

Book Reviews

Jo Mun-yeong [Cho Mun Young] 조문영,
ed. 2017. 『헬-조선 인 앤 아웃 *Hell-Chosun
In & Out*』. Seoul: Nulmin 놀민. 287 pp.
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Hell-Chosun In & Out is an edited collection composed of seven chapters with an introduction by Jo Mun-yeong. The book focuses on South Korean (hereafter, Korean) youths struggling with neoliberal principles, such as a “winner-takes-all” mentality and the pressure of limitless competition. Such principles shape contemporary Korean society, recently called “Hell Chosun” to describe 2010s Korea as a hell where people have no hope. The authors approach the global experiences of the younger generation of Koreans with anthropological methods: interviews, participant observation, and self-ethnography. They observe, record, and interpret traces of Korean youths’ lives around the globe and reflect on the recent discourses focused on the lives of Korean youths. Categorical rhetoric related to these lives works to erase the complexity of encounters with “the global” (7), a concept indicating a sense of belonging to global networks and a way of thinking beyond borders of the nation-state.

In her Introduction, Jo cites the poverty of existence in Korea and a state of infinite wandering as a feature of modern global mobility. Based on this, her introduction frames the following seven chapters as anthropological explorations of individual lives of Korean youth who plan and practice life

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through repetitive border crossings. Yi Min-yeong interviews young travelers who decided to escape from “Hell Chosun” because of fatigue and dissatisfaction with Korean society and who stayed for extended periods in Rishikesh, India. Yi shows that during their travels in Rishikesh they tried to find an inner voice buried under their social identity in Korean culture. For them, as Jo observes, “the global” is a temporary antidote to “Hell Chosun.” Kim Su-jeong, by looking at Korean students studying in a community college in Chicago, points out that these students were banished to the United States from powerful political and economic centers in Korea over identity politics because they were seen as financially incompetent and regarded as a menace to social stability as a result of their unemployment. The U.S government and colleges often consider Korean students as a means to supplement finances, as a result Kim suggests that Korean students have become political and economic refugees with a lack of rights and benefits. U Seung-hyeon tracks how Korean youths who temporarily migrated to Ireland get absorbed into the global pool of flexible labor. He shows that, on the excuse of studying English, Korean students bolted from Korean society where they found themselves denied full social membership, to settle for a time in Ireland. But soon they came to realize they would be limited there as well, because, as “precariat” (Standing 2011), they can only be in charge of non-accumulative simple labor without job security (applicable in many economically advanced foreign countries). Kim notes that Korean youths, as precarious workers under persisting conditions of instability, cannot achieve sustainable status anywhere in the world. In the studies of Kim and U, “the globe” is a dangerous space drowning Korean youth more deeply into neoliberalism rather than helping them escape from “Hell Chosun.”

Through interviews, Choe Hui-jeong takes a close look at the “global patriot” (*geullobeol aegukja*) (140) discourse that the Korean government has formed about US permanent residents of Korean descent who volunteer for Korean military service. She reveals that they volunteer for Korean military service not because they are filled with patriotism for Korea, but because, after realizing the legal, cultural, and emotional limits they experienced in the United States as well as an absence of social connectedness in that country (and others), they found it was their best choice to settle down or get a job in Korea, using their “global assets” (165), such as a diploma from a foreign university or English fluency. Therefore, they believed they “should” enlist in Korean military service to get legal

status in Korea. In this case, they have taken advantage of the “global patriot” discourse to be recognized in Korean society.

Unlike the first four chapters, the last three contributions show Korean youths who are relatively active and try to make substantial movements in the global neoliberal system. Jeong Ga-yeong examines the mobility of undocumented Korean youths in the United States where they encounter the “obedient migrants” (201) identity that the US government has strategically shaped for Korean Americans. Jo Mun-yeong concentrates on a number of Korean community organization movements (*jumin undong*) and young activists’ awareness of a problem in the international development system, and regards these youths as intermediaries between the Korean community organization movement and alternative international development. However, more depth revealing what these youths actually did to change the existing system substantially is needed. Kim Ju-on, in a form of autoethnography, tells the story of how she has become an activist and experienced working within the Basic Income Earth Network in South Korea. Kim defines herself as a unique activist having an “outdated” ambition to contribute to the progress of history, and, unlike other young Korean activists, “holding onto the sentiments of the protesters of the baby boom generation” (277) in Korea. However, by differentiating and isolating herself from other Korean young activists and describing her motivations as unusual and by suggesting the possibility of “the global” in rural movement, she confines her self-ethnography to a private narrative which is hard to extend to the youth discourse in Korean society today. In these last three chapters, “the global” is a space for politics, presenting new possibilities for young activists and creating a virtuous circle within countries.

By examining each encounter between Korean youth and “the global” and interpreting each encounter minutely, the first four chapters shed light on the shadows which existing frameworks of youth discourse throw. They suggest that Korean youths are not just one-sided victims or passive subjects excluded by neoliberalism or conforming to it. That is, *Hell-Chosun In & Out* represents a significant departure from recent youth discourse in Korea, which tends to rely on a dichotomy between positive and cynical perspectives on “the global.” As noted, some Korean youths tactically use youth discourse themselves to seek the possibility of a new life, and have potential as “cultural translators” (134) to penetrate the systems of Korean society based on their global experiences. These findings

enrich simplified discussions of Korean youth under neoliberalism and “the global” beyond nation-state.

As Jo points out, although economically driven modern migration is still preponderant, global mobility to overcome a poverty of existence is also proliferating. This volume explores sociocultural meanings of Korean youths’ global mobility, by observing each young Korean’s life elaborately and suggests aesthetics in possibilities that “the global” offers. To sum up, multifarious chapters in this volume form a constellation depicting Korean youths facing a neoliberal ethos in Korean society and reacting by traveling in and out of Korea. For its meticulous and abundant ethnographic presentation and insightful interpretation, the volume is helpful not only for scholars in the fields of cultural studies, anthropology, and sociology but also for general readers interested in the Korean younger generations struggling with the matter of how to live in a modern society.

References

- Standing, Guy. 2011. *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*. Blumsbury.