

South Korean Factory Managers' Transnational Life in Ho Chi Minh City

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(In lieu of an abstract) It has become commonplace in the global production system for workers to relocate to various regions across the world. Companies import migrant workers by making capital and labor more flexible in order to maximize profits. As a result, sojourners—those who do not intend to settle down for good but instead are likely to return to their home countries—are increasing in number, and their transnational life patterns, woven by their movements between their homes and their resident countries, are receiving more academic attention. This article draws on South Korean managers' experiences in Vietnam to gain a better understanding of transnationalism. South Korean factory managers, when they move from relatively wealthy South Korea to relatively poor Vietnam, tend to work in the new region without intending to permanently settle down or to be assimilated into the local culture. They are also unlikely to be victims of discrimination by native residents. Although they do not form a social majority in the region, they are allocated superior status at workplaces and in everyday contexts. Nevertheless, their life is constrained by their nationality status as foreigners and by their social class status as lower-middle-class skilled workers. This empirical study ties the distinctive characteristics shown in the transnational lives of South Korean factory managers to their socioeconomic reproduction, as well as to the creation and care of their families.

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1. Introduction

I worked at a backpack factory when I first came to Seoul in 1978. I had no plans for my future at the time. I got married in 1996 after being promoted to General Production Manager. Somehow, from that point until 1999 I received no more raises. It was very hard to get a new job then as there were few bag factories, but I was offered a position in Bangladesh. Having no other choices, I left South Korea, heading there to work, packing my stuff in only 10 days. The factory was small, and life was harsh there. I managed to work anyway. But after three years, the owner died from a stroke. [...] I went back to Seoul, had a job interview 15 days later, and moved to the bag factory in Vietnam in 2003. [...] It's been 15 years since I began wandering around the world to work, but my heart still races when I arrive at the airport to spend summer and New Year's vacations in South Korea. Yet, after a while everything starts to feel unfamiliar and uncomfortable. My high-school-aged son does very well at school. I am happiest when he sends me "KaTalk"¹ messages saying "Thanks, Dad." All I've got is a house in Seongnam City. My relatives complain that I'm not doing what I am supposed to do as the first son. On top of that, my work is hard. But at times like this, I should be thankful that I can support my family at any rate and have a drink at a Korean restaurant outside the dorm on weekends. (General Manager T, bag factory)

It has become commonplace in the global production system, which is always seeking cheap labor, for workers to relocate to various regions across the world. Companies import migrant workers by making capital and labor more flexible in order to maximize profits. As a result, sojourners—those who do not intend to settle down for good but instead are likely to return to their home countries—are increasing in number (Kim and Lee 1983: 34), and their transnational life patterns, woven by their movements between their homes and their resident countries, are receiving more academic attention (Yun Injin 2008). In anthropology, there have been many vibrant efforts to understand the changes migrants experience as the speed of globalization accelerates, to the point that this trend is known as the "transnational turn" (Vertovec 2007: 966).

Given 15 years observing Korean people in Vietnam, I appreciate the benefits that this theory of transnationalism can offer. The transnational view addresses the bidirectional social relations and cultural experiences emerging in both South Korea [hereafter, Korea] and Vietnam, rather than

¹ (Editor's note) KaTalk refers to Kakao Talk, a mobile instant messaging application widely used among Koreans.

limiting studies to a unidirectional view focused on only one side, as was often the case for previous studies of migration. In fact, the lives of Koreans living in Vietnam are fashioned by political-economic conditions that force them to constantly move across several countries; it is becoming even more difficult to elucidate their lives today because their sociocultural experiences are no longer restricted to a single site, be it either their workplace or their living space.

It seems, however, that there are difficulties in adopting the concept of transnationalism to understand the lives of Korean people in Vietnam. It is not entirely clear what insights one might expect by applying this framework, as opposed to earlier theories grounded in concepts such as "migration," "diaspora," and "multiculturalism." In actuality, studies based on the transnational approach have a tendency to focus on the same points as earlier research, including migrants' motives for taking work that requires moving, processes of adaptation to an importing country, and migration's effects on the exporting country (Levitt and Jaworsky 2007: 1452). If this is so, what are the implications of studying this topic within the transnational framework? That is to say, what analytical benefits arise from expanding the scope of research toward interconnected sociocultural domains, rather than taking for granted that migrants' lives are localized within one country? In order to answer these questions, I suggest it is important to conduct ethnographic research of diverse transnational lives, rather than confining discussion to theory.

Another challenge is that most empirical studies so far represent the lives either of "cosmopolitan elites" (Ong 1998) or of unskilled migrant workers. As a result, managers, salespersons, and skilled workers, who constitute a significant part of transnational migration at present, are almost excluded from studies of transnationalism. One reason for the rarity of research on such migrants is that previous studies have focused on problems arising from discrimination and exclusion as experienced by unskilled laborers, born in less prosperous countries and working in relatively wealthy importing countries. In contrast, elites, who freely move around the world thanks to their economic power and knowledge, may have been considered more intriguing objects of study because of the evident transnational features of their lives.

At the same time, there are other reasons for the general lack of research on managerial workers in multinational corporations and factories. For example, the skilled and managerial Korean workers who migrate from

Korea to Vietnam (i.e., from a semi-peripheral region to a peripheral region in the world economic system) tend to be less motivated to settle in the new country, which makes it unlikely they would be included in traditional Korean diaspora studies. Also, migrant workers today have only a slight impact on South Korea's national economy and are not well represented in society, unlike in the period when South Korea, then a peripheral region, sent construction workers to the Middle East. Recent transnational workers are neither willing to settle down in another country (especially when they are from a wealthier home country), nor are they considered "industrial warriors" who would be heroes for their poor home country as in the past. These migrant skilled and/or managerial factory workers in an overseas country today are easily overlooked, considered neither academically nor socially significant.

Despite these circumstances, I believe that Korean managerial workers employed by Korean multinational corporations across the world deserve more attention from academics, since more and more Korean companies are moving their production units and workforce to other countries. Furthermore, research on the transnational aspects of the class, ethnic, and cultural characteristics of Korean factory managers residing overseas on a long-term basis will enrich scholarship on transnationalism both theoretically and empirically.

Korean factory managers, who have moved from a relatively wealthy country to a relatively poor one, tend to work in the new region without intending to permanently settle down or to be assimilated into the local culture. They are also unlikely to be victims of discrimination by native residents. Although they do not form a social majority in the region, they are allocated superior status at workplaces and in everyday contexts. Nevertheless, their life is constrained by their national and class status as foreigners and by their status as lower-middle-class skilled workers. I suggest that an empirical study of the distinctive characteristics shown in the transnational lives of Korean factory managers is indispensable, providing an ethnographic foundation from managers' lived experience to inform better understanding of transnationalism.

Keeping in mind the aforementioned suggestions, in this study I aim to ethnographically describe the transnational lives of Korean managerial workers at the factories of Korean multinational corporations, located in and around Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. After considering previous relevant literature and presenting the object of this study and pertinent

methods more fully (Sections 2 and 3), in the fourth section I examine the socioeconomic status of the transnational migrants and explore how and why they came to live in and around Ho Chi Minh City. After that, I offer an illustration of their transnational ways of life as observed in their workplaces by providing descriptive analyses of their working conditions, class consciousness, and ethnic identity (Section 5). In the last section I analyze how their transnational characteristics as shown in their everyday lives are tied to socioeconomic reproduction, as well as to the creation and care of their families (Section 6).

2. Transnational Studies of Overseas Migrant Labor

Before the 1960s, overseas migrant workers were recognized as a particular form of diaspora. For instance, the Korean workers who migrated to China and Hawaii in search of jobs under Japanese colonial rule led a life that is similar to that of Jews who were evicted from their home countries and settled in new regions, consciously forming distinctive ethnic communities in many countries around the world (Yun Injin 2008: 1-3). However, in terms of key motives for migration, the “pull” factors, such as abundant opportunities for employment and good living conditions, began to be more significant *vis-à-vis* “push” factors because of accelerated globalization after new nations came on stage following independence. Although structural factors continued to affect migration patterns, the migrants’ social networks have become multi-stranded due to diversifying personal motivations, and the patterns of migration have become more complex (Schiller, Basch, and Blanc-Szanton 1994). Changes in circumstances have made “diaspora” a less valuable tool for analyzing overseas migrant labor (Safran 1991: 83-84).

In this critical vein, a conceptual transition took place in the early 1990s, contextualizing the changing nature of international labor migration within a transnational framework, seeing it as a particular form of transnationalism (Basch, Schiller, and Blanc-Szanton 1994). What does it mean then to understand international labor migrations in terms of transnationalism? As the prefix “trans” suggests, the analytical concept focuses on the processes that lead “to the emergence of new social fields” of migrant workers, transcending geographical and political boundaries (Yun Injin 2008: 7). The new approach is an attempt to understand the

processes through which the social relations and cultural notions that govern migrant workers' lives—moving between exporting and importing countries in both directions—create families, communities, and identities.

One benefit of focusing on the transnational social domain formed by international labor migrations is that this allows observation of multiple and changing features of a complex phenomenon, which may not be adequately observed through older analytical concepts such as “diaspora.” For example, one feature of contemporary migration is that overseas migrants tend to flexibly interpret symbolic sovereignty, perceptions of their home country, and national identities in accordance with their current socio-economic situations. In contrast, the transnational plane of “compressed time-space” (Harvey 1990: 260) is likely to enforce “long-distance nationalism” (Schiller and Fouron 2001) and the opposite trend of consolidating small communities connecting families, relatives, and users of the same native language. In other words, the theoretical approach of “transnationalism from below” (Smith and Guarnizo 1998), which is characterized by a specific focus on the social domain, is valuable for the analysis of perceptions, experiences, and sociocultural phenomena as lived by overseas migrant workers with versatile perspectives in the variable everyday contexts of their everyday lives.

Despite such potential benefits offered by the concept of transnationalism in studying overseas migrant workers, there also are a number of undeniable problems in applying the concept to real and concrete lives. First, some argue that it is a theory without distinctive merit (Levitt and Jaworsky 2007). According to this argument, the term is often interchangeable with others such as “the global” and “the international,” and its excessive applications to a wide range of sociocultural phenomena make it a theory that virtually “explains everything and nothing” (Hayes 2010: 24). If not accompanied by an effort to formulate the empirical standards to tell what is and what is not transnational, it may be inevitable that the theory does not have any distinguishing merit. However, considerable explanatory power can be achieved with transnationalism through ethnographic interpretations and theoretically guided explanations of accumulated empirical data, as well as by overarching theoretical discussions.

Another line of critique of the transnational theory focuses on the fact that the majority of empirical case studies are conducted with a focus on migrant workers residing in the United States and Europe. As a result, the analyses often take a Eurocentric viewpoint; it has normally been assumed

that the migrants' national or ethnic assimilation to and integration in the hosting culture are inevitable and most research has been conducted with the purpose of revealing the factors that affect patterns of adaptation, discrimination, and exclusion during the process (e.g., Jaynes 2007). In the same vein, even when the exporting country is centered in research, inquiries have been limited to examining the economic influences overseas migrant workers exert over their families living in their home countries (e.g., Tylor et al. 1996). What is missing here is a study of the process through which the political-economic conditions and sociocultural experiences of both the importing and exporting countries inform migrant workers' transnational lives. In order to avoid an analysis based on the importing countries' and Western perspectives, Huang (2010) suggests that the concept "transnational intersectionality" as defined by Mahalingham, Balan, and Molina (2007) may offer a promising alternative. As noted, intersectionality has been formed and revised through numerous discussions in the social sciences oriented to resolving the problems arising from "simultaneity of multiple identities" (Brewer 1997; Brodtkin 2000). A human being's identities, such as "black," "female," and "working class," are manifested simultaneously in real-life circumstances; each identity's distinctive qualities, however, can be recognized through an analysis of that specific social category. In addition, a person's perceptions and practices may have considerably different characteristics according to their unique categorical compositions. For example, it is reasonable to anticipate different behaviors and perceptions associated with a black female worker and a white male capitalist in a Western context. And, in addition, features of identities shift with context.

No case study that clearly demonstrates the potential of these ideas with empirical data from outside the West has been presented. Such a study is needed to illustrate how to distinguish relevant categories of identity from each other in non-Western contexts and to reveal how they intersect. Along with Huang and Mahalingham and colleagues, I agree that it is crucial to reveal the intersectionality of migrant identities in transnational contexts. The real challenge is to empirically demonstrate the theoretical concept of intersectionality in a precise way by conducting an analysis of a concrete dataset derived from migrant experiences outside the West.

I hope to meet this challenge here by introducing suggestions made by Huang, since I am in complete agreement with her argument, that there is

a need to focus on family *and* workplace when observing transnational intersectionality. The focus on family is essential because the ways migrants connect with their parents, spouses, and children residing back home or together abroad reveal aspects of their identities by way of the “transnational circuits of care and affection” (Huang 2010: 11). I suggest that it is crucial to understand how identities emerge from such relationships as well as from one’s gender, class, nationality, or ethnicity.

As Huang suggested, also important in transnational studies are “transnational workplaces” (ibid: 13). Overseas migrant workers live their lives practicing within transnational production units governed by culture and power according to perceived class status, ethnic identity, and gender as organized by the segmented global labor market (McDowell 2008). Observing migrants in their workplaces offers valuable insights into their transnational lives through the ways they differentiate themselves from professional, elite migrant workers as well as from local native workers and in the significance they ascribe to their work.

This article, thus, aims to ethnographically reveal the sociocultural sphere that Korean factory managers, residing in and around Ho Chi Minh City (pan-HCMC), create with their bidirectional movements between Korea and Vietnam, thereby offering an empirical case study with implications for better understanding transnational migration. First of all, I illustrate the necessity of research on diverse cases in transnationalism without presuming that assimilation is an inevitable phenomenon, a position too often taken by scholars whose research centers on importing Western countries. Also, I offer an opportunity to critically reflect on how migrants’ transnational lives in the workplace and in everyday contexts are formed in relation to their families, co-workers, class, gender, nationalities, and ethnicities, as well as in the interconnectivity of these categories.

3. Methods and Object of Study

It was in 2008 that I began to collect life historical data from Korean factory managers in a town near Ho Chi Minh City. When I began my research, I paid equal attention to factory managers, resident journalists, and self-employed business people. As it happened, however, the number of strikes at multinational factories in Vietnam skyrocketed at the time of my research, and they received enormous attention. In response, my

Table 1. The Korean factory managers for the analysis

No	Name	Sex	Age	Industry	Position	Home	Family	Child- ren	Years of stay	Notes
1	A	M	56	Textile	FD	PBH	T	2	25	Korean-Vietnamese family
2	B	M	52	Clothing	FD	D	A	2	10	
3	C	M	55	Textile	Dir	PMH	T	2	20	Managerial
4	D	M	48	Textile	FD	D	A	2	13	Re-entered after two years' stay in Korea
5	E	M	57	Textile	GM	D	A	2	15	Re-entered after three years' stay in Korea
6	F	M	30	Clothing	AM	D	A	0	3	Single. Sales management
7	G	M	45	Clothing	GM	PMH	T	2	8	5 years in Guatemala. Sales management
8	H	M	59	Clothing	GM	D	A	1	5	Worked for 5 years in Korea doing import business
9	I	M	46	Clothing	GM	D	A	1	10	1.5 years in Saipan, 5 years in El Salvador. Korean-Chinese
10	J	F	52	Clothing	GM	D	A	1	5	18 years in Saipan. Korean-Chinese
11	K	M	42	Bag	GM	PMH	T	2	12	5 years in Bangladesh
12	L	M	42	Bag	DGM	PMH	T	2	4	10 years in Bangladesh
13	M	M	39	Bag	M	PMH	T	2	7	2.5 years in Bangladesh
14	N	M	35	Partyware	GM	SD	T	0	2	Cohabiting with mother and uncle (owner). Single
15	O	M	52	Printing	FD	LA	A	2	5	5 years in China
16	P	M	52	Printing	GM	LA	T	2	19	Korean-Vietnamese family
17	Q	M	47	Packaging	Dir	D	A	2	10	Korean-Vietnamese family. Affine to the owner
18	R	M	52	Packaging	Dir	SD	A	1	9	
19	S	M	47	Packaging	GM	LA	T	2	9	Korean-Vietnamese family
20	T	M	54	Bag	GM	D	A	1	11	Three years in Bangladesh

[Position]

Dir: Director; GM: General Manager; DGM: Deputy General Manager; M: Manager; AM: Assistant Manager; FD: Factory Director

[Home]

PBH: Pham Ban Hai; PMH: Phu My Hung; D: Dormitory; LA: Local Apartment; SD: Second Degree apartment

[Family]

T: Living together; A: Living away

research turned toward labor politics in Vietnam, which has been my research focus ever since.

It is ironic that my research on the strikes over six consecutive years re-triggered my interest in the unique sociocultural experiences of Korean factory managers. During my visits to the Korean factories in the course of researching the strikes, I became friends with the managers and became fascinated with their diverse life histories. Especially in 2011, during my sabbatical stay in Ho Chi Minh City, I visited workplaces as well as managers' homes, on both formal and informal occasions, and I gradually developed a serious interest in the topic of their transnational lives and decided to record their stories. Thus this article is based on my notes from conversations with more than a hundred factory managers. The conversations and notes were specifically developed with the present project in mind. Apart from this, I also conducted supplementary interviews with twenty managers with whom I already had connections from the summer and winter of 2013 in order to provide a more in-depth analysis. These people are the factory managers I mostly refer to in this article (see Table 1).

I had no strict criteria in choosing the 20 key informants for my supplementary fieldwork, apart from factors such as duration of residence, residential district, age, and type and size of factory, so that these factors were evenly represented. In addition to this, however, some key informants were consciously chosen because the information they were able to provide was critical for illustrating the characteristics of transnational lives in workplaces and living spaces alike. For instance, among such informants are: Korean-Chinese, those with work experience in a country other than Vietnam, and those who constitute a "Korean-Vietnamese family" with their Vietnamese spouse.

4. Political-Economic Conditions and Socioeconomic Status of Korean Factory Managers in Ho Chi Minh City

1) *The Political-Economic Context of Korean Managers' Immigration to Ho Chi Minh City*

The first Korean corporations formally settled in Ho Chi Minh City at the

end of the 1980s.² In the mid 1980s, the Vietnamese market opened up to foreign companies with the *Doi Moi* (reformation) policy. It was in this context that a part of the Korean labor-intensive industry cautiously began to move to Vietnam, fleeing the rising wages in Korea, which were pressuring company owners into relocating their production sectors. Since the early 1990s, Korean textile and sewing factories manufacturing shoes and bags have rushed to Ho Chi Minh City and adjacent areas (from here on referred to as “Ho Chi Minh”) to take advantage of the stability of Vietnamese economic policies and wage efficiency which proved profitable during the initial settlement trials. Some of the Korean multinational factories targeting Western markets, which had already established themselves in regions such as Guatemala, El Salvador, and Saipan, expanded their scale and moved to Ho Chi Minh, a region that was eventually transformed into the largest labor-intensive industrial area in Southeast Asia.

This group of migrants constitutes the first generation of factory managers in Ho Chi Minh. Their settlement processes were rather opportunistic, and the chances aligned with (1) the Korean economy's urgent need for a structural adjustment of the industrial sector; (2) the rushed industrialization of the Vietnamese economy with foreign capital; and (3) the search by Korean companies within the labor-intensive sector for a production niche with lower wages—all according to the demands of the “global factory regime” (Blim and Rothstein 1992). These people migrated “involuntarily through organized routes” in a specific political-economic context (Peixoto 2001), rather than voluntarily migrating to Ho Chi Minh.

This first generation to work as factory managers in Ho Chi Minh does not constitute a large group. Although there are many Koreans who have lived in the city for more than twenty years, few of them have remained as factory managers in the region for this time period, since most labor-intensive factories have gradually replaced Korean employees in managerial positions with local Vietnamese employees in order to reduce production costs. Also, relatively older and more experienced managers are

² Korean businesses began to move to Vietnam unofficially in the 1980s, listing native Vietnamese residents as owners. Those companies, however, were very small and were owned *de facto* by the Koreans who migrated to Vietnam before the country's reunification (cf., Chae Suhong 2005 and Kim Yeongjin 2010 for more on the history of Koreans' settlements in Ho Chi Minh).

likely to lose their jobs over the years to younger less costly employees and any workers hired for more than 20 consecutive years are likely to have a special connection to the owner (for instance, Factory Director A of a textile factory) or to be in charge of tasks critical to a company, such as accounting or special machinery operations (for instance, Factory Director C of a textile factory). These employees are in their mid-50s or older and are almost always at the level of General Manager or Director at least.

The majority of workers in Korean factories in Ho Chi Minh migrated in a second phase in the aftermath of the Asian Financial Crisis at the end of 1997, usually referred to as the “IMF Crisis” in Korea. One subgroup of this second generation moved to Vietnam along with the factories they had worked for, while the other subgroup consists of Korean residents already in Vietnam and hired from the region by in-migrating companies.³ The workers belonging to the former subgroup are employed by the “factories that survived the IMF regime, owing to their physical strength and vigor” (Factory Director C, textile factory). Although vulnerable to a series of readjustments and employment reduction plans, their employment is relatively stable, as the factories they work for tend to be big and the companies have multiple production units across and beyond Southeast Asia.

In comparison, Korean-origin local employees, who are there because their previous employer went out of business or for personal reasons, are hired for their work experience within the same industry. These Korean local employees are mostly contract workers struggling with precarious employment and are likely to move to a bigger company in the same industry or to ones that offer better contract terms if such opportunities arise. In addition, a considerable number of the employees have work experiences in a third country or in Korea, having lived and worked there for certain periods of time.

Case: Factory manager, locally employed after a discontinued career

I graduated from an agricultural vocational school in 1975, and began to

³ Local employees get their jobs directly from the local branch of a company in Vietnam. Some of them are employed after an interview at the company’s headquarters in Korea. They are differentiated from the Korean workers sent by the company, such as those having worked at a factory in Korea directly run by the company and those who moved along with the factory where they used to work.

work at a factory in Cheongnyangni. [...] In the early 1980s, a silk company offered me 320,000 KRW a month when I was being paid only 180,000 KRW. I moved to the company and worked there for three years. The textile-export industry was very vigorous at the time. I opened up a factory on my own, but the industry declined after the 1988 Olympics, and I had to close it down in 1992. [...] So I began to work as a middleman, purchasing handkerchiefs, scarves, and neckties, and supplying them to retail stores, or importing crocodile skins from Vietnam and selling them to bag factories. My new business wasn't successful. [...] I moved to Vietnam to find an opportunity to work as an exporter providing subsidiary materials to Korean factories. And then, in 2009, I met the director of a company's local branch. He offered me a job as a Production Manager. Thanks to this, I was able to get stable employment for the first time in my life. (Manager H, textile company)

Case: Locally employed factory manager with work experience in an overseas country

After graduating from high school, in 1981, I began to work at a small printing factory in Dongdaemun. At the time nylon was a brand new material, and my job was to develop suitable ink for printing on the fabric and to do the printing. I worked for 7 or 8 years, except when I was doing military service. In 1989, there were plenty of jobs and the work paid very well, but the companies began to relocate to other regions because of rising wages. The job became scarce in 1993, and I had to do just any work I could. I even ran a restaurant. I very much regretted deciding not to accept a job offer in Indonesia. Then a friend of mine, who had worked in the printing industry, asked me to come to China to work with him. So I moved to Qingdao and worked there from 2004 to 2008. [...] The factory owner came for a visit to the city and suggested that I work with him in Vietnam. [Here in Ho Chi Minh] I have many peers and seniors. I can support my family in Korea with the money I earn here. My hands are stained with ink all the time, but I'm just grateful that I have the job. (Factory Manager O, printing factory)

As illustrated above, there are two generations of Korean factory managers in Ho Chi Minh City, based on whether they got their job before or after the IMF Crisis. This group ranging over both generations of managers has gone through a series of changes in terms of population size and characteristics, as more Korean companies established production sectors in Vietnam. In particular, their transnational characteristics change periodically in terms of differences in housing situations and family structures. However, it is reasonable to assume that the political-economic conditions on which managers' transnational lives are based today are due

to the continuous strengthening of the characteristics that emerged after the IMF period.

In a nutshell, locally hired Korean managers are increasing in number, while managers who migrated from Korea to the region through organizational routes are decreasing. From the companies' perspectives, employment and labor control have become more flexible; from the managers' perspectives, their employment and income have become less stable as contracted rather than longer-term employment is increasingly expected. There are, I suggest, two major reasons for the increase in contract-based, precarious local employments.

One reason for contradictions with skilled managerial workers, capable of handling labor-intensive factories, is an "ethnically segregated labor market" (McDowell 2008). The global market of skilled managerial labor is "regionalized," and companies have a strong tendency to hire those belonging to the same ethnic group or national origin as the company directors. Korean multinational factories are organized according to the strong belief that core skills and managerial tasks should be handled by trustworthy workers—in other words, by Koreans. This belief is rationalized by the assumption that only Korean managers can earnestly embrace a Korean director's plans and allow for smooth communication. A Korean manager, however, is significantly more expensive than a local one. If one Korean manager—who costs about 5,000 USD a month—is fired, the factory can hire 25 locals, for whom the companies need to pay only about 200 USD per month each. More than anything, labor-intensive companies are at the lowest tier of the global production system, and the key to their survival is to "win the wage game," which makes them subject to constant pressures to reduce production costs by localizing the workforce. Locally hired Korean managers are relatively cheap, and an additional benefit is that they are considered reliable workers while being relatively easy to dismiss if necessary.

The other reason contract labor has increased is that the absolute majority of labor-intensive production sectors, such as textile, shoes, bags, and clothing companies, no longer have factories in Korea. There are still factories that produce special luxury products or do their business on a smaller scale, but factories for mass production are rare, and even if these were present, it would be difficult to recruit workers for them. For this reason, skilled workers for labor-intensive industries are no longer reliably reproduced in Korea. Therefore, it is more practical and efficient for the

companies to hire Korean managers already in Vietnam who have work experience within the same industry, rather than to foster workers for the next generation. As a result, most managers in Ho Chi Minh are in their 40-50s, sometimes even in their 60s.

As explained above, the transnational lives of Korean factory managers in Ho Chi Minh are developing in accordance with political-economic circumstances in which the global labor market of skilled managerial work is subject to ethnic differentiation and regionalization, as well as to the relocation of the labor-intensive industry—all of which are the outcomes of a restructuring global production system. While the practice of local hiring and choosing workers with specific ethnic identities and personal connections is becoming more common, the workers hired in this way inevitably have less job security (McDowell 2008: 492).

2) Political-Economic Conditions for Korean Factory Managers and Their Socioeconomic Status within the Korean Diaspora in Ho Chi Minh

Korean managers who have migrated to Ho Chi Minh at different times and hold different positions still live within a common political economy in Vietnam. The political-economic circumstances and the socioeconomic status of the migrant managers affect the specific forms of their transnational lives, while each subgroup is subject to a distinctive arrangement. The differentiating factors are: the factory's place within the global production system, the types of products, scale of production, and financial state of the company, the company's labor policy, and an individual's position within the organization. Wages and stability of employment differ greatly according to a factory's status, such as vendor, subcontractor, subsidiary producer; types of products, such as shoes, hats, clothing, and fabrics; and scale, namely small, medium, or large. Also, it is inevitable that the political-economic conditions to which workers are subject and the socioeconomic status they hold depend on their position and title within the company's organization, such as director, general manager, and deputy general manager. Lastly, the company's philosophy of work matters as well.

Since each individual's circumstance is unique, it is not easy to come up with a formula combining multiple variables to clarify the effects of political-economic conditions. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to assume that a factory's products are often a reliable predictor of its size. For instance, a

system of specialized machineries is needed for shoes and textile production, and the factories manufacturing these products are likely to be big in order to make effective use of the investment in the tools. In contrast, clothing, hat, and bag production require only a handful of sewing machines, and thus a small factory is sufficient. Even bigger corporations manufacture tires, steel, and electronics; work contracts there are exceptionally stable and the working conditions are significantly better than those of subcontractors and subsidiary factories.

Complementing the discussion so far, there are three major groups in the managerial population, differentiated by socioeconomic status resulting from the political-economic conditions to which they are subject. The group with the poorest conditions is the managers of subcontractor and partner factories, whose business is to supply subsidiary materials to their contractors. Their monthly minimum wage is 2,500 USD, and the average is around 4,000-5,000 USD—these figures are well below the average for the same position in any other industry. Although it is difficult to say that these managers are in greater danger of dismissal because of the size of the industry per se, it is clear that the industry's high turnover rate and the financial instability of the companies make their positions relatively insecure.

Korean managers working at medium-sized factories—factories that hire around 1,000-5,000 local workers and manufacture for outsourced orders—receive 500-1,000 USD more per month compared to their counterparts at subcontractor and supplier factories manufacturing subsidiary materials. The managers also receive a partial subsidy for housing and their children's education at the Korean International School (from here on referred to as the Korean school) in Ho Chi Minh, as well as for flights during vacation season, which almost all companies provide. Although it is hard to say that they suffer a lower risk of losing their job compared to the first group, they tend not to leave their jobs as often due to better working conditions.

The third group with a distinctive political-economic condition consists of employees sent to an overseas branch by major corporations.⁴

⁴ There are no precise statistics available for the number of Koreans in Ho Chi Minh. The only official estimation released in 2012 comes from the Vietnamese Embassy. The estimation is also only based on vague evidence. According to this estimate, there were roughly 75,000 Koreans residing in Vietnam in the year of 2012 (see Table 2). However, the Koreans living in Ho Chi Minh estimate that the actual number should

There are two types of factories in Ho Chi Minh both employing this kind of Korean migrant manager. One consists of factories located in Vietnam, owned by a *chaebol* (family-owned conglomerate). The other consists of vendor factories reserving as much capital as and pursuing equal interest rates to those run by *chaebol* affiliates. As part of its management strategy, the latter type of factory sets up only its headquarters in Korea and places multiple factories that make a specific type of product (e.g., clothing or shoes) in other regions. Factory managers working for these overseas factories get paid as much as those at major companies in Korea, as appropriate to their positions. In addition, the company also pays for the tuition fees as set by the Korean school and for housing suitable for their status. The employment of such managers is relatively secure compared to the first two categories.

It should be noted for the third type of employment that Koreans in Vietnam themselves distinguish between *chaebol* managers and those working at large-scale vendors. The first subcategory is usually called “expatriates” (*jujaewon*), while the second is called “investment company worker” or “factory manager.” It is possible that people draw distinctions between them because their future plans differ—some are likely to return to Korea in a few years after finishing their services, while others are more likely to settle down in Vietnam, and still others are sojourner-type workers who will come back to Vietnam after working at a branch in another country. Another reason for this differentiation might be that their positions are associated with heterogeneous political-economic status differentials. In the case of big vendor factories, only managers with high-ranking positions are offered wage and welfare standards comparable to those of workers in a *chaebol*-owned factory.

One important aspect is that such a categorization reflects the

fall between 50,000-100,000, showing a wide difference in their perceptions. Nevertheless, if it can be assumed that there are approximately 1,300-1,700 Korean factories in the city, and that each one has, on average, 10 managers, there should be 15,000 managers living in the city. If it is assumed that about a half of them live with their families consisting of spouse and one child, the number of the Korean residents would be 22,500. Therefore, the managers and their families might total 30,000. In addition to this, resident employees and others might total 20,000, and self-employed business people and their families might total 15,000 to 20,000. All added up, it is likely that there are no more than 65,000-70,000 Koreans in Ho Chi Minh. But these are all rough estimations, as the population moving, both in and out, is large, and it is not possible to do a complete enumeration.

Table 2. Characteristics of the Korean populations in Ho Chi Minh City

(Unit: number of persons)

Gender	Total population size	Legal status of residence				Total	Number of registered South Korean nationals abroad (% of the registered)
		Overseas compatriots (Citizen of Vietnam)	South Korean nationals abroad	Sojourners			
				Permanent residents	General		
Male	52,000	1	0	50,699	1,300	51,999	6,016 (12)
Female	23,000	1	0	22,299	700	22,999	9,904 (43)
Total	75,000	2	0	72,998	2,000	74,998	15,920 (21)

Source: The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, www.mofa.go.kr

socioeconomic status of Korean managers in the Korean community of Ho Chi Minh. Koreans living in the city sort themselves into resident managers, factory managers, self-employed managers, and others⁵ for the rest (Chae Suhong 2005: 120-127; 2012: 29-31). There are also, of course, owners of big companies, but they are not considered a part of the Korean group in Vietnam, since they spend most of their time in Korea or in other countries. Also, small factory owners are perceived as belonging to the same group as factory managers, while small company owners without a factory (for instance, owners of travel agencies, hospitals, and distribution agencies) are classified as self-employed. Table 2 summarizes the general characteristics of the larger Korean population in Ho Chi Minh City from which the various categories of managers are drawn. Included in the table are family members who have also come to Vietnam.

Among the four categories (of resident managerial workers, factory managers, self-employed managers and others), the group that enjoys the best political-economic conditions and the highest socioeconomic status is the resident managerial workers. They get paid a relatively higher wage and receive various kinds of welfare benefits from their companies, which

⁵ Included in "the others" category are: workers in travel agencies, self-employed business people, unemployed people, thugs, and marriage brokers. This group of people were not counted in the first three categories.

allows them to live in relatively luxurious apartments that cost about 2,000-5,000 USD per month, to send their children to the international school, and to play golf on weekends. As a result, resident managerial workers, originally “resident workers of the boss,” socialize easily with government employees⁶ and high-status managers working for big corporations, all of whom are roughly equal in terms of political-economic status. Such broadly defined “residents” exercise significant leverage when it comes to major decisions to be made in the Korean community, thanks to their jobs and these social networks.

Factory managers, who have no such benefits, deliberately emphasize the fact that the resident managerial workers are at best temporary residents, and that their status is essentially that of an office employee, even if they enjoy a good standard of living thanks to the benefits provided by their companies. In reality, however, the socioeconomic status of these residents is clearly enviable. One interesting aspect is that no matter what factory managers think about the resident managers, there is almost no opportunity for them to socialize with each other in ordinary everyday life. As a rule, they are segregated by separate social networks and cultures, and do not mix with each other.

Likewise, factory managers and self-employed people are often differentiated by their respective political-economic positions and do not have many opportunities to socialize with each other. Nonetheless, they form an occasional yet close relationship as needed, for instance, by cultivating close relationships as regular customers and retailers at restaurants, bakeries, supermarkets, and spas. In earlier days, self-employed Koreans accumulated a considerable amount of wealth and looked down on the resident managerial workers (Chae Suhong 2005: 128-131). The majority of them, however, are now running small businesses that earn them up to 3,000 USD a month, an amount that exceeds the usual salary for factory managers yet is not as large as was once the case. Regarding why they suffered a decrease in profits, one explanation could be that Korean self-employed workers with limited capital flooded into Ho Chi Minh after the IMF Crisis (Jeong Hyegyong et al. 2011: 384). In fact,

⁶ For example, Koreans working at the South Korean Embassy, KOTRA (Korea Trade-Investment Promotion Agency), and other public enterprises are counted as resident employees, for the welfare subsidies they receive for housing and education, which are at the level comparable to that of resident workers hired by big corporations.

factory managers and self-employed workers, as opposed to resident managerial workers, are far more likely to get to know each other as neighbors in the same apartment block, parents at the Korean school, or members of the same sports club.

Clearly, the transnational lives of Korean factory managers in Ho Chi Minh are shaped by their political-economic conditions and associated socioeconomic status. Why is it then that these managers nonetheless wish to continue on with their precarious socioeconomic lives as sojourners in a faraway country? What are the class and ethnic identities within which they work, while clashing with local workers and leading transnational lives? How do they (re)create relationships with their families and others outside the workplace in everyday life and practice transnational caregiving and affection? These questions, to be explored in the following section, are based upon my understanding of their political-economic conditions and socioeconomic status as explained so far.

5. Korean Factory Managers and Their Lives in Transnational Workplaces in Ho Chi Minh

1) Double-Bound Class Consciousness in Transnational Workplaces and Contradictions in Localization

The everyday lives of the factory managers appear very regular and simple. Large industrial complexes are concentrated in the outskirts of Ho Chi Minh and surrounding regions, such as Dong Nai and Binh Duong, and a regular workday plan is essential for long-distance commuters who do not live in the company's dormitory. New towns with concentrated Korean populations such as Phu My Hung are busy from 5 to 6 in the morning. On the way to the factories, which are located around one to one and a half hours away by company bus, almost every manager tries to sleep a little more as if it were a regular part of their daily schedule. The bus usually arrives before 7:00 a.m. The workers, after arrival, have a simple breakfast provided by the company in the Korean dormitory, and then begin the day's work. At around noon, there comes a short lunchtime, then siesta for a half an hour, and lastly, the afternoon's work until 5:00 p.m. Unless there is an exceptionally important task or an accident, most work remaining at day's end is handed to the Vietnamese manager in charge of teams on the

night shift, and the Korean managers are allowed to go back home. The directors consider this daily schedule natural, as the managers have to share the company's commuter bus to travel the long way back home—this daily routine is effectively inevitable. Even the managers residing in a dorm, although they live closer, follow the same routine rather than finishing leftover work.

The labor process for the on-site managers largely consists of tasks that do not need much attention or elaborate skill, even in labor-intensive factories. Their jobs are: to check whether materials needed are available and managed properly, to note whether the company's products are finished on time, to identify any shortage in the inventory of necessary materials, and to record any defective products found. They carry out these tasks with a high standard of professionalism. The intensity of their labor is less than that of the manual workers, whose labor proceeds in a concentrated, fast, and repetitive way so as to keep production moving.

Case: Simple management skills as described by one Korean factory manager in a transnational workplace

My major in college was textile engineering. I received a job offer from a hat manufacturer in 2000. I applied for a two-year position in Bangladesh and eventually ended up working there for a decade. I supervised the production process, especially the embroidery. I kept on doing that job for a while at first, [then] moved on to manage the materials, and then supervised the sewing process; three years at each job. After that, I moved to Vietnam and managed bag factory X's production process for three years. Although I have no particular skill [in bag production], my knowledge of management was all I needed to do my job properly. Regardless of the product and process, assuming that one understands the core process for a specific product, production management is not very challenging unless the initial setup is bad. (Deputy General Manager L, bag factory)

Although this manager relied on his managerial skills without detailed knowledge of the work processes, in labor-intensive industries, it is tricky for a manager to oversee the manual laborers without having a detailed knowledge of the product. For instance, shoe manufacturing comprises more than a hundred processes and needs as many as 5,000 to several tens of thousands of workers. It is impossible for one or two supervisors to manage manufacturing on such a scale. For this reason, any major shoe factory in Ho Chi Minh has at least 50-100 Korean managers, even though their business was set up only in the mid-1990s. Likewise, woven

textile factories, which have a relatively complicated manufacturing process, have to employ many skilled managerial workers.

There indeed are differences across the industries; still, it is clear that the factory managers in Vietnam have less onerous responsibilities compared with their earlier experiences managing factories in Korea where directors demand strict control of laborers. Manual workers at the factories in Vietnam are not under such strict control and the directors in the Vietnamese factories do not complain about managers who do their jobs in a relatively relaxed manner, leaving much of the production cycle to the workers to carry out, since the factories run reliably on their own for the most part.

This leniency is possible because the efficiency of production management is affected by more than managers' technical knowledge and work ethic. Actually, some researchers from management studies (e.g., Kennedy et al. 2004) argue that interpersonal techniques in transnational workplaces should be distinctive and reflect the conflicting sociocultural values present at the site. In other words, on-site management in transnational organizations requires an approach that, in contrast with ordinary workplaces, reflects a diversity of sociocultural values that influence people's performances.

If we observe transnational workplaces with sociocultural values in mind, we find two common on-site management skills utilized by managers in Korean factories in Ho Chi Minh. First, male managers supervise female workers. Although there are exceptions—one female manager at a shoe factory was hired for her fluent Vietnamese, which she learned while attending a foreign studies university, and a Korean-Chinese woman supervised the sewing process at a sewing factory—the majority of Korean managers at labor-intensive factories are men. There are also more male on-site managers, especially in higher-ranking positions. In contrast, Korean factories in Ho Chi Minh have a strong tendency to choose women when there is a need to hire local Vietnamese workers, unless the position is of a type that is perceived to demand male strength or gendered knowledge. As a result, almost all Vietnamese workers are women. Indeed, one could argue that in the factories, a management strategy based on “male values” or “masculinity” is preferred, while women workers are considered “feminine”—that is, submissive and easy to handle.

Another on-site management skill commonly observed in any factory is to control the local workers by utilizing the ethnic hierarchy. The Korean

“factory regime” (Burawoy 1985) in Ho Chi Minh is characterized by, almost without exception, Koreans in leadership roles with power over the Vietnamese people. Vietnamese workers even in managerial roles are subservient to Korean employees.⁷ Likewise, Vietnamese people, whether workers or managers, are clearly aware that their most important responsibility is to follow the directions of Korean managers.

Under these circumstances, male Korean managers sometimes learn over time that it is more efficient to do their job by exploiting sociocultural norms to exert control over female Vietnamese workers, rather than by being excessively strict and meticulous in their governance. In addition, they are also aware that they can secure their employment and enhance their working conditions best by conforming faithfully to the directors' intentions and interests and doing their job this way. As a result, having been employed by the company themselves, the managers actively carry out their roles as efficient supervisors, by controlling the workers on behalf of the directors.

The problem is that the Vietnamese workers “penetrate” or at least “semi-penetrate” the Korean managers' interests and intents (Willis 1981). As a result, when a company clashes with its union, the local workers distrust the Korean managers, assuming that they are completely on the directors' side. In particular, when there is a strike, the union often criticizes the ways the managers do their work, in addition to demanding raises and improvement of working conditions. Sometimes, the manual workers complain that the Korean managers have authoritarian tendencies, are forceful with women workers, and belittle the Vietnamese.

In order to preempt losing their job or being disadvantaged by conflicts, the Korean managers need to be as fluent as possible in Vietnamese, and to win the trust of the local workers by giving them tips on important processes; that is, they actively seek a way to be localized. However, localization for the Korean on-site managers who are subject to specific political-economic arrangements is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, by making an effort to successfully adapt to the local situation, they are able to satisfy the directors. But on the other, the localization makes them more vulnerable in the job market because by effectively training the

⁷ Koreans never work manual labor jobs in Vietnam. There is no need to explain why none accept the manual labor positions with the monthly average payment of around 200-300 USD.

local workers, they make themselves more disposable. Still, without such efforts at localization, the manual laborers would be less willing to trust them, and the company would evaluate them as incompetent for their managerial job. In addition, should a manager lose their current job for failing to acclimate themselves, finding a new job is even harder, since any potential employer would check with previous employers regarding their ability to efficiently communicate with and direct the Vietnamese workers.

To sum up, the Korean managers in Ho Chi Minh are bound up in their political-economic conditions and acquire a twofold class identity, while living with the contradictions of localization in the transnational workplaces.

2) *Ethnic Conflict and Mystification of Class Consciousness in Transnational Workplaces*

Ethnicities, classes, and genders of the Korean managers in transnational workplaces weave together into manifold identities according to complex algorithms.⁸ When examined through the lens of class, the Korean managers are really no more than working-class people reproducing their socioeconomic lives within the boundaries set by capitalism, even if they are relatively well off compared to the local Vietnamese workers. They experience a clash of interests between themselves and the capital, and aim to raise their working-class consciousness through a series of efforts at enhancing their political-economic conditions.

In reality, however, the managers do not show any effort to organize a trade union, nor do they resist arbitrary layoffs by the company, nor do they actively negotiate their working conditions. Why, then, is it that they appear to conform to the capitalist logic? I believe there are multiple answers to this question. First, one could argue that it is due to the Vietnamese government's policy of legally and institutionally supporting its citizens in labor disputes and their right to organize trade unions while remaining rather indifferent to the working conditions of foreign workers. Second, it could be that the managers are relatively satisfied that they do

⁸ I doubt if it is possible to construct a function or algorithm to substitute for the empirical case-based evidence. I have addressed this in theoretical discussions appearing in Section two—doing such a calculation is not my intention, neither is it within my capability.

have a job when the job market for skilled managers is in recession, as well as that their companies provide reasonable welfare benefits. As mentioned in the previous section, it is also possible to say that this is owing to the twofold or flexible class consciousness emerging from their position as foreign on-site managers, whose job is to direct the local manual workers. All of these interpretations are compelling in the case of Korean managers in Vietnam and the same things happen in any workplace in any country or region, under the influence of widespread neoliberal ideology and a flexible labor market structure.

While these interpretations are compelling, examining additional aspects of transnational workplaces, such as Korean factories in Ho Chi Minh, as social fields where diverse cultural differences merge and bounce off each other enriches understanding of transnationalism. It is through these processes that ethnic differences and conflicts conceal, confuse, and mystify class consciousness. These situations are the result of almost insuperable social distance and cultural differences between foreign (Korean) managers and local (Vietnamese) workers, which are inevitable at any transnational workplaces.

Case: A Superficial Relationship between a Korean Manager and a Vietnamese Worker

I [a Korean manager] go to a pub and karaoke once every few months with the [Vietnamese] directors. The Koreans [managers] attend the family events of people in directorial or higher positions. [...] I was once invited by an [Vietnamese] assembly line director to his home. [...] Yet we just hung out to be polite. In the end, we don't speak each other's language well enough, and we eat separately, and rarely come across each other outside the factory. We don't know each other very well. [...] We know who is close to whom, and can predict who is thinking about what. But we have no idea how they talk and think about us. Isn't it true that at work all you need to do is to handle your job properly and not to make serious mistakes? For us, it would be more than enough if they wouldn't lie, send out defective products, or betray us when there's a strike in a neighboring factory, after having pretended to be friendly to us. [...] Oh and yes! I've been living here [in Vietnam] for 15 years now. Still, whenever I've seen a Vietnamese worker outside the factory, it has almost always been at company events, unless he is a team director or something. (General Manager E, textile factory)

In fact, Vietnamese factory workers form tight social networks with the people from their work teams, hometowns, relatives, and their *nhà trọ*, a

form of housing with very cramped quarters for workers. They utilize this network to access information on the working conditions of another company and communal childcare groups. Also, in order to keep such networks, the workers spend a considerable amount of money despite their meager incomes.

The Korean managers are usually not good at accessing the laborer networks, and are normally not interested in them either. Nor do they hang out with the Vietnamese workers unless they need to talk about work. During work, mealtimes, and breaks, the Korean managers gather in a room in the office building or in a separate dorm. Sometimes they run into the Vietnamese workers, interact in a playful way, and make small talk, but only on an occasional basis. It is not necessary to explain further what things are like outside the factory, for even at work, things go this way. The Korean managers form their own secluded world to enjoy leisure time, share difficulties in life, and stay close to each other.

The social distance created by separate sociocultural worlds leads to misunderstandings and mistrust between the managers and the workers in the workplace, with vertically organized production units being the sole exception. This feature is best represented by the ethnic discourses about each other. When there is a problem in the factory, Korean managers attribute it to the Vietnamese people supposedly being “unsanitary,” “deceitful,” and “irresponsible.” On the part of the workers, when they are dissatisfied with what’s happening, they say that Korean people are “impatient,” “violent,” and “suspicious”—both utilize various forms of negative “stereotyping.” Needless to say, it is very rare that such discourse happens face-to-face. Nevertheless, it further widens the social gap. In addition, social distance and mistrust are amplified through political conflicts such as strikes.

It is largely conflicting interests surrounding wages and working conditions that lead to conflicts between workers and directors at transnational workplaces such as the labor-intensive Korean factories in Ho Chi Minh. In reality, almost every recent strike in Vietnam emerged from conflicting economic interests (Do, Vu, and Vu 2011). Nevertheless, both sides rely on ethnic and nationalistic discourse rather than class-based discourse in identifying the causes of conflicts and in coming up with solutions. Excessive economic pursuits and undesirable political cultures, rather than political-economic interests, are identified as the trigger. Through this process, the problem of class is concealed and mystified by

ethnic conflicts. I assume that it is largely through this mystification that Korean managers openly express their animosity, rather than sympathy, toward the demands made by the Vietnamese workers. Likewise, it is possible to interpret the Vietnamese workers' tendency to criticize the Korean culture of labor and politics as derivative of such ethnic distrust and precluding sympathy for the twofold position inevitably held by the Korean managers.

The discrimination against Korean-Chinese factory managers from Vietnamese manual workers that happens in some factories in Ho Chi Minh is a result of such mystification of class issues through ethnic conflicts. Although Korean-Chinese managers are paid less than Korean managers,⁹ they are hired for their skills and experience to make matters convenient for the Korean directors. Vietnamese manual workers, however, despite perceiving that the Korean-Chinese managers speak Korean but do not have Korean citizenship, consider them of the same group as the South Korean managers but assume a domineering manner toward them. Since the company's hierarchical organization makes it difficult to explicitly defy Korean managers, the Vietnamese workers, realizing that the Korean-Chinese managers occupy the ambiguous space of passing as Korean while not having Korean citizenship, make them the targets of witch hunts. There are indeed significantly more complaints and demands against the Korean-Chinese managers.

Case: Discrimination against Korean-Chinese managers

On the first day and for three months afterwards, (Vietnamese workers) test the new guy. I got into a lot of fights. Their rationale is not entirely clear to me, but it feels like there is something twisted in their minds. If I do not listen to them, they yell at me and let the translator say "Either you or I have to leave." They have a domineering manner. The situation got better after I won a sewing competition, albeit with an old machine, but there are lots of difficulties below the surface. [...] In Saipan, I really didn't have the same problem, although it also was a Korean company. I think it's because we worked with Chinese people (workers) then. Here, on the other hand, some factories are suffering from complaints (made by the Vietnamese workers) against Korean-Chinese managers. [...] We have problems with the Koreans

⁹ Korean-Chinese managers usually get paid around 1,500-2,500 USD according to their years of work experience. The maximum wage does not exceed 3,000 USD. It is reasonable to assume that they usually get paid about 50 percent as compared to the Korean managers.

too. They sometimes scold me in front of the Vietnamese workers, or they just reverse a decision I made without saying anything about it to me first. Whenever something like that happens, we the Chinese (Korean-Chinese) get together and talk about our own problems. (General Manager J, clothing factory)

Expressed as discrimination against Korean-Chinese factory managers, the Vietnamese workers' ethnic mistrust and hostility are both the outcome and source of mystification. In other words, "interest-based politics" are again obscured by "identity politics" surrounding different ethnic groups (Lee 1998: 21). As such, Korean managers, along with Vietnamese workers, interpret the world and act in it with a consciousness based on their ethnic identities rather than on their class.

6. Transnational Lives of Korean Managers in Their Living Spaces

1) Differentiation of Living Spaces of Transnational Families and Their Socioeconomic Reproduction

It has now been three decades since Koreans have settled in Ho Chi Minh, and the gradual changes in living spaces and family structures have become more visible than before. One notable aspect is that most Korean factory managers live in a Korean-heavy district with their families. In the past, most of them lived in factory dorms, especially before 2000. In the case of Korean factories located in Ho Chi Minh, they hire two or three Korean managers if the factory size is small, around 10 in the medium-sized ones, and even 50-100 managers in large-scale factories. Based on more than one hundred cases, the data having been collected by myself over the years, half of them appear to live in dorms, with the other half living outside the factory with their families.¹⁰

The variation in forms of housing is accompanied by several other transnational changes in family structure and ideas about family. The most outstanding feature is the fracturing of the idealized or normative mindset that family should be a community completely committed to the children's

¹⁰ Not surprisingly, a small number of workers are single and live outside the factory estate.

education, shared residence, and economic reproduction—at present, there are fewer negative opinions on someone's living apart from the rest of the family and only providing them with money. There are no longer many people who consider it unnatural for a couple to live in Ho Chi Minh while leaving their children in Korea to study, or for one half of a couple to live alone in the dorm of the factory estate while the rest of the family lives where the factory was formerly located, in countries such as Indonesia, China, and the Philippines. It is also considered natural for a wife and children to go back to Korea with the husband left alone in Vietnam over the vacation period. This is a dramatic change when considering that in the past, Koreans had been deeply concerned about possible family disintegration, symbolized by the image of “dance fever” (*chumbaram*), when many migrant workers' families stayed behind in Korea while the husband/father worked in the Middle East (cf. Kim and Lee 1983). Indeed, the concept of “transnational family” (Bryceson and Vuorela 2002) is being accepted more widely.

Another change is the weakening of the conception that a typical family is of “pure blood.” Those who are teaching Korean to the children of Korean-Vietnamese families estimate that in and around Ho Chi Minh there are about 3,000 families consisting of a Korean manager husband and a Vietnamese wife. Following such an increase in the number of people who are favorable toward the idea of marrying or wish to marry a Vietnamese woman, the idea of family is also changing.

There are five major housing types for a transnational life as adopted by the Korean managers, and each is located in a different region—Phu My Hung, the 7th district of Ho Chi Minh; the region surrounding “Super Bowl,” a shopping mall in Tan Bien of Ho Chi Minh;¹¹ the apartment blocks near An Phu in *2-gun*; the “local” residential areas in Dong Nai and Binh Duong, where factories are concentrated; and dormitories within factory estates (Nguyen, Nguyen, and Nguyen 2011).

Case: Reflections on changes in Korea Town in Ho Chi Minh

Even up to the early 1990s, Pham Van Hai was known as the Korean street.

¹¹ The area surrounding Super Bowl is indeed a restaurant district. It is not, however, a main residential area for the managers, unless the wife is a Vietnamese person in a Korean-Vietnamese family, who has good reasons to live in the district. The area will not be covered from now on for this reason.

The place was crowded with business people and *Lai Dai Han* (the second generation of Korean-Vietnamese) helpers until its decline in 2002. In 1998, the new city, Phu My Hung, was completed and the Korean school was built there—Koreans moved to this new area following this change. Moreover, Korean stores mushroomed around the Super Bowl, and the factory managers living in nearby districts rushed to the area to eat at the restaurants on weekends. That's how Pham Van Hai became empty. These days, there are many Korean people, although somewhat invisible, living in the cheap apartments in downtown Ho Chi Minh and around the industrial district, as well as in Phu My Hung. If you feel that the dorm is rather stifling, or you have a girlfriend, these are the right places to live. [...] Rich people and local branch directors don't live there. They live in the apartments reserved for foreigners in 1-*gun* and 3-*gun*, as well as in the downtown area. (Factory Director A, textile factory)

About half of the Korean managers live alone in the factory dorms away from the rest of the families, and the other half mostly live in Phu My Hung. This area, where the apartments are concentrated, has been taking the shape of new city since 1997.¹² It is the most favored residential area because, more than anything, the only existing Korean school is there. The school was founded in 1998 and offers diverse courses from preschool to high school. On top of that, the tuition fee is affordable, with the result that 1,400 students are registered at the school.¹³ Another merit of Phu My Hung is that it is a commercial district with plenty of private tutoring institutions (*hagwon*), Korean restaurants, groceries, video rental shops, massage salons, small hotels, big chain supermarkets, hospitals—that is, basically all kinds of amenities run and used by Koreans. In addition, the area is equipped with a few satellite channels hosting Korean TV shows, and the Vietnamese residents are friendlier to Koreans due to the influence of the Korean Wave (Yi Hanu and Le Thi Hoai Phuong 2013).

¹² Phu My Hung is a large-scale new city built with Taiwanese capital. Permission for construction was granted in 1993, the infrastructure finished in 1996, and construction of buildings began in 1997 (cf. www.phumyhung.com.vn). It is comparable to Korean cities such as Bundang and Ilsan.

¹³ The official name of the school is “Ho Chi Min Korean International School,” and it is usually referred to as the Korean school. In April 2014, there were 1,409 students; 38 pre-school age, 652 at the elementary level, 719 at the junior high level, which combines the middle and high schools. The quarterly tuition fees are, respectively, 660, 600, 720, and 810 USD, which are all inexpensive as compared to other international schools in Vietnam. Even when the parents are not legally married, an admission to this school is possible if there is a clear evidence that either of the parents is Korean (e.g., the school website, www.kshcm.net)

Although not as perfectly equipped with facilities as Phu My Hung, another residential region favored by Korean factory managers is An Phu in *2-gun*, due to its location near the highway that leads to the industrial area. In this district, there are also a number of the most luxurious apartments, but the most popular ones cost 500-1,500 USD a month. The residents in this district live there in order to send their children to the international school, or because they prefer not to live in Phu My Hung, with its large Korean population, despite the longer commute to the Korean school. Other residents include childless Korean businessmen, resident workers, and factory managers. As a result, the residents' varying socioeconomic statuses or the "drawing of distinctions" based on such variations are not as apparent. These conditions make the district ideal for managers who are financially stable and part of a Korean-Vietnamese family.

The rest of the Korean population usually lives in local apartments within an industrial area, where the absolute majority of the residents are natives. The rent does not exceed 500 USD a month for such housing. Koreans choose to live in such apartments when they would actually prefer to live elsewhere because their families are living in Korea, or they are married to Vietnamese women but cannot afford a luxurious house. Korean families with children almost never live in local apartments within an industrial area, as it takes significant time to get their children to the Korean school from there, and the only choice left would be the Vietnamese schools. Even Korean-Vietnamese families are somewhat reluctant to send their children to Vietnamese schools because of the poorer educational conditions. Families that cannot afford the international school usually try to send their children to an exclusive private school or a Taiwanese/Chinese school. Taking these points into consideration, one can determine that factory managers living in local apartments within an industrial area have a very low socioeconomic status within the Korean society.

The most powerful reason for this spatial differentiation in housing types among the managers is their different political-economic circumstances. For sure, personal preferences and tastes do affect decisions regarding where to live, but the price range of one's ultimate choice is inevitably determined by their financial circumstances, which are a function of their socioeconomic status. This feature is clearly visible in a case that shows how an ordinary factory manager's household

economically reproduces.¹⁴

Case: Reproduction of a manager's family in a "Gangbuk" apartment, Phu My Hung

Well it's a little embarrassing to talk about my income. [...] I get paid from both Vietnam and Korea. I get 1,500 USD from Vietnam, and it amounts to 1,350 USD after paying taxes. Every month I transfer about 2,500-3,000 USD from the Korean account, and I spend more than 4,000 USD per month. Hardly a penny is spent in Korea, but I still can't save money regularly. I have two kids, I live in "two beds," and I pay 700 USD a month. My company pays for tuition to the Korean school, but it's not very expensive. I do pay 250 USD for English tutoring, 100 USD for piano and flute lessons twice a week, and 50-60 USD for painting and *taekwondo* lessons. So it all adds up to 1,000 USD per month for private education (for my two kids). On top of that, I pay the maid (she works two hours per day, six days per week) 100 USD a month. So, it's all about 1,500-2,000 USD every month. If we eat out once on every weekend, we can meet the budget, even if it is tight. [...] We don't even get paid a pension. (Deputy General Manager L, bag factory)

Assuming that the average income of a Korean factory manager is around 4,000-5,000 USD, and assuming that it takes at least 3,000-4,000 USD to reproduce a four-person household—500-1,000 USD for the rent, 400-500 USD for tuition fees, 500-1,000 USD for private tutoring sessions, 1,000 USD for food, and 500 USD for other occasional expenses such as weddings, funerals, and medical services—as a rule, it is hard to save money unless the family members sacrifice their leisure activities, which would result in roughly 1,000 USD a month in savings.

There are only two ways for the managers to improve their situations. The first is to live in a dorm, away from their family in Korea. In this case, they can spend about 500-1,000 USD a month on personal expenses and send the rest to their family in Korea. In such a case, with the addition of his wife's income, it is possible for a manager to purchase an inexpensive house in Korea, the fruit of working overseas for a long period of time. The other way is to marry a Vietnamese woman, live in a local apartment, and adopt the living standards of native residents. In fact, more and more

¹⁴ This refers to the majority of factory managers, excluding the category of "sojourner managers" working for a large company, or those who work for a very small factory with very poor working conditions.

Korean managers are willing to marry a Vietnamese woman due to economic pressures; such marriages enable them to cut down on living expenses and seek investment opportunities in the country, thereby enabling them to accumulate wealth.

At the same time, the reality is that more Korean managers are reluctant to live away from their families simply for economic reasons. The reason is probably that transnational families now have more varied goals in life, such as sending their children to a Korean university via special admission processes, or providing a living space good enough to satisfy a wife. Such motivations are gaining more importance in the transnational lives of workers.

Unsurprisingly, I often hear that managers' families are satisfied with their lives in Ho Chi Minh despite not having much in the way of savings. A common narrative is: "My wife likes living here and doesn't want to go back to Korea." The wives have only scant opportunities for economically significant jobs, and are often unwilling to get a job at all. They are content with their lives, which entail focusing on their children's education and employing a local worker for household maintenance. For this reason, the activities in their living spaces put women at the center. Wives often have a wider range of social relationships and activities than their husbands. If workplaces are male-centered, the living spaces can be described as female-centered.

To sum up, the Korean factory managers in Ho Chi Minh and their transnational living and residential spaces are differentiated by socioeconomic circumstances, and in accordance with the political-economic conditions. Unlike in the past, they manage to run the household economy in differentiated ways, and live a family- or woman-centered life at home.

2) Long Distance Caregiving and Sentiments of Transnational Families

Korean factory managers, the majority of whom are men belonging to transnational families, are under constant pressure created by various patriarchal family norms. Even when they take care of families residing in the same place, they struggle in order to maintain their transnational ways of life in both their workplace and living space, but it is a very special kind of hardship to do long-distance care work when their parents and siblings, as well as their wives and children, are left in Korea.

Case: Being proud to support family but feeling estranged from them

I am not that old, but my family is what I care about most. I regret that I wasn't able to keep my family together. Living like this feels hollow, and I feel sorry for my kids. Although I comfort myself that I am supporting my family, and I feel grateful for my wife's dedication to the kids. [...] When I was working in China, I changed my position every three months and moved between Korea and China. My boss promised that I would be able to go on a vacation of 10-14 days twice a year if I moved to Vietnam. In actuality, I am allowed to leave only once a year. For compensation, I was allowed to visit Korea freely on any urgent occasion. I actually can do that and have done that. My house (in Korea) once had a leakage. You know, it's hard for a woman (wife) to fix it alone. So I asked for a short visit. [...] After moving to Vietnam, I had my first kid with me here, because I didn't want to live apart from him. It was hard though—he used to leave his clothes everywhere, but I didn't feel like scolding him. We were unfamiliar to each other after all. I regret very much though that I didn't teach him discipline while we were living together. It was a good opportunity to live with my son, but when my second son left to complete his military service, my wife said she was too lonely, so I had to let him go back. (Factory Director O, printing factory)

The Korean managers are proud that they are capable of supporting their families while working far away from home. One factory manager, Mr. O, is even more proud of what he is doing—being able to support his family—because of a particular history. He regrets having been a “trouble maker” in his youth. At the same time, he feels guilty about not taking care of his wife and children. Sometimes he feels regretful and even betrayed, when he feels estranged from his family. But there is no solution to this problem, as he can neither change the past nor escape his political-economic reality. The contradiction is that by working overseas in order to support his family, he became less intimate with them; yet had the family stayed together, he would not have been able to carry out his role as the patriarch. Such contradictions are created by the masculine and patriarchal senses of obligation heightened for male workers living alone and away from their families. Such arrangements are quintessentially transnational (Walter, Bourgois, and Loinaz 2004).

Case: Feeling pressured by filial obligations to parents

My father was a construction worker. His expertise was sealing and waterproofing. When I was unemployed, I used to follow him to work and help. Basically, in order to do this job, you need to squat all day. I did it for

just one day and wasn't able to stand up next day. I realized that he had suffered through such hard labor his entire life in order to feed his kids. My parents live in a basement housed in a multi-unit. I was the only one who could improve the situation—my brother's business went bust and my sister wasn't doing so well either. So I took out a loan and bought my father a small multi-unit home. I'm spending 40 percent of what I earn to pay it back. Sometimes, I think that had it not been for my parents, I could have saved a lot of money. But you know, someone has to do it, right? I'm even scared when it occurs to me that my parents can fall ill at any moment. (General Manager P, printing factory)

The obligation to care for one's parents, internalized within Korea's extended family structure, is a crucial part of the "transnational circuit of care and affection" (Huang 2010: 11) of Korean factory managers. They are not free from the sense of obligation, pressure, and guilt to take care of their parents. Especially when they are born into a working class family and inherit numerous hardships and poverty, or when they are the first or only son, they suffer the pain of being torn between their filial obligation and the reality that does not allow them to fulfill it. They are allowed to leave the workplace only once or twice a year, and the regret remains that they were unable to participate in important family events such as weddings and funerals. They also get both angry and frustrated by the resentment and blame from their parents and siblings. The emotions and feelings that the managers internalize are indeed contradictory—it is, however, their fate as transnational workers.

Case: Transnational caregiving in a cybernetic world

I got married in 1992, but it was only two years ago, at 43, that I had a daughter, as my wife suffered a miscarriage and I moved overseas for work. The Chief Director invited my wife to Vietnam for me and she became pregnant on that occasion. To see my daughter, I use my own money to go back to Korea once more in addition to my regular vacation. My wife sends me pictures of my kid on KakaoTalk. After the week's work, on weekends, I watch my daughter playing on my computer all day long, using an online video chatting app. This makes me feel a little reassured—I can't take care of my daughter myself, but I can be with my family in this way. (General Manager I, clothing factory)

Fast-developing technology such as video chats, SNS, and voice chats "compress time and space" (Harvey 1990: 260) and thus change the forms and intensity of transnational caregiving. Owing to this technological

development, long-distance families can meet up more often, if only online, and become more intimate with each other. Korean managers find much consolation in talking with their kids, wife, parents, and siblings, either on a phone or a computer, to give attention and affection. Nevertheless, there is a clear limit to how much intimacy they can experience with their family members in cyberspace. Emotions such as pride, senses of obligation, regret, and guilt are, in the end, rooted in a political-economic reality that does not allow them to practice what they consider socioculturally significant.

7. Conclusion: Transnational Life and the Future of Korean Factory Managers in Ho Chi Minh

When I was young, I had lots of dreams. Wouldn't you suffer if you ended up doing work that you never thought you would do? I believe, though, that I need to be satisfied with my life as it is, and should be grateful to my family. I don't want many things in life. My goal is clear and simple: I will work here until my kid turns 20 and becomes independent. I know that other people want to make a lot of money, travel... My dream is to save as much money as possible until I die, support my parents, educate my kids, and never have to borrow money from others when I get old. (General Manager P, printing factory)

Why did the managers end up living and working in Ho Chi Minh, rather than doing what they dreamed about when they were young? The structural reason is clear: Korean labor-intensive factories have migrated to Ho Chi Minh as the global production system has restructured. There was also a political-economic context that localized the skilled managerial labor market and fractured ethnic groups. The managerial workers, when they were unable to find new jobs in Korea, either followed their factory abroad or took a position at a factory that was searching for a Korean skilled manager.

What sort of lives do they lead in "transnational workplaces" (Huang 2010: 13) in Ho Chi Minh? They seem to have lost sight of class consciousness while carrying out the duties imposed on them by capital as male managers of factories where the vast majority of workers are women. They themselves have not escaped from the fate of the working class, but diligently do their jobs of making the local workers accept poor working conditions and encouraging them to work hard. In addition, they need to

carry out contradictory roles. On the one hand, they have to train the local workers if they are going to keep their current jobs at all. On the other, this could ironically result in their own unemployment, as the jobs can be taken away from them and given to the local trainees. They are aware of the contradiction. But they tend to cover up the fundamental problems by blaming the Vietnamese workers, rather than seeing through their own confusing existence. They mystify the class problem as ethnic conflict, and are absorbed in "politics of identity" rather than engaging with a "politics of interests" (Lee 1998: 21).

What kinds of life do they have in the transnational living spaces of Ho Chi Minh? They manage to keep living by finding a suitable niche within their political-economic reality, in a city where the living space is divided up according to the socioeconomic structure. There, they struggle hard to keep their jobs in order to put food on the table and educate their children, while trying to adapt to woman-centered personal lives. Those who live away from their families carry on with complex feelings about caring for their families, parents, and siblings at long distance. They live while experiencing the complex feelings brought by a political-economic reality that does not allow them to have what is important to them.

Do they have a promising future in this transnational way of life? It does not seem likely that they do. Unlike in the past, there are fewer workers who migrate via the "circuit of company organization" (Peixoto 2001), while locally employed, precarious workers are increasing in number in the region. As time goes by, the localization process will advance further and further, and there will be significantly fewer jobs left for the Korean migrants. The future is not very bright for Korea's labor-intensive industries either: they may soon be forced to close down their businesses unless they succeed in finding a new country in which to relocate.

Will the managerial workers be able to escape this grey future? That will not be easy for them. They lack the capital and job skills necessary to set up an independent business on their own. They have worked as skilled managerial workers their entire lives; it is uncertain whether they would be able to adapt to a new place and to quickly equip themselves with the capability, determination, and insight necessary for survival there.

In this reality, it makes sense that their hopes and dreams focus on keeping their current positions as factory managers, raising their children to independence, caring for their parents until death, and not relying on anyone else in old age. Their dreams may be the common fate of the

working class, living in a society where capitalism dominates. The only thing that is special about these workers is that they live through this fate within a transnational space. In this way, the transnational space of worker managers, and that of capitalists and elites, are rooted in remarkably different political-economic soils.

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