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978-0-521-57062-6 - Class Struggle or Family Struggle?: The Lives of Women Factory Workers in South Korea

Seung-kyung Kim

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This study complements the burgeoning literature on South Korean economic development by considering it from the perspective of young female factory workers in the Masan Free Export Zone, the group whose cheap labor underwrote the initial phases of Korea's economic growth and that continues to be the most poorly paid segment of the Korean labor force. In approaching development from this position, Professor Kim explores the opportunity and exploitation that industrial development has presented to female workers and humanizes the notion of the "Korean economic miracle" by examining its impact on their lives.

The author also endeavors to provide an understanding of the ways in which these women both accommodate and resist the dominating forces of global capitalism and patriarchy. This ethnography looks at the conflicts and ambivalences of young women as they participate in the industrial workforce and simultaneously grapple with defining their roles with respect to marriage and motherhood within conventional family structures. The book explores the women's individual and collective struggles to improve their positions and examines their links with other political forces within the labor movement. The author analyzes how female workers envision their place in society, how they cope with economic and social marginalization in their daily lives, and how they develop strategies for a better future. In exploring these questions, the book considers the heterogeneity of female workers and the complexities of their experience as women and as workers.

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The Lives of Women Factory Workers
in South Korea

SEUNG-KYUNG KIM

University of Maryland, College Park



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For Anna, Ellen, and John

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Preface: Field, Subject, Author¹

AS I have undertaken the long, slow process of converting the personal experience of my anthropological fieldwork into a book, I have been forced to reexamine the ambiguities of my position as a “native anthropologist” and to reflect on the many-faceted relationship between author and subject. The betwixt-and-between position of the native anthropologist has been discussed by various anthropologists (Jones 1970; Choong Soon Kim 1990; Kondo 1990; Narayan 1993; Ohnuki-Tierney 1984). As scholars have become concerned about the nuances in relationships between researchers and their informants/subjects, they have needed to pay more attention to the specific location or positionality of both the researcher and the anthropological subject, and they have stressed the need to incorporate this specificity into writing (Abu-Lughod 1986, 1991; Behar 1993; Clifford 1988; Crapanzano 1980; Narayan 1993; Rosaldo 1989; D. Wolf 1996). The variability in the positionality of researchers has increased as greater numbers of Third World anthropologists have written about people in their home countries. Complex issues of identity also surface when Western-educated feminist anthropologists try to represent lower-class female subjects from their home culture. Setting aside the issue of class differences, no matter how much anthropologists identify with and try to share the position of their subjects, they always remain “other” by virtue of being the ones doing the “studying” (cf. Narayan 1993).

Feminist scholars in other disciplines have also criticized the unequal relationship between researcher and subject in ethnographic research (Acker, Barry, and Esseveld 1991; Gluck and Patai 1991; Mies 1983; Personal Narratives Group 1989; Stacey 1991).² Neither in research nor in writing can there be absolute equality between the researcher and the subject. The relationship, I would argue, however, is much more complex and complicated than the binary

1 An earlier version of this preface was published in *Anthropology Today* (1995, 11(3):6–9).

2 Sanjek (1993) offers a compelling discussion on this unequal relationship between anthropologists and their assistants in fieldwork and writing ethnography.

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power relationship condemned by many feminist scholars and anthropologists.³ Ethnographic fieldwork entails constant negotiation with subjects that the researcher intends to represent. Here I explore the dynamics of the ethnographic encounter engendered by a particular political–economic situation of South Korea in the late 1980s and the problem of translating lived experience into text. I examine the relationship between myself as a researcher and a woman who was variously my friend, my key informant and an alter ego to an extent that is unusual in anthropological research.

In order to understand how this relationship developed, it is first necessary to go into my own background⁴ and look at the reasons why I was conducting this specific research when and where I was. I came to the United States to study anthropology after completing my bachelor's degree in sociology in Korea. What had attracted me to anthropology was its apparent ability to get closer to human experience through the method of participant observation. Although in the course of studying anthropology I became interested in other cultures, I did not insist on undertaking research in a culture different from my own. In fact, after spending seven years in the United States, I was especially concerned to reconnect with some of the important political issues facing my own society, that of Korea, and therefore became a native anthropologist. Thus, although I made the appropriate efforts to set up my research project in terms of current academic priorities and received funding from several sources, I was motivated by reasons that were political and personal as well as scholarly.

It was my intention to study the lives of women factory workers in the Masan Free Export Zone (MAFEZ) in Masan, a city not far from where my mother still lives. MAFEZ was established in 1970 as part of the government's export-oriented development plan. It rapidly became a significant center for light manufacturing industries owned by foreign companies and employing a predominantly female labor force in low-wage jobs. I knew before I began my

3 Margery Wolf (1992) argues against the accusations made by postmodern scholars that anthropologists inherently violate their informants' stories by reconfiguring and editing. She states that the information given by informants is not ultimately a commodity and that the duty of anthropologists is to interpret faithfully what they are told and relay the information to the wider world.

4 As in the cases of Abu-Lughod, Behar and Narayan, the ambiguities of my own cultural position are important parameters of my fieldwork (Abu-Lughod 1991; Behar 1993; Narayan 1993). Although, unlike these anthropologists, my early life took place within a relatively homogeneous Korean cultural setting, as an adult I studied in the United States, married an American, became the mother of two American daughters and now teach at an American university. Thus, I have acquired a degree of cultural ambiguity.

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project that the women who worked in Masan were exploited by nearly any definition of the term. They worked long hours under harsh conditions for extremely low wages. I saw my project both as a way of learning what these women had to say about their lives and as somehow contributing to helping them improve their lives by raising their consciousness (Seung-kyung Kim 1990).

It is necessary to consider my own class background before proceeding further. The social classes of present-day South Korea have little continuity with those of traditional Korea. Colonialism, war and industrialization have combined to create new classes and render previous social divisions obsolete. Nevertheless, there are extreme differences between rich and poor in South Korea. Although my grandparents (who died before I was born) were peasants, my father was a successful small businessman, and my own life has always been comfortably middle class. Along with many others of my class and generation, I was uncomfortable with the feeling of privilege in the presence of so much poverty.

I planned to rely on participant observation to conduct my fieldwork and intended to work in a factory in order to better understand conditions there. This plan presented several problems. First, I no longer had a Korean identification card, so I could not legally get a job. Second, to prevent college students from helping workers organize, the government had established laws forbidding anyone with a college degree from working in a factory. And third, the electronics factories in the Zone did not hire women older than twenty-two. I was able to get around these problems with the help of a cousin, who was a middle manager in a Japanese-owned electronics factory in MAFEZ.

My cousin used his influence to help me get a job there, but he required a firm promise that I would not divulge my identity or try to stir up workers while I was employed. "Strictly observation," he said. I worked in the factory for three months and frequently found maintaining the deception to be burdensome and difficult, especially as I had to pretend to be ten years younger than I really was. Participant observation also proved frustrating because the hours were so long and the work was so exhausting that I had difficulty even maintaining a diary. Quitting my job was the most painful experience in my fieldwork because I had led my friends to believe that I had taken the factory job in desperation, and they were terribly worried about my future without the job. When I met some of them later and explained my project, some were sympathetic but a few were quite angry at my deception.

After I finished working at the factory, I managed to conduct a survey of

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some of the workers in the Zone using questionnaires. However, as before, the cooperation I needed from authorities to conduct the research had compromised my objectives, and my questionnaires had been purged of any politically sensitive questions. By May 1987, I felt quite frustrated that my project was not making much progress.

At about that time, I began to learn about the Catholic Women's Center from several women workers and from the matron of the dormitory for workers in the Zone. I heard that the Center attracted women workers by advertising classes for women (*yōsong kyosil*) when, in fact, what they taught was Communist ideology and labor law. Workers told me that going to the Center was an exciting experience, but they had been warned not to go there anymore. The matron of the dormitory advised me not to get involved with the Center because the police were watching it closely.

In spite of this advice, I arranged to meet with Ms. Lee, a coordinator at the Catholic Women's Center whom I knew slightly through an acquaintance at the local university. After I explained my project, she agreed to let me participate in the Center's discussion groups. The Young Catholic Workers' Organization (JOC, from the French "Jeunesse Ouvrière Chrétienne") set up these groups, consisting of four to five workers each and usually named after flowers: lily, daffodil and others. Each group's first meeting started with the question "Who am I?" Each worker took turns introducing herself, beginning with her birthday and including a brief life history.⁵ After that, the group discussed a prepared topic, and went on to talk about working conditions in their factories and how to improve them.

The first discussion that I attended involved reading a book of Korean history written for the common people (*minjung yōksa*). These histories take a bottom-up approach, in contrast to the elite perspective characteristic of most conventional histories. The book under consideration was an "easy reading" Korean history aimed at a broad audience. After discussing the book, the

5 Life histories have been a major interest of anthropologists concerned with positionality, but as the JOC meeting illustrates, people make fairly formal presentations of their life histories in contexts quite unrelated to research. Recording life histories like the ones presented at these meetings became a major part of my research. Coming to terms with the subjective aspect of people's life stories presents problems similar to those involved in understanding the positionality of the researcher. As Laurel Kendall observes, "the truth of an informant's life, like autobiographic truth, is shaped by the circumstances of the telling, and . . . memory and self-presentation are selective and sometimes self-contradictory processes . . . [and] . . . contradictory stories, and even outright fabrications, yield their own windows on the human soul" (1988:12–13).

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women took turns talking about their work situations. One woman was at the same factory where I had worked, and three were workers at garment factories. I met Sun-hui at this meeting.

Sun-hui had been working in the Zone at a garment factory that had just gone bankrupt. She was working part time for the Catholic Church while looking for another factory job. She told me she was twenty-six years old and had come from Seoul four years ago. She was more receptive to my project than most workers had been and seemed to understand what I was trying to accomplish in Masan. I was also trying to make arrangements to share living accommodations with workers, and Sun-hui agreed to let me share with her and her roommates. I moved in with them in July and remained with them for the next nine months.

Our room was about three by four meters, so small that when we lay down, there was no room to move. The room was directly opposite an old-fashioned toilet, and whenever it was raining, the smell from the toilet was overwhelming and we were almost unable to eat. We paid 40,000 won (\$50) a month for that room plus 8,000 won (\$10) for electricity and water. Our landlord and landlady were both factory workers who lived in two rooms of the house with their three children and rented out three rooms (see Chapter 3). Even though the house was old, small and old-fashioned, they were very proud to own a house of their own.

The house was heated by an old-fashioned *ondol* system using coal briquettes. The only furniture in the room consisted of three vinyl wardrobes belonging to my roommates and a desk that belonged to one of them. We folded up and stored our bedding in the wardrobes when we were not sleeping. Our kitchen hardly deserved the name, it was so small. We used a kerosene stove for cooking, and I contributed an electric rice cooker. We took turns cooking, washing and cleaning the room. Whoever was in charge of cooking had to get up at 6:00 A.M. to cook breakfast, which was usually just rice, soup and *kimchi*. Sometimes we ate eggs and other vegetables for dinner, but meat (pork) was a luxury we had only immediately after payday. My roommates often skipped dinner, which they explained was because they were worried about getting fat, but was at least in part to save the expense (see Han'guk Kidokkyo Kyohoe Hyöbuihoe 1984a). For most workers in MAFEZ, the main meal of the day was the lunch provided by the factory.

Living with them enabled me to participate in their everyday activities and resulted in many hours of conversation. I conducted my first interview with Sun-hui soon after I moved in. We talked for almost three hours about a broad

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range of topics – how and why Sun-hui moved to Masan from Seoul, how she met her current roommates, how she spent her monthly wage and what kinds of activities she had been involved in at various factories.

We began talking about wages and how much money she allocated for her expenses each month. Sun-hui said, almost laughingly, that she did not send any money to her family because she tried to save about 40% of her wage; she had to pay for her contribution to the household, which came to about 20% of her wage; and surprisingly, she spent almost 40% of her income for what she termed *sagyobi* (money for meeting friends). It seemed a bit strange that she spent so much money for this purpose, but I did not press her to specify the reasons.

She said little about her family, but mentioned that her parents owned a small candy store and that her sister and brother were married and living apart from her parents. Because I did not expect otherwise, I assumed that she was a high school graduate and asked, “So, what did you do after you graduated from high school?” Sun-hui did not object to my leading question and went on discussing her work history:

After I graduated from high school, I worked for a hat factory at Kurodong in Seoul. I am left-handed, so it was hard for me to learn to sew. While I was an apprentice there, I cut my hand pretty badly with shears. Nobody paid any attention to my injury; a woman just put some iodine on it and told me to continue to work. You see this scar on my hand? That is from that cut. I really wanted to learn to sew, so I moved to another factory, where I became an apprentice to learn sewing skills. But I was assigned to do ironing most of the time I was there, so I moved again to Chŏngkyechŏn, where I had a friend who was a top sewing machine operator. I learned to use the sewing machine in two months of working there. After I knew something about using a sewing machine, I moved to Puchŏn and pretended to be a skilled operator with two years of experience. I spent six months there making sports bags. . . .

Sun-hui then explained how she was able to get this factory to improve their policy about Sunday pay so that it conformed with the law:

Around this time, I had a series of physical and emotional problems. I left the factory and spent about nine months working as a domestic maid before I decided to come down to Masan. Life as a domestic

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maid was easy compared to working in sewing factories. I had a lot of free time to rest, I could sleep enough and the food was a lot better. But I thought that this kind of life was not for me and decided to move again after my health got better. I had a friend whose fiancé was working at a factory in Ch'angwŏn, and we came down together. At first, it seemed that Masan factories didn't have any problems: there was not much overtime work, and labor conditions seemed to be much better than where I had been before. In August 1984 when I came down to Masan, it was easy to get a job at an electronics company in the Zone. I worked for one of them for six months, but then my mother had a serious accident and I had to go back to Seoul to take care of her. When I came back to Masan in 1985, it was almost impossible to get a job at the electronics companies. This time was called "the depression" in the Zone. I went to work for a subcontracting firm while I searched for a better job. I couldn't get a job at an electronics factory, but I heard about this shoe factory, Hyŏpchin. I was not sure about my skills, but I took the job and stayed there until they went bankrupt in May. I worked for this factory for twenty months. That was the longest time I worked at one place.

I asked her how she knew so much about the labor law, but she avoided answering my question directly and mentioned that she learned things while attending the Protestant Church. She also mentioned that she started to go to the Catholic Church and became a member of Young Catholic Workers' Organization after she moved to Masan. She brushed away my question concerning her obvious knowledge of labor law, just saying that she became interested in this issue (workers' rights) after she graduated from high school and started to go to church.

Her life history sounded a lot like the one I used to tell other workers in the factory while I was working, although my story was not as complicated as hers. But I did not, even for one moment, think she was fabricating her story. Now, listening to the tape of the interview, I realize that if I had considered the possibility, I could have seen gaps in her story. Furthermore, I was busy trying to impress Sun-hui during this first interview. I practically lectured her and her roommates about the sins of the multinational corporations, the Korean government and the world economy, as well as trying to convince them that I was a progressive woman even though I was a lot older than they were. During this initial interview, I talked as much as, if not more than, Sun-hui.

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For the first two months of living with Sun-hui and the others, I was the primary cook. I got up first, and made rice and some side dishes for our breakfast. The two younger women went to work, and Sun-hui and I went around to visit older married women who had previously worked in the Zone. We became closer and got to know each other more, and after two months we had a sort of heart-to-heart talk.

I used to smoke heavily but did not smoke at all during my fieldwork because it is not acceptable for women to smoke in public. One afternoon I was discussing my plans for interviews with Sun-hui and had an urge to smoke, so I blurted out, “Sun-hui, will it be all right if I smoke?” It risked damaging my reputation with her, but by then I felt secure enough about our relationship to divulge one of my secrets. Her response, however, surprised me. She said, “Don’t worry. I smoke too. Since there is no one around today, why don’t we buy a pack and smoke?” Smoking among young middle-class women, especially college students, was considered a sign of liberation because it violated conventional ideas about how young women should behave. I did not expect to find a factory woman smoking.⁶ This common admission of sinfulness opened up our relationship, and she started to talk about herself more and differently. She told me that she had attended a college (although she did not reveal which one). She also admitted that Sun-hui was a false name, but refused to tell me the real one on the basis that the less I knew about her the better, in case anything happened. Her revelations did not really shock me because by this time, I realized there was more to Sun-hui’s life than she had been telling me. I surmised that she was a radical student, but I respected her wishes and did not push any further. After that day, I understood why she was out every night, visiting so many workers and spending her own money. Her way of life made a lot more sense after I heard a little bit of the truth.

At the end of September, my husband came to visit me and we went for a short sightseeing trip to Chōlla Province. When I told Sun-hui that I planned to visit Kwangju, she gave me a letter to hand deliver to a Catholic nun in that city. When we met the nun, I learned more about Sun-hui’s past. She told us she was greatly worried about Sun-hui, especially about her health, because she had been on the verge of collapse when she last saw her in Seoul. Obviously, this was the time Sun-hui left the factory and went to work as a maid. She was

6 Smoking became briefly fashionable among women factory workers after 1988 because of the influence of college students, but the fashion passed quickly, and most factory women still consider it improper for young women to smoke.

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also worried about her safety and whether the police were actively pursuing her. From the nun I learned that Sun-hui had moved to Masan to escape the police. She had been deeply involved in a night class for young workers organized by radical students and church organizations. Most of her comrades had been arrested during a police raid, and after that she had to move around to avoid the police. The nun told us that Sun-hui's family was middle class and owned a rice mill factory, and that Sun-hui was a very bright student who had entered the department of education at Ehwa Women's University, with the top examination score.

After I returned I became closer to Sun-hui, confiding in her about many problems I faced personally and professionally regarding the research I was trying to do. Sun-hui helped guide my project and arranged interviews with labor activists for me. I continued to talk and meet with some of the young women I met while I was working at the factory, but my research focus shifted more to women who were involved in unionization and the labor movement. Of course, other people and events also shaped the direction of my research. The nationwide labor uprising in July and August 1987 swept many women workers into demonstrations and strikes and provided my project with a dramatic focus. However, it was through Sun-hui that I met the women who led the movement in Masan (see Seung-kyung Kim 1992). Sun-hui and I participated together in the street rallies and demonstrations and cried together when the police shot tear gas. The experience reminded me of the demonstrations I had been involved with in college.

My last interview with Sun-hui before I left Korea in March 1988 was filled with philosophical questions about social justice, the relative merits of socialist society and democratic society, and considerations of issues of workers' exploitation and the role of intellectuals. She told me:

I often think about the concept of "social justice" and my place in the quest for this justice, which I define as the distribution of benefits among more people. I do not think any one person can or should have the power to produce this justice, but everyone should try to bring it about. I consider the role of students and religious organizations in recovering democracy for this society to be critical. Along with political democracy, we also need to move toward a society with more equal distribution of wealth. If we can eventually establish a society full of justice and love, I will be very happy. People can contribute to this pursuit on two different levels: a larger and more macro level, and a

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smaller and more micro level in changing people's attitudes and values. I consider myself in the latter category.

Most workers do not know about my identity. I do not tell them because the relationship we built on the basis of equal status changes once I tell them, "I am a college graduate, and I came down here to help you to organize." Rather than preaching to them about what to do from the outside, I would bury myself among them and make change from within. It is so rewarding to watch a woman worker change her position from whether to join a union or not to making a statement, "It is all right for me to be arrested for the involvement with a union." Their level of consciousness expands from factory to national issues.

Intellectuals have a role in this process, but first, we need to get over the thought of being superior and leading workers. We need, instead, to be partners, in the true sense, in the same movement. If we do that, then we can open our hearts to each other and we can learn from each other.

During this interview I hardly spoke, and Sun-hui talked mostly about her own place within the labor movement and the student movement. At about this time, I also got to know a lot about her personal life: how much she was in love with a man who was also a union leader in one of the factories. She often told me about her anticipated future being married to this man, and said that together they could work for the workers' community in Masan.

After I left the field, we kept in contact by letters and phone calls. During 1988 and 1989, she worked very hard to help workers of the Tandy Corporation factory in Masan in their unsuccessful struggle against the plant closing (see Chapter 4). However, her letters showed more and more frustration about not being able to do much. Her personal life was not going well either. Her boyfriend had decided to break off their relationship, explaining, "You are not a true proletarian. You come from a middle-class background and you never worked out of necessity, so you don't know how we really feel." And then he decided to marry a woman, also an activist, but from an authentically proletarian background. Sun-hui felt humiliated and defeated. She began to question her role as an organizer. She worried about how hard it was to change workers' consciousness and how unrewarding her efforts were.

Sun-hui left Masan in 1990 to return to Seoul, where she deliberated about what to do with her life. She considered the possibility of attending the

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Women's Studies Program in Ehwa Women's University as a graduate student; the possibility of running a day-care facility for the children of workers in an industrial zone; and the possibility of getting married.

In 1991, she married a man who had been involved in the student movement and who managed a small press publishing radical books. She also enrolled in the Women's Studies Program. When I visited Korea that year, she joined me for a week-long visit to Masan, and we went around talking to women workers we knew. It was just like old times. She told me that she felt bad about leaving Masan and admitting defeat. She also felt guilty about returning to academia, which she had previously rejected, as well as about having married an essentially middle-class man.

When I visited her in January 1994, she was still worried about the future of the labor movement, especially of women workers' labor unions and their organizations, but she had come to terms with her role in the labor movement and felt good about the years she had spent in Masan. Sun-hui's role as an organizer was still appreciated by many people in Masan. Workers praised her as a real workers' friend, in contrast to the students who came down to Masan after 1987 to indoctrinate workers (see Chapter 5).

Sun-hui now works as a government employee (*kongmuwŏn*) in a neighborhood office and lives in a small two-bedroom apartment just outside of Seoul with her husband, her two-year-old son, and her mother-in-law. Her modest income provides the bulk of her family's support because her husband's publishing business is not doing well.

As I wrote this, I kept thinking about the parallels between Sun-hui and myself and about how much greater they might have been if I had stayed in Korea. Although Sun-hui was so crucial to my research, I edited her out of my dissertation, and upon reflection, I believe that this was only partly for the obvious political reasons. She was not an authentic proletarian for me either.⁷ By writing this preface, however, I am beginning to come to terms with both her and my relationship to each other and to the women who are forced by necessity to work in Korea's factories.

Each fieldwork experience has its own unique characteristics. Sun-hui's initial, fabricated version of her life story reveals the power of an informant within the "negotiated reality" of the fieldwork encounter. However, her story

7 Although Sun-hui was not an authentic proletarian, in that she worked in factories for reasons other than financial necessity, it is important to note that she spent a longer period of time working in factories (eight years) than did most women workers in Masan, and that during this time she depended exclusively on her factory income.

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also illustrates how anthropology overlaps other aspects of life because her interview with me merely elaborated a story she had already developed for others. Nor was I unique in learning “the truth” about Sun-hui; she had also confided in many of her friends. Although as an anthropologist I had an additional motive to be interested in her story, I also had learned about her as her friend.

My involvement with Sun-hui grew out of the specific political and economic context of Korea in the late 1980s. Both Sun-hui and I had been influenced by the political climate of the universities, both of us had had a desire to promote the welfare of people who seemed excluded and exploited, and both of us went to Masan with ideas about helping women factory workers. The fact that we started from such similar positions helps to explain our instant rapport, her willingness to help me with my research and her influence on my project. The nature of our relationship reveals a blurring of the distinction between researcher and subject and highlights the ambiguities of the native anthropologist’s position within her own culture.

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Language Note

I have generally followed the McCune–Reischauer system of romanization for Korean. However, I have used the standard alternative romanizations for place names that commonly appear in English language writing on Korea (e.g., “Seoul”). In cases where I know that a Korean author uses an alternative romanization, I have followed his or her preference. Names of Korean authors are written in the text and in citations according to Korean style, with surname first, except for persons who I know prefer otherwise. In the references I have tried consistently to list Korean authors in Korean style and Korean-American authors in American style.