

Educational Manager Mothers: South Korea's Neoliberal Transformation

Park So Jin

Abstract

This article analyzes the emerging image of “educational manager mothers” in the context of South Korea’s neoliberal transformation, including educational reforms and the rapid expansion of the private after-school market. Although maternal support for children’s education is not entirely new in South Korea, the escalating private after-school market demands much more of mothers than formal schooling ever did. By critically scrutinizing the continuity and discontinuity of this emerging maternal image between the old and new rhetoric, this article examines the newly intensified maternal roles for children’s education. In particular, by analyzing the media discourse, this article explores new aspects of this maternal subjectivity, which is closely intertwined with South Korea’s neoliberal transformations and its calls for newly creative and competitive citizens. While resonating with the old ambivalent tone and centering on the experiences of middle-class full-time mothers, this discourse reconstructs educational manager mothers as necessary figures for children’s educational success. This maternal discourse thus enjoins diverse women to become manager mothers, by obscuring the classed aspect of this image and emphasizing the specific “ability” (*neungnyeok*) or “nature” (*jajil*) of mothers for managing their children’s education.

Keywords: educational manager mother, discourse, private after-school market, neoliberal transformation, self-managed citizens, maternal subjectivity, educational fever, gender, class.

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Introduction

. . . “We have to prepare for the university entrance exam [for our children] beginning at the age of three.”

. . . On a street filled with private after-school institutes in the Nowon-gu district of Seoul.¹ There are few cars on the sidewalk. Those sitting in the drivers’ seats are all women. One is busily embroidering, one is eating bread with a toddler, and one is falling asleep. . . . After the door of the private after-school institute opens, children emerge one by one. They look like second or third graders in elementary school. . . . Small children walk to their mommy’s car, carrying backpacks as big as their bodies.

“No doubt about it—we are road-managers.” “We feed [our children] supper on the road, going back and forth . . .” (*Chosun Ilbo*, December 5, 2002).²

The above report vividly describes the image of educational manager mothers (*maenijeo eomma*)³ that is now prevalent in South Korea: Mothers chauffeur their elementary school children to private after-school programs, while providing quick meals inside the cars to save time. To keep track of their children’s after-school schedules, the mothers use thick day calendars, as shown by a sample page from the diary of a 30-something housewife who sends her two children to twenty-three different private after-school programs.

1. Nowon-gu is a large apartment complex area in the northeast region of Seoul. In comparison to the image of the affluent Gangnam area (the South of Hangang river), it represents a more modest middle-class neighborhood.
2. The title of this serial report is “Our children: Prisoners of Private After-School Education,” and this first report has a subtitle, “Mom is a Road Manager.”
3. In comparison to decades-old terms such as the “education mother” (*kyoiku mama*) in Japan and “soccer mom” in the United States, this term, “educational manager mother” has very recently emerged in South Korea. Although these terms imply overlapping images for mothers involved in children’s education, the specificity of each term in different cultural and historical contexts should not be overlooked.

During my fieldwork in Seoul,⁴ which resonated with the above image of educational manager mothers, most of the mothers I interviewed expressed concern and anxiety for their elementary school children's education, especially private after-school education. Some mothers pointed out that although the task of "raising children" (*janyeo yangyuk*) could be fulfilled by other women, such as mother-in-laws or babysitters, the task of "educating children" (*janyeo gyoyuk*) could not: mothers are the only ones who should manage it.

In the past, the most important thing for children was to study hard in school. . . . Nowadays, however, for children to succeed, they need to do so many things, such as learn to use a computer and speak English. . . . In this day and age, mothers have to be more intensively involved than ever before, and children are busier than they have ever been. But the problem is that we don't know which criteria will really most shape our children's lives—we don't know what is best for our children. It is the job of mothers to judge what is best for their children and when to implement it. But, nowadays, it is all so very difficult (a middle-class mother of a six-year old daughter and a worksheet teacher, 2000).

As one of the middle-class mothers I interviewed aptly described in the above vignette, children are now busier than ever due to private after-school programs, and the maternal role in children's education has become more intense than ever before. A South Korean feminist critic recently characterized the intensity of mothers' involvement as the "hysteria of children's education" (Im 2001). If this is the case, why and how have mothers' roles in their children's education become so crucial and intense in South Korea? What is new about the emerging image of educational manager mother?

4. Although this article mainly focuses on the media and academic discourses on educational manager mothers, I conducted an ethnographic field research (summer 2000, July 2001 to June 2003) on mothers' involvement in their elementary school kids across class spectrum. All interviews quoted here are from my field research. See Park and Abelmann (2004) and Park (2007) for the ethnographic details of how this maternal image affects the everyday lives of women.

Some scholars might argue that it is nothing new in South Korea, while tracing the origin of mothers' responsibility for their children's education back to the Joseon dynasty, relating it to Confucian culture or to the modern ideal of "good wife, wise mother" (*hyeonmo yangcheo*). Others might say that the "swish of the skirt" (*chimat baram*), which is comparable to the English expression "apron strings," or "education fever" (*gyoyungnyeol*) were already known in the 1970s and 1980s.

Although I acknowledge this continuity, this article pays more careful attention to the newly intensified roles played by mothers in their children's education in the context of South Korea's neoliberal transformation, including educational reforms and the rapid expansion of the private after-school market. By analyzing diverse popular and academic discourses, this article explores the particular ways in which the new image of the educational manager mother is articulated with the notion of Korean neoliberal citizenship. First, it examines the recent escalation of the private after-school market in relation to neoliberal educational reforms, while revealing South Korea's neoliberal transformation and its call for a new, creative citizenship. Second, I briefly map out the ways in which mothers' roles in children's education have been culturally defined in the diverse rhetoric of educational fever and the "swish of the skirt," in order to rethink the continuity and discontinuity of Korean motherhood. Third, I explore the new aspects of the emerging discourse of educational manager mothers, by focusing on the media discourse. In contrast to the old, negative image of the "swish of the skirt," this analysis shows that the new rhetoric of educational manager mothers more positively enjoins women to become manager mothers, despite resonances that might exist with the old ambivalent tone. By paying attention to the specific ways in which this gendered discourse of motherhood celebrates the specific "ability" (*neungnyeok*) or "nature" (*jajil*) of mothers in terms of managing their children's education, this article asserts that the emerging image of the educational manager mother is closely intertwined with South Korea's call for a newly creative and competitive citizen.

Neoliberal Educational Transformation and the Private After-School Market

Private after-school education (*sagyoyuk*) in South Korea is a composite of diverse private institutions (*hagwon*)⁵, private or group tutorials (*gaein gwaoe* or *geurup gwaoe*), and home-visiting study coaches (*hakseupji*) operating outside the realm of formal schooling. While South Korean schools have been recently diagnosed as “collapsing” (Seo 2003), this private after-school market continues to flourish. According to a report from the Korean Educational Development Institute (KEDI), 72.6% of school-aged students (83.1% of elementary students) participated in this after-school market in 2002.⁶ This number, in comparison to 15% in 1980, 22% in 1991, 54% in 1997, and 58% in 2000, reveals the rapid expansion of the after-school market and its increasing levels of consumption, especially through the 1990s and early 2000s (Yang 2003, 289). Also remarkable is that the after-school market for elementary students is the fastest-growing in the industry (*Hankyoreh*, August 16, 2002).

The recent escalation of this after-school market is all the more remarkable in light of the long sweep of South Korea’s contemporary educational history, which was committed, at least ideologically, to equal opportunity, such as found in the decades-long “school equalization policy.” The military government of Park Chung-hee (1961-1979) made two critical educational reforms in the interests of uniformity of education and equalization of schools that have shaped the South Korean educational field during the past three decades: first, the “Middle School Non-Examination Entrance System” (*junghakgyo musiheom iphak jedo*) (1968) and the “High School Equalization Policy” (*gogyo pyeongjunhwa jeongchaek*) (1974). With these two poli-

5. *Hagwon* includes extracurricular institutes (e.g., art or athletic institutes), subject-specialized institutes (*jeonmun hagwon*) (e.g., English specialized institutes), and cram schools (*ipsi hagwon*).

6. According to my own survey among parents of 3rd and 6th graders (total 753) of seven elementary schools in Seoul in 2002, 94.6% of students participated in some private after-school program.

cies, South Korean secondary schools have remained relatively—at least in theory—homogenous until recently. Unlike Japan or the United States, the significance of private schools has remained trivial because of these two policies.

Unlike the case of Japan, the recent expansion of this market in South Korea is also closely related to the complex history of state regulation and deregulation of this market. In 1980, in the name of equality of educational opportunity, the Chun Doo-hwan military regime announced the “July 30 Educational Reform,” which created stringent prohibitions against all kinds of private after-school education. However, throughout the 1990s, the state regulation was gradually loosened, especially in the market for secondary students (Sorensen 1994; Seth 2002). Finally, in April 2000, the Constitutional Court decided that state regulation, which had technically prohibited private educational institutes since 1980, were in violation of the South Korean Constitution, which guarantees parents’ rights over their children’s education and the freedom to choose employment. Along with the new adoption of English as part of the elementary school curriculum in 1997, this court decision has had an important effect on the private after-school market, especially for elementary students.

More importantly, this court decision should be understood in the context of neoliberal educational reform, which dramatically changed the rhetoric of educational values from “uniformity and equality” to “creativity, excellence, and diversification.” The Kim Dae-jung administration accelerated the neoliberal educational reforms that were initiated under the first civilian government of the Kim Young-sam administration. Although South Korea has undergone a series of educational reforms, the recent educational reforms from the mid-1990s are considered the most radical and comprehensive ones (Seth 2002, 169; Mok et al. 2003, 58).

While defining the 21st century as the age “in which creative people can succeed,” Lee Hae Chan, the first minister of education during the Kim Dae-jung administration, argues:

. . . 20th-century society demanded uniformity and homogeneity,

but the society of the 21st century is different because it needs people who can think more creatively and more flexibly.⁷

As the above passage shows, a central tenet of neoliberal educational reform was the preparation of a South Korea, hence its citizenry, that could compete in the twenty-first century global economy. In contrast to the emphasis on the uniformity, standardization, and equality of education that marked successive authoritarian regimes (1961-1992), recent educational reforms (the 7th revised national curriculum) pursue a decentralized and diversified curriculum that can promote the excellence and creativity of students. These reforms apply the principles of market economy—"free competition" and "de-regulation"—to education, emphasizing the diverse choices of educational consumers (Kim C. 1997; Ro 1999; Lee Y. 2001).

Amidst such intense neoliberal educational reforms and even the widely acknowledged economic hardship following the South Korean financial crisis, the prominence of the private after-school market only increased in the final years of the 1990s and has continued until the present day. Of course, the 2000 Constitutional Court decision, which lifted state regulation of the private after-school market, accelerated and justified such expansion. To wit, in the new millennium, market principles and consumer demand for education triumphed over state regulation. This growing market also defines the South Korean neoliberal educational turn as a unique case: Despite the neoliberal education reforms, schools still remain relatively uniform in terms of the state's decades-long school equalization policy, while this private after-school sector, which was formally freed of state regulation in 2000, emerges as the vanguard of the unchecked privatization and marketization of education.⁸ As many critical scholars have

7. See the public letter of Lee Hae Chan to Korean parents, "The Promise to absorb the private after-school education (*gwaoe*) into schools" in the monthly magazine, *Sindonga* (June 1998, <http://shindonga.donga.com>).

8. Thus, the rapidly increasing private after-school market often becomes an excuse or a reason to legitimate "school diversification" against the state's long equalization policy (Lee J. 2004).

warned, the privatization and marketization of education, along with other neoliberal transformations, would reproduce and magnify already-existing inequalities (Apple 2001; Comaroff and Comaroff 2000; Walkerdine 2003).

Michael Apple (2001, 414) aptly argues that neoliberal educational reforms in other countries often signify a transformation of what counts as "a responsible citizen." The recent educational reforms are also one of South Korea's imperative neoliberal projects intended to transform its citizenry into newly creative and competitive citizens. Following critical theories of citizenship, I am concerned here with the state's citizenship projects in terms of "the ways in which authorities thought about (some) individuals as potential citizens, and the ways in which they tried to act upon them" (Rose and Novas 2005, 439).

The post-authoritarian context of South Korea and experience of the IMF crisis made the state's new citizenship project more imperative. Examining the neoliberal transformation during the Kim Dae-jung regime, Song argues that at the post-authoritarian historical moment, the liberal humanist project of democratic individual freedom and rights coincides with such a neoliberal transformation:

. . . Neoliberal governmental policies in South Korea during the IMF crisis [South Korean financial crisis] were powerfully implemented because a liberal ethos and vision of a better life had historical roots and gained explanatory power from people's everyday and political lives throughout the 1990s (Song 2003, 17).

More importantly, this article argues that the recent neoliberal transformations, including educational reforms and the growing private after-school market, "enunciate" educational manager mothers who are competitive—if not creative in their own right—citizens in the new global economy by raising their children to be "new creative citizens."⁹ Further, I argue that the new gendered maternal ideology of educational manager mothers, which is modeled after that of middle-

9. For "enunciating subjects," see Anagnost (1997).

class full-time housewives, becomes central to the measurement of married women's worth and citizenship.

The Old Image of the “Swish of the Skirt”: Praising or Bashing Mothers?

Unlike the Euro-American context, in which it has been taken as a positive practice to be encouraged, in South Korea “parental involvement”—often dubbed as “parental education fever”—has long been a target of suspicion, ambivalence, and even suppression because of its supposed excess.¹⁰ During the last four decades, (parental) education fever has been a target of contrasting evaluations. On the one hand, this figure has been socially admired as a critical “motive power” of South Korea's rapid economic development, and parents, especially mothers, who support their children's educational success, have been praised socially and culturally (O 2000; Lee S. 2001). On the other hand, however, it has often been criticized as the “principle offender” of diverse educational and social problems (Kim Y. et al. 1993; Seth 2002). The common reference to the swish of a mother's skirt often epitomizes this kind of criticism, while vilifying mothers who exhibit “excessive,” “distorted,” or “indiscreet” educational fever.

It is noteworthy that mothers have implicitly or explicitly been central to this ambivalent discourse, while fathers have often been absent or, at best, extras. The very term, “swish of the skirt,” illustrates the gendered nature of this discourse. Generally, this term negatively depicts women's influence, and it often refers specifically to mothers' excessive zeal for their children's education, especially in terms of schooling.

Mothers have also been spotlighted when this ambivalent discourse celebrates education fever. For instance, during the university entrance exam season, media reports often present images of mothers praying in churches or temples for their children's success on the

10. See Lee J. (2002); O (2000); Robinson (1994); Sorensen (1994); Seth (2002); Kim Y. et al. (1993).

exam. This kind of media story echoes common wisdom narratives, such as “Behind every successful child is a mother” (Lee S. 2001). In this context, therefore, support for their children's education has been taken for granted as the mothers' responsibility.

However, the gendered discourse of “swish of the skirt” more often has connoted the negative image of mothers' excessive, taken-for-granted responsibility for their children's education, while expressing an inherent ambivalence. In this regard, in searching for the word in *Chosun Ilbo* (www.chosun.com) headlines from the mid-1960s to the 1980s, I found that the term “swish of the skirt” was depicted as something to be done away with. More importantly, in this discursive field, it was “a few affluent or indiscreet mothers (*ilbu buyucheung* or *mubunbyeol-han eomma-deul*),” who were easily criticized for their excessive education fever. For example, the “swish of the skirt” often negatively connoted the image of affluent mothers, who bribed teachers to favor their children.

Despite the very gendered nature of popular discourse on education fever, however, educational studies tend to use the gender-blind term, “parents” (*hakbumo*), while implicitly assuming that it is mothers who become actively involved in their children's education (Kim Y. et al. 1993; Kim H. 1992; O 2000).¹¹ Furthermore, educational literature often subsumes the gender issue under the rubric of Confucian culture or tradition, which embraces diverse terms, like familism, filial piety (*hyo*), or the image of a traditional mother (Kim H. 1992; Kim, et al. 1993; O 2000). However, interpreting current education fever as the cultural heritage of tradition or Confucianism can be interpreted as yet another “invention of tradition” for the ideological purposes, while ignoring its historical transformation and specificity (Kendall 1996; Abelmann 2003, 287-8; Lee S. 2001).¹²

11. By doing so, they do not pay attention to the gendered aspects of “parental education fever,” while taking for granted the cultural assumption of “mothers' roles” for their children's education, hidden beneath the blanket term of “parents” (Reay 1998).

12. I agree with Laurel Kendall (1996, 10) who critically points out that “Confucianism” becomes “a reductionist black box that ‘explains’ all things from economic success to failed democracy” in popular writing on Korea.

Veering away from the gender-blind and ahistorical approach, I emphasize the historical specificity of the new image of manager mothers in the context of the continuous transformation of gender and motherhood (Kendall 2002; Yoon 2001). Recently some South Korean feminist scholars have noted a transformation in the definition of motherhood (Shim 1999; Im 2001; Yoon 1996, 2001; Sin 1997; Kim E. 1997). Although they do not fully appreciate the increasing intensification of the roles of mothers in their children's education since the mid-1990s, several studies of motherhood describe the recent intensification of mothering practices in relation to education (Sin 1997; Yoon 1996, 2001; Shim 1999). Tracing the emergence of "modern middle-class housewives" in the 1960s and 1970s, Yoon (2001, 68) argues that the most important role for a married woman as a housewife became "buying the family house" through the frugal management of the household budget and "children's education" (*janyeo gyoyuk*) from the 1970s. It is in this period that the old image of the "swish of the skirt," especially in regards to the university entrance examination education (*ipsi gyoyuk*), began to appear.

The new image of young middle-class mothers in the 1990s is noteworthy. As Yoon (2001, 82) argues, the image of young mothers in the 1990s has been widespread: "highly educated¹³ middle-class professional housewives (*peuro jubu*)," who consider children's education as the most crucial mothering practice (Cho 2002). Against the robust middle-aged *ajumma*¹⁴ image, the "missy" (*misijok*) image, i.e. middle-class housewives who dress like young single women or college girls, became popular in the late 1990s (Cho 2002, 185-186; Yoon 2001, 118-222). In this transformed feminine image of the "missy" housewife, young middle-class mothers are savvy consumers who purchase the best commodities for their children and know how to take care of themselves (*jagi gwalli*), especially their bodies (Yoon

13. Throughout the 1980s, the expansion of higher education resulted in the increase of female college students, although college-graduated women still experienced discrimination in the labor market.

14. *Ajumma* is hard to translate, but it refers to married women, often with a derogatory connotation (Cho 2002).

2001, 120-121).

Although the popular "missy" image in the 1990s is still present in the new image of "manager mothers," I argue that it should be more emphasized that current mothering practices for children's education begin earlier and earlier and thus become more intensified in relation to the rapid escalation of the private after-school educational market and "early education" (*jogi gyoyuk*) market. More importantly, it profoundly transformed the nature of mothering practices for their children's education. Nowadays, mothers' educational involvement is focused on private after-school education, rather than schools. For example, a middle-class woman I interviewed proclaimed, "My kids' school? Forget it. What they learn in private after-school programs (*sagyoyuk*) is much more important" (a middle-class mother of 3rd and 6th grade daughters, 2002). This private after-school market demands much more of mothers than formal schooling ever did, leading to mothers' heightened sense of responsibility and self-consciousness about their activities. As maternal consumer subjects, most of the women I interviewed exerted enormous energy on and faced many decisions regarding their children's private after-school education: collecting information about the private educational market through interaction with other mothers (or by surfing the Internet), making decisions according to their financial resources, and managing their children's schedule between mandatory public education and private after-school institutes.

Of course, in the face of these demands, women with diverse class capital—economic, cultural, and social capital in Bourdieu's term (Bourdieu 1984, 1987; Lareau 1989; Reay 1998)—behaved differently.¹⁵ However, what I am concerned with here is the discursive construction of specific maternal subjects and its discursive effects, rather than class differences in mothering practices.

15. See Park (2007); Park and Abelmann (2004) for a detailed ethnographic description.

Discourse of Educational Manager Mothers

Let me return to the news report introduced at the beginning of this article. In December 2002, the *Chosun Ilbo*, one of the three major South Korean daily newspapers and arguably the most conservative, published a three-part series entitled “Our Children: Prisoners of Private After-School Education” (*gwaoe*¹⁶ *gamok-e gachin aideul*). Each episode in the three-part series had its own subtitle: 1) “Mom Is a Road Manager” (December 5, 2002); 2) “No Time for Rest or Play” (December 8, 2002); and 3) “English Is a Survival Game” (December 10, 2002).¹⁷ As I mentioned earlier, the first episode vividly described the image of the new educational manager mother.

By using the term “road manager,” this special news report aptly captured the current hegemonic maternal image. From the time of my fieldwork (2001-2003) to the current day, it is not at all difficult to see a similar image of manager mothers—sometimes also dubbed as “Gangnam moms” (also “Daechi-dong moms”)—in the mass media and even in bookstores.¹⁸ Many mothers I interviewed used the word “management” (*gwalli*) or “manager” (*maenijeo*) to refer to the roles they played in their children’s education. Although I am not unaware of the specific tone of the *Chosun Ilbo* as a conservative medium, I do attempt to interpret this specific report as a microcosm of the current discourse on mothers’ involvement in their children’s education in South Korea. It would be justified, since many other media reports resonate with this *Chosun Ilbo* report in terms of the characteristics of manager mothers and its ambivalent tones toward this new maternal image.¹⁹ For example, one report in *OhMyNews*,

16. *Gwaoe* has been used for two meanings. *Gwaoe* here is used as a broader term, which embraces the diverse private after-school programs, rather than as “private tutoring,” its narrow meaning.

17. In the Korean Yahoo website, a reader of *Chosun Ilbo* linked this first series report under the title, “Did You Read Today’s *Chosun Ilbo*?” In May 2003, the number of the inquiries about this report on this website was over 25,000. It indicates the popularity of the concerns contained in this report.

18. See Park (2007) for a discussion of “Gangnam moms.”

19. See *Dong-A Ilbo*, September 6, 2002 and *OhMyNews*, April 29, 2004,

an internet-based progressive newspaper, contains a description of the “Gangnam mom” that clearly resonates with the new image of manager mothers, which this *Chosun Ilbo* report provoked (i.e., its emphasis on the capability of mothers, including their ability to collect information and manage the private after-school market for their children through exclusive networks).

I thus interpret this special report in the *Chosun Ilbo* as a window on the discursive transformation of Korean motherhood. While examining the ambivalent tone in the report toward mothers that is oscillating between vilifying and pitying them, I analyze the ways in which this report tactfully constructs this certain maternal image as “indispensable.” More importantly, the popular discourse of manager mothers emphasizes the mothers’ specific “quality” or “ability” to manage children’s education, which is seemingly irrelevant to class.

At first glance, this report appears to vilify mothers who are like “road managers.” The headline reads, “Our Children: Prisoners of Private After-School Education,” while the first episode is subtitled, “Mom Is a Road Manager.” Juxtaposing these two titles provokes the stark contradiction between children who languish in the prison of private after-school education and mothers as “road managers” who escort their children into that market/prison. With the help of an amazing number of after-school programs, the “30-something housewife who sends her two kids to 23 kinds of *gwaoe*” epitomizes this villainous image. In fact, on the special report website, one reader admonished such mothers, saying that they support their children’s after-school programs for “their own satisfaction,” though justifying it as being “for their children.”

Moreover, the discourse of vilifying mothers resonates with public debates about the negative effects of (supposedly excessive) private after-school education on children. Here, the concern for the children’s interests is focused on their emotional, mental, and physi-

www.ohmynews.com. The recent soap opera, entitled “Catching up to the Gangnam Mom” (*Gangnam eomma ttara jaggi*) (SBS T.V. drama from June 25 to August 21, 2007), also resonates with this new image of “manager mother” in terms of “Gangnam mom.”

cal well-being. For example, the second episode, “No Time for Rest or Play,” focuses on children’s mental and physical stress resulting from excessive participation in private after-school programs. This second report begins with stark comments from children in a children’s counseling center:

I want to make the globe mine. Then I won’t need to study English” (3rd grade boy).

If I don’t do well on the exam, I feel choked up and sick to my stomach. Because I feel like it’s all my fault. Shouldn’t I get to play at least once in a while? I want to tell my mom how I feel, but I’m not brave enough to do so” (5th grade girl) (*Choson Ilbo*, December 8, 2002).

According to the report, headaches and stomachaches are very common symptoms for children who are suffering from mental stress due to studying and the pressures of private after-school classes.

During my fieldwork, I often encountered this kind of report, which emphasized the negative effects of private after-school education on children’s mental and physical well-being, in diverse mass media. Given the cultural understanding of mothers’ primary roles in their children’s education, this report targets and warns mothers about privileging their children’s educational success at the cost of their children’s physical and mental well-being. Here, mothers are vilified for causing their children’s mental stress, while children appear as the “pitiful victims” of their mothers’ excessive ambition.

Even while vilifying the mothers, the first episode also sympathized with them. The cause of the problem was attributed to the failure of the recent educational reform in general and the reform of the university entrance exam in particular under the Kim Dae-jung administration. Now it seems the new villain is the failing “government,” while mothers are its victims. The report begins by arguing that students are increasingly dependent on private cram schools because of the pressure to prepare for the college entrance exam. This conclusion is supported by the narrative of one mother, who is

sending her six-year-old son to an expensive English-speaking kindergarten: “In fact, this is all so he can get into college later.” Then, the reporter’s narrative follows:

All paths lead to the college entrance exam. The educational reform policy of the Kim Dae-jung administration, which argues, “You can go to college even if you only do well in one subject, regardless of what that subject is,” resulted in the difficulty of “getting into college by doing only one subject well” and the obsession with “finding something you’re good at.” It is definitely the current university entrance exam system, which embraces too many different criteria, such as the student’s school grades (*naesin*), special skills, score on the national entrance exam (*suneung*), and college interviews, that calls for manager mothers.

Here, the premise that “all paths lead to the college entrance exam” is all too familiar for South Koreans. However, the reality of when preparation for the university entrance competition begins (i.e., the preschool age) is pretty shocking. More importantly, the logic is that mothers cannot help but be road managers (i.e., they have no choice) because of the current educational system. In particular, it is the current policy reform initiative to diversify the criteria for acceptance into college that demands manager mothers; they are supposed to help their children find and develop their unique talents from an early age, while also managing the children’s grades in school and their score on the entrance exam by choosing the right private after-school programs. Mothers are thus vulnerable as well. This sympathetic voice opens up the possibility of saving mothers from being vilified for their children’s suffering, because it is not their choice to be manager mothers, but is a social demand stemming from a larger structure.

Importantly, the report then goes further to construct the maternal image of road managers as “indispensable” (or necessary) for their children’s educational success in the current educational system.

The indispensable figure [for children’s educational success] is a

mom, who is capable of anything, from making grades for “talent” (*teukgi jeomsu*), through managing their school grades (*naesin*) . . . and schedules for “extracurricular contests” (*gyeongsi daehoe*), to acting promptly and building the proper networks. The so-called “success in school= passing the university entrance exam” train that mothers ride only goes one way. They can’t change tracks on their own, and they take their lives into their own hands by trying to jump off.

As such, manager mothers become necessary or indispensable maternal models for children’s educational success, rather than villains. Moreover, as the above passage asserts, nobody can jump off the one-way train of children’s success by risking their own (and their children’s) lives. By doing so, this discourse renders a specific maternal image generic, while obscuring class differentiation across a diversity of mothers. This discourse now seems to preach that every mother should be a manager mother. It is later pointed out in the report that “parents all want the same thing—to do as much as they can afford for their children.” Thus, finding and developing their children’s talents by paying for private after-school programs is naturalized as the “responsibility of parents,” and specifically of mothers. Accordingly, this report constructs a powerful image of hegemonic maternal subjectivity (i.e. manager mothers), enunciated by the recent education reforms or current education system.

Here, we should pay close attention to the extent to which this report emphasizes the “quality” or “ability” of this kind of manager mother, which differs greatly from the old image of the “swish of the skirt.” It is said that mothers should be “capable of anything” in order to manage their children’s education from an early age with promptness and proper social networking. The report series continues to exemplify this image of “manager mothers” by providing some outstanding examples. For instance, the first report in the series concludes with the addition of such examples. This supplementary report was titled, “I Could Not Keep Track of My Child’s [Extracurricular] Schedule without a Calendar.” This section detailed the exemplary case of a housewife who was sending her two kids to 23 differ-

ent after-school programs while keeping two different diaries—a weekly planner and a journal—in order to keep track of her children’s schedules. The diaries, “the number one necessity for road-manager moms,” stand for the new quality of manager mothers. That quality is determined by the mother’s ability or skill at scheduling and orchestrating children’s private after-school programs. Thus, despite oscillating between vilifying and pitying mothers, this report ultimately encourages readers to become manager mothers, who are figured as indispensable to children’s eventual educational success.

However, I argue that the image of manager mothers in this report is based on the model of middle-class full-time housewives, who have enough time and economic, cultural, and social resources to devote themselves to the management of their children’s private after-school education. By quoting a white-collar mother who works in a bank and whose husband is a civil servant, this first report in the series points out that “working-mothers cannot help but feel relatively deprived (*sangdaejeok baktalgam*)” when other women who possess the latest information on after-school programs become the most popular among the other mothers. In contrast to full-time housewives, these working mothers do not have the time to socialize with other mothers and thus have limited access to such information. Similarly, working-class or poor women, who lack similar economic and cultural resources, are excluded from this image of manager mothers, though this report never referred to these women.

However, by obscuring the classed aspect of this maternal image and emphasizing the ability or quality of mothers as seemingly individual characteristics, this report promotes the image as if to imply that anybody could be a manager mother with enough effort. This is the significant effect of the manager mother discourse, which affects many Korean mothers’ efforts on behalf of their children’s education.

For example, a working-class mother I interviewed noted that her neighbors, and herself included, had recently changed their life focus. Rather than saving money to buy a house, she explained, they tend to “invest” in their children’s education. She said, “It’s not so our children will take care of us later. Their lives will be better if they

study harder. . . . Even if it means we don't own a house. . . . I am only working for my children's education" (a working-class mother of the 1st and 4th graders and a part-time worker, 2002). Similarly, other working-class mothers acknowledged their own growing expenses for their children's private after-school education, even within a stringent budget.

Neoliberal Project of Self-Managed Citizens, Gender, and Class

Although neoliberalism has often been understood as a "retreat" or "rolling back" of the state through a transfer of the operations of government to non-state (often private) bodies, many scholars have critically noted that it does not mean "less government," but rather a new modality of government (Ferguson and Gupta 2002, 989; Song 2003). Following the Foucauldian concept of "governmentality," several critical scholars of neoliberalism have paid attention to this shifting technology of governance in relation to neoliberal subjects—"the entrepreneur of self" (Ferguson and Gupta 2002; Gordon 1991; Lemke 2002; Rose 1999, 87, 141-142; Walkerdine 2003). In this mode of technology, "subjects come to understand themselves as responsible for their own regulation and the management of themselves" (Walkerdine 2003, 239).

In this subject formation, family often emerges as what Ann Anagnost (2004) called "a theater of neoliberal subject production." Examining the increasing discourse of *suzhi* (quality) in post-socialist China's transformation, Anagnost (2004, 192) argues that the middle-class family becomes a locus of crafting neoliberal subjects through the family project of instilling *suzhi* in the child. Building upon her argument, I argue that the South Korean family similarly becomes a theater of neoliberal subject production for both new creative children and new educational manager mothers. Such family projects are "strategies for social mobility," as she also points out. Thus, these enunciated neoliberal subjects drive the social mobility and maintenance strategies for working-class mothers and middle-class mothers

in South Korea, but in different ways according to their class (Park and Abelmann 2004; Park 2007).

By analyzing the media discourse of manager mothers, I try to draw a connection between the new image of manager mothers and the new creative and competent citizenry that the South Korean neoliberal project has demanded.²⁰ When the Kim Young-sam administration initiated the globalization (*seggyehwa*) project in the mid-1990s, a popular government advertisement, titled "Who Is Your Competitor?" appeared on television. It propagated the idea of building up national competitiveness (*gukga gyeongjaengnyeok*) by improving individual competitiveness (*gaein-ui gyeongjaengnyeok*) on the global stage. The ad featured different characters, including a businessman, a student, a laborer and a housewife, who talked about their competition. While asking the audience, "Who is your competitor?" this advertisement asserted that individual competitiveness is the most crucial human capital for national empowerment, and thus commanded its citizens to improve one's own ability to compete by oneself. Although this kind of rhetoric was unfamiliar to Koreans at that time, such rhetoric seems ubiquitous nowadays both in quotidian conversations²¹ and the popular media (Seo 2005).

Echoing the above advertisement, a report in the *Dong-A Ilbo* was titled, "Full-time Housewife vs. Working Housewife: Their Ability to Compete for Their Children's Education."²² One of the subtitles read, "Full-time Housewives as a Manager of Children," which resonated with the new image of manager mothers, who are able to manage their children's private after-school education and mobilize social networks for the "competition over children's education." This report attempts to prove that working mothers, as well as full-time mothers, can be manager mothers" by using examples of so-called "overly

20. See also Allison (1991).

21. In summer 2002, when I interviewed some South Korean college students, they emphasized the importance of "management" or "self-management" (*jagi gwalli*) in terms of competing for better jobs and even in terms of being able to live happy lives.

22. *Dong-A Ilbo*, September 6, 2002.

ambitious" (*geukseong seureoun*) working housewives. This report demonstrates the importance of mothers' ability to compete for children's educational success, regardless of whether they work or not.

As I have examined, such keywords as "management," "information," and "the ability to compete" highlight the mothers' particular qualities as new educational consumers, while coinciding with the popularity of these very terms as neoliberal buzzwords in other arenas of everyday life. Furthermore, the emphasis on the specific ability or skill of mothers in the popular discourse illustrates the shifting mode of production of the specific maternal consumer subjects, who make and remake themselves as self-managed maternal citizens through their consumptive practices (Walkerdine 2003; Du Gay 1996; Anagnost 1997, 2000). I thus argue that the newly intensified and reinvented role for women as manager mothers and their specific qualities or abilities as such are now emphasized as a measure of married women's social worth and citizenship, while being intertwined with the South Korean neoliberal project of producing self-managed citizens.

Conclusion

While discussing the changing nature of British class politics, Walkerdine (2003, 243) points out the necessity of exploring the ways in which social inequality "is differently lived" in the neoliberal transformation, because diverse people, including low-paid manual and service workers, are constantly "enjoined to improve and remake themselves as the freed consumer, as the 'entrepreneur of themselves.'" In this regard, Walkerdine understands that in the new mode of self-management technologies, "class differences are taken to have melted away" (Walkerdine 2003, 239). Certainly, by this, she does not mean that there is any sign of lessening social inequality. Indeed, despite the neoliberal context in which social inequality is intensified—or at least preserved—she argues that the narratives and possibility of upward mobility seem to have flourished, celebrating

individual freedom to regulate and improve oneself.

Despite its different context, narratives of upward mobility continue in South Korea, especially regarding education, as they have for a long time. As I discussed earlier, in the process of democratization and in the aftermath of the economic crisis, however, we face the dramatic rhetorical changes in education from uniformity and equality to creativity, excellence, and diversification. Nowadays, as the new name of the Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development suggests, nurturing competitive and creative individuals to enhance Korea's global competitiveness has become the most important purpose of education. In the context of neoliberal transformation, like the British case, although social inequality has widened, individuals are celebrated as self-managed citizens who are willing to take the responsibility to regulate and improve themselves. This is the meeting point between the South Korean neoliberal project of producing self-managed citizens and the emerging discourse of manager mothers.

In the specific South Korean context, with its long-standing emphasis on maternal responsibility in the education of children, the neoliberal formation of maternal subjects as manager mothers constantly invites diverse women (including working-class mothers or middle-class working mothers) to join these maternal educational projects. These projects are also social mobility projects for the whole family to climb the social ladder. By emphasizing maternal ability or quality, the discourse of manager mothers encourages mothers to become consumers for their children's education, as if everybody can (or should) be manager mothers. This ability or quality of manager mothers as consumers is (re)invented in the context of the rapid growth of the private after-school educational market and the recent neoliberal transformation. In this shifting technology of governance, if somebody fails to be a capable manager mother, the responsibility for her own destiny and her child's falls squarely onto her own shoulders, as the above *Chosun Ilbo* report warned.

Of course, in reality, the ability of mothers (as consumers) to compete for their children's education is closely related to their eco-

nomic, cultural, and social resources, given the continuous escalation of the private after-school market. In this climate, the new rhetoric of manager mothers and the intensified maternal roles in children's education has thus raised most South Korean mothers' anxiety and concerns, including those of middle-class and working-class mothers, more than ever before.

The discourse of manager mothers as a hegemonic maternal image and its discursive effects raises several problems for feminist scholars. Although the ideology of normative—often moralistic—motherhood has a long-standing legacy in South Korea, as I have discussed, it was not until the mid-1990s that South Korean feminist scholars began to take mothering practices and the changing hegemonic motherhood seriously (Sin 1997; Shim 1999; Yoon 1996, 2001). Moreover, such emerging feminist studies tended to focus on the mothering practices of urban middle-class full-time housewives, while overlooking the transformation of hegemonic maternal images and its diverse effects on not only middle-class mothers, but also on working-class mothers. Diane Reay (1998) points out that British working-class mothers struggle with feelings of “ambivalence,” “uncertainty” and “inadequacy” about their involvement in their children's primary education, while their middle-class counterparts show more confidence in their own practices.²³ Unlike this British case, during my fieldwork, I could not find such a clear-cut class line in South Korea. Amidst the neoliberal transformation, many women across the class spectrum instead expressed ambivalence and confusion—rather than confidence—about what they should do in regards to their children's education. By saying that, however, I am not denying some trends of class distinction in mothers' educational practices.²⁴ Rather, I want to highlight the significant effects of the normative discourse of mother-

23. Similarly, Annette Lareau (1989, 2003) points out the clear-cut class distinction of mothers' involvement in the United States.

24. To examine class distinction of maternal practices in South Korea is also a very significant research subject for feminist scholars. See Park and Abelmann (2004); Park (2007). In order to do that, we need more empirical—qualitative or quantitative—research on working-class or poor mothers.

hood in South Korea. In other words, the maternal model of middle-class full-time housewives becomes centralized and regulates the mothering practices of other women. Thus, questions remain for further inquiry: is there any relation between this intensified maternal ideology and the rapidly declining birth rate in South Korea? Is there any possibility of constructing alternative maternal identities against the salient image of “educational manager mothers”? How can we search for feminist alternatives, not only for middle-class mothers, but also for the working class and the poor?

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