] However, children's success and upward social mobility in Korea is largely considered to be the outcome of the

mothers' heartfelt care. The reinforcement of the image of full-time middle-class mothers who do intensive mothering as 'good mothers,' marginalises other commercialised educational services as 'bad and distrustful.'

39. Thus, I argue that the neoliberal discourses on motherhood do not simply replace the conventional notions of motherhood and mothering practices in Korea. Rather, Korean migrant mothers tend to reconfigure and reframe their experiences of transnational motherhood in ways that are reminiscent of their traditional notions of motherhood. In Korean migrant mothers' own accounts, the emotionality and unmarketability of maternal care appear to be the most efficient form of personal resources, a paradoxical consequence of neoliberalism that usually emphasises the rationality, entrepreneurship, and marketability of subjects as the most desirable attributes of personhood to best fit in the rapidly changing markets. This case study, thus, refutes a monolithic application of neoliberalism to the phenomenon of Korean 'geese' mothers. Instead, it draws particular attention to the situatedness of emergent motherhoods, which is mediated by local structures of meaning as well as being embedded in transnational space.

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Notes

[1] Valerie Walkerdine, 'Workers in the new economy: Transformation as border crossing,' *Ethos* 24(1) (2008): 10–41, pp. 37–38.

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[4] Bonnie Urciuoli, 'Skills and selves in the new work place,' *American Ethnologist* 35(2) (2008): 210–28, p. 210.

[5] [Wendy Brown](#), 'Neo-liberalism and the end of liberal democracy,' *Theory and Event* 7(1) 2003 (accessed 19 November 2015).

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- [7] Joo-Hyun Cho, 'Neoliberal governmentality at work: post-IMF Korean society and the construction of neoliberal women,' *Korea Journal* 49(3) (2009): 15–43, p. 26.
- [8] Park and Abelmann, 'Class and cosmopolitan striving'; Park, 'Educational manager mothers.'
- [9] Joo-Hyun Cho, 'Neoliberal governmentality at work'; Uhn Cho, 'Gender inequality or gender paradox'; Yeonbo Jeong, 'Scientific motherhood, responsibility, and hope: umbilical cord blood banking in South Korea,' *New Genetics and Society* 33(4) (2014): 349–69; Jae Kyung Lee, 'The glorification of 'scientific motherhood' as an ideological construct in modern Korea,' *Asia Journal of Women's Studies* 5(4) (2009): 9–27, p. 9; Park, 'Educational manager mothers.'
- [10] See also Arlie R. Hochschild, 'Through the crack of the time bind: from market management to family management,' *Anthropology of Work Review* 28(1) (2007): 1–7; Lois McNay, 'Self as enterprise: Dilemmas of control and resistance in Foucault's the birth of biopolitics,' *Theory, Culture, and Society* 26(6) (2009): 55–77; Nicolette Makovicky, 'Introduction: me, Inc.? Untangling neoliberalism, personhood and postsocialism,' in *Neoliberalism, Personhood, and Postsocialism: Enterprising Selves in Changing Economies*, ed. Nicolette Makovicky, pp. 1–16, : Ashgate, 2014; Urchiolli, 'Skills and selves in the new workplace.'
- [11] Sharon Hays, *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996.
- [12] Annet Lareau, *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race and Family Life*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003.
- [13] The expression, 'wild geese families' (*girogi gajok*), is a folk term that denotes Korean transnational split households due to children's overseas education. In this transnational split family, mothers are referred to as 'geese' mothers (*girogi omma*), while fathers as 'geese' fathers (*girogi appa*). For Koreans, wild geese traditionally represent a symbol of marital fidelity.
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- [16] Kwang-kyu Lee, *Korean Family and Kinship*, Seoul: Jipmoondang, 1997, p. 65.
- [17] Michel Foucault, 'Technologies of the self,' in *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, ed. Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman and Patrick H. Hutton, pp. 16–49, Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988.
- [18] See Sharon Hays, *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996.
- [19] The term 'home-stay' (*hom-stei* in Korean) refers to a form of residential arrangement where visiting students can rent a room from local families. Many Korean lone students stay with Singaporean host families, and a typical Singaporean host family consists of a married couple with their own children (and sometimes with a domestic helper). Some Korean 'geese' mothers also sublet their rooms to other Korean students in an attempt to save their housing fees. These home-stay students usually pay between SGD1,500–2,000 (USD1,000–1,500) per month for their room and board.
- [20] A similar point in research methods was discussed in Kang, 'Global citizens in the making: Child-centred multimedia ethnographic research on South Korean student migrants in Singapore,' *Ethnography* 14(3) (2013): 324–45.
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- [23] Uhn Cho, 'Korean families on the frontline of globalization.'
- [24] Park, 'Educational manager mothers,' p. 193.
- [25] Abelmann, Park and Kim, 'College rank and neoliberal subjectivity'; Park, 'Educational manager mothers'; Park, 'The

promise of English'; Shin, 'Language "skills".'

[26] Yoonhee Kang, 'Going global in comfort: South Korean educational exodus in Singapore,' in *South Korea's Education Exodus: The Life and Times of Study Abroad*, ed. Adrienne Lo, Nancy Abelmann, Soo Ah Kwon, and Sumie Okazaki, pp. 125–46, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015.

[27] Kang, 'Transnational motherhood,' pp. 153–55.

[28] Joseph Sung-Yul Park and So-Hee Bae, 'School choice in the global school house,' *South Korea's Education Exodus: The Life and Times of Study Abroad*, ed. Adrienne Lo, Nancy Abelmann, Soo Ah Kwon and Sumie Okazaki, pp. 85–102, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015.

[29] Yoonhee Kang, 'Singlish or Globish: Multiple language ideologies and global identities among Korean educational migrants in Singapore,' *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 16(2) (2012): 165–83.

[30] See also Park and Bae, 'School choice,' p. 89.

[31] Jeehun Kim, "'Downed: and stuck in Singapore": Lower/middle class South Korean wild geese (*kirogi*) children in Singapore,' *Research in Sociology of Education* 17 (2010): 271–311.

[32] For a discussion on overseas education industry in Canada, see Shin, 'Language "skills".'

[33] Francis Collins, 'Bridges to learning: International student mobilities, education agencies and social networks,' in *Global Networks* 8(4) (2008): 398–417.

[34] Park and Abelmann, 'Class and cosmopolitan striving'; Dayoung Bae and K.A.S. Wickrama, 'Family socioeconomic status and academic achievement among Korean adolescents: Linking mechanisms of family processes and adolescents' time use,' *Journal of Early Adolescence* 35(7) (2015): 1014–1038.

[35] Bae and Wickrama, 'Family socioeconomic status.'

[36] Park and Abelmann, 'Class and cosmopolitan striving'; Uhn Cho, 'Korean families on the frontline of globalization'; Uhn Cho, 'Gender inequality'; Park, 'Educational manager mothers.'

[37] Park, 'Educational manager mothers,' p. 206.

[38] Under the Chun Doo-Hwan military regime (1980–1987), private after-school education had been strictly prohibited in order to maintain equality and uniformity of education. However, since the 1990s, the Korean education system has been decentralised and granted greater autonomy, in which greater freedom of choice and market-driven competition have been more emphasised, under Korea's political and social democratisation since the first civilian regime of Kim Young Sam (1993–1998). For further discussion, see Michael Seth, *Education Fever: Society, Politics, and the Pursuit of Schooling in South Korea*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002.

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[43] Park, 'Educational manager mothers,' p. 195.

[44] Lareau, *Unequal Childhoods*, p. 247.

[45] Joo-Hyun Cho, 'Neoliberal governmentality at work'; Uhn Cho, 'Korean families on the frontline of globalization'; Park, 'Educational manager mothers.' See also Jia Hong, 'The historical approach to Korean motherhood: Comparing and EBS , *The*

Korean Journal of Humanities and the Social Sciences, 38(1/2) (2014): 205–228

[46] Park, 'Educational manager mothers,' p. 188.

[47] Uhn Cho, 'Gender inequality,' p. 81.

[48] Park and Abelmann, 'Class and cosmopolitan striving'; U. Cho, 'Korean families on the frontline of globalization'; Uhn Cho, 'Gender inequality'; Park, 'Educational manager mothers.'

[49] Yang-Suk Choi, 'The phenomenon of 'geese-families': Marital separation between geese-fathers and geese mothers,' *Kajok kwa Munhwa* (Family and Culture), 18,(2) (2006): 37–65.

[50] See Kwang-kyu Lee, *Korean Family and Kinship*.

[51] See Kang, 'Transnational motherhood.'

[52] Hanyu Pinyin refers to a writing system that phonetically romanises Chinese written characters.

[53] Kang, 'Going global in comfort.'

[54] Hakyoon Lee, "'I am a Kirogi mother": Education exodus and life transformation among Korean transnational women,' *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education* 9 (2010): 250–64.

[55] A similar point was analysed in Yoonhee Kang, 'Any one parent will do: Negotiations of fatherhood among South Korean "wild geese" fathers in Singapore,' *Journal of Korean Studies*, 17(2) (2012): 269–98.

[56] Virginia Caputo, 'She's from a "good family": Performing childhood and motherhood in a Canadian private school setting,' *Childhood* 14(2) (2007): 173–92, p. 178.

[57] Kang, 'Transnational motherhood.'

[58] Walkerdine, 'Workers in the new economy,' p. 28.

[59] Foucault, 'Technologies of the self.'

[60] See also Abelmann, Park and Kim, 'College rank and neoliberal subjectivity.'

[61] Park and Ablemann, 'Class and cosmopolitan striving'; Bae and Wickrama, 'Family socioeconomic status'; see also Lareau, *Unequal Childhoods*.

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