

Review Essay

Kim Chanho 김찬호. 2014. 『모멸감: 굴욕과 존엄의 감정사회학』 [Humiliation: An emotional sociology of disgrace and dignity]. Seoul: Munhwakwa jiseongsa 문화과지성사. 340 pp. ISBN 9788932025551 ₩13,500.

Kim Chanho 김찬호. 2018. 『유머니즘: 웃음과 공감의 마음사회학』 [Humorism: An emotional sociology of laughter and sympathy]. Seoul: Munhwakwa jiseongsa 문화과지성사. 250 pp. ISBN 9788932035055 ₩13,000.

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As an American graduate student in Korean anthropology beginning my dissertation fieldwork in the early 2010s, I diligently read Korean-language articles my advisors identified as key texts, but I did not yet have faces to put to names. Upon attending my first Korean Cultural Anthropology Conference in Gyeongju—alongside Chonbuk University faculty and graduate students, as I was affiliated there—I was both saddened and, selfishly, a bit relieved to find that anthropology is a small discipline in South Korea. While the American Anthropological Association annual conference in North America is regularly packed with upwards of six or seven thousand anthropologists, I realized then that only a few universities

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in Korea had anthropology departments. I was saddened because I believe my chosen discipline offers unique insights about the world, but relieved because it seemed that it might not be too overwhelming to quickly get a sense of the field and its key players. To be sure, certain names affiliated with certain departments came up repeatedly; over the years, I met many of them, often receiving their generous guidance as I completed fieldwork. A few other names I heard often, but they seemed to remain on the margins.

At another meeting, this time at Yonsei University, a mentor from Chonbuk University browsed the book exhibit outside the conference venue with me. She pointed out a few books by Kim Chanho as being useful in understanding South Korean society better, and I was surprised when a moment later she pointed and exclaimed, “And there he is now!” A thin man in a gray suit crossed the square. He had a serious expression but twinkling eyes. He and my mentor greeted each other. She introduced me, and he proceeded on his way at high speed. “The life of a public intellectual,” my mentor murmured. “Always somewhere to be.” I bought the books that my mentor had pointed out—*Munhwai balgyeon* (The discovery of culture, 2007) and *Saengaeui balgyeon* (The discovery of life, 2009)—and while I wish I could say that I ran into Kim Chanho at various conferences over the years and had a chance to tell him how I had enjoyed his books, I did not encounter him again. Back then, I still had a ton of Korean vocabulary to learn, and the organization of his books into “keywords” in Korean culture and society was very helpful for my learning.

Professor Kim Chanho is an adjunct professor at Sungkonghoe University, and as a public intellectual, he has also collaborated with various institutes and nonprofit organizations in leadership roles. Although he is a sociologist by training, he regularly collaborates with anthropologists and teaches anthropology topics through general education courses. Many of his books are categorized as “general education” or “liberal arts” (*gyoyang*), and a perusal of his books shows him to be a solidly interdisciplinary scholar, balanced between the humanities and social sciences. Over the years, I have seen him mentioned in the acknowledgments of multiple books and dissertations by anthropologists, and it is clear he has had an impact on students and colleagues. He has been a co-editor or contributor to too many edited volumes to mention, and also an English-to-Korean translator of Parker J. Palmer’s books on education and leadership (including *The Courage to Teach*), sociologist Paul Willis’s book *Learning to Labour*, and anthropologist Marvin Harris’s *Our Kind: Who We Are, Where We Came From, and Where*

*We Are Going*. He is also the Japanese-to-Korean translator of Cho Han Haejoang and Chizuko Ueno's collaboration *Gyeonggyeeseo malhanda* (Speaking from the boundary, 2004). His diverse solo-authored works include *Saboereul boneun noll* (The logic of viewing society, 2001; updated version 2008); *Dosineun midieoda* (The city as media, 2002); *Munhwai balgyeon* (The discovery of culture, 2007); *Hyudaeponi malhada: mobail tongsinui munhwaillyubak* (Cell phones speak: A cultural anthropology of mobile communications, 2008); *Gyoyugui sangsangnyeok: gyosawa bumoga hamkke geurineun haengbokan gyoyuk* (Education's imaginative power: Happy education made by teachers and parents together, 2008); *Saengaeui balgyeon* (The discovery of life, 2009; updated version 2018); *Donui inmunhak: meoni geimui sidae, buui geunwoneul doemunneunda* (The humanities of money: Returning to the question of the origins of fortune in an age of money games, 2011); *Illyubakjaga jadongchareul mandeundago? munhwaillyubak* (An anthropologist made cars? Cultural anthropology, 2012; part of an illustrated introductory series for children/young adults); *Momyeolgam: guryokgwa joneomui gamjeongsahobhak* (Humiliation: An emotional sociology of disgrace and dignity, 2014); *Nulbyeon: soranban sesange eonulhan mal geolgi* (Ineloquent: Raising awkward topics in troubled times, 2016); and *Yumeonijeum: useumgwa gonggamui maeumsahobhak* (Humorism: An emotional sociology of laughter and sympathy, 2018).

*Humiliation* (2014) is an ambitious attempt to “trace the grammar of life and the heart” across different aspects of Korean society in which “humiliation” manifests. At the outset, Kim identifies Korean society as being ripe for understanding through a sociology of emotions, and he delves into particularly powerful Korean keywords involving emotions: *yeokdongseong* (dynamism), *yudaegam* (bonds), *sinmyeong* (excitement), *kki* (spirit), *hwakkeunham* (ardor), *naembi geunseong* (pot grit). Many of these defy easy translation—much like the now-cliché “untranslatability” of cultural psychological concepts *jeong* or *han*—or become somehow lackluster in translation. The last term in the above list, *naembi geunseong*, is often critically applied to South Korean politics, identifying a habitual hot-headedness that evokes a pot boiling over. Kim also identifies the high affectivity in South Korea and connection between social affect and passion (*gyeokjeong*). The “passion” of Koreans and its contagious qualities in a densely populated society can lead to innovation and rapid adaptation to new trends, but also to inferiority complexes and blind competition. Kim's stated goal with this book is to overcome humiliation and its associated

inferiority complexes and explore possibilities for a life of respect, both for the self and others. He cites South Korea's high suicide rate among OECD countries, stressful university entrance exam system, and booming plastic surgery industry as indicators of a necessary shift in values. He also points to surveys of OECD countries in which South Korea ranks low in happiness and self-confidence, in stark contrast with the nation's remarkable economic development in the last few decades. *Humiliation* teases out many double-edged swords of South Korean society. For instance, Kim notes that a highly wired life mediated by smartphones seems to encourage high levels of internet incivility amidst the benefits of connectivity, as internet troll comments (*akpul*) outnumber positive comments 4:1 (versus 1:4 in Japan and 1:9 in the Netherlands). In the absence of sufficient social trust, cursing or humiliating others is a way to build up one's own identity.

Kim does not descend into hopelessness despite some dark material; his message is one of hope and possibility. His writing style is persuasive without being overly dramatic, and it is balanced between common-sense yet keen observations of Korean society, compelling anecdotes, and sparing use of quantitative data to back up his arguments. In tracing the spaces and contexts in which "humiliation" is most acutely felt in South Korea, Kim hopes to open up more possibilities for living without envy, obsessive comparison and competition with others, and a nagging sense of inferiority (*yeoldeunggam*). He identifies humiliation as an impasse without productive potential in the contemporary world: "If we express our sadness or loneliness, we can get comfort, or if we express anxiety or rage, we can often get sympathy. But humiliation is different. If we reveal the humiliation we've experienced on account of our education credentials or appearance, the vulnerability in revealing our humiliation can lead to further humiliation. In that hidden feeling, other feelings of shame, inferiority, self-hate, rage, fear, loneliness, and sadness are wrapped up" (7). A strong sense of humiliation can lead to interpersonal conflict, demonstrated by the common sight of two old men shouting, "How old are you? Who are you to talk to me that way? Do you know who I am?" Humiliation also has implications for international relations and identity at the national level, structuring frequent interactions with neighboring China and Japan. As I write this review essay, humiliation has informed an outcry over the Humboldt Forum museum in Berlin's Korea exhibit, which has "insulted" (*moyok*) South Korea by making the exhibit smaller than the Japan and China exhibits, and focusing on modern rather than pre-modern artifacts. While South

Korea's sense of humiliation stems in part from its post-colonial condition, Kim is not quick to over-rely on this as the sole reason for national sentiment.

*Humiliation* is composed of five chapters plus a prologue and epilogue. Each chapter is further divided into several digestible sections. In chapter 1, Kim defines his terms and discusses humiliation and its associated concepts historically and cross-culturally. He delves into the many effects of humiliation of the East vis-à-vis the West in the process of colonization and imperialism—and connected Orientalism—and notes the unusual degree of incursion of the emotional into the political in the case of North Korea, which frequently speaks of being “humiliated” or “insulted” by South Korea. In chapter 2, Kim discusses the history of humiliation in Korea specifically, from the Choson dynasty through industrialization and beyond. He laments the emotionless logic of Western political science and omission of emotions from history books, arguing that “the big events of history can be shaped by the anxiety or rage of an individual” (38). This chapter is arguably the book's richest, as it explores the emotional sociology of South Korea more broadly as well as investigates the various spheres in which humiliation is most likely to arise. South Korea is full of cultural keywords that relate to humiliation, including loser (*rujeo*), a nobody (*jjijiri*), and surplus humans (*ingyeo ingan*). In terms of reasons why someone might feel humiliation, the list is long: too fat, ugly, too short, too young, too old, unmarried, divorced, disabled, poor, second-class education, contract worker, low-prestige job, and can't speak English. This long list of points of comparison between self and others has ramifications for the emotional labor performed in customer service jobs, in which workers must manage their emotions in the face of humiliation inflicted by both customers and management. Chapter 3 examines humiliation in literature, film, and art as well as some famous diplomatic incidents in which humiliation played a significant role in the exchange. This chapter focuses in on micro-aggressions against “others” in South Korean society: foreigners, disabled persons, and, under an enduring patriarchal society, women. While the focus is on South Korean examples, Kim draws on international works to advance a more expansive argument about humiliation under global capitalism. In a globalized society and world, Kim suggests, “being familiar with cultural codes is just as important as learning foreign languages” (203).

The final two chapters of the book shift towards a more active grappling with how to construct a society that does not humiliate or wallow in its

humiliation by others (chapter 4), and how to deal with feelings of humiliation in oneself (chapter 5). Chapter 4 considers the frequent and infamous abuse of service sector workers, such as flight attendants, and the training they are subjected to in order to break them down psychologically. Without victim-blaming, Kim asks what it would take to evolve society so that all are treated with basic respect. For workers who have been trained to uphold hierarchy and internalize a message of “the customer is king,” Kim suggests a broad “deprogramming” from the cult of customer service. Other parts of the chapter focus on moving towards a world that looks beyond the logic of money, reframing the way that we talk about minorities and others in marginal social positions, and allowing time and space for people to discover themselves (someone who is “just” a housewife to get involved in social movements, someone branded as a weak student to become active in a volunteer group, etc.). Chapter 5 continues offering examples from history, current events, and literature to illustrate conditions of possibility for a life in which we are the master of our own emotions and resilient against the insults of others. Kim’s final takeaway is that “happiness is not necessarily excellence,” and in the epilogue he ties together threads that run throughout the book—namely, he reiterates that moving beyond humiliation involves structural components (regulating real estate prices, easing a competitive job market), cultural components (in particular, breaking down the obsession with school ranking), and psychological components (cultivating self-esteem). Kim dreams of a society in which we do not find our value in the recognition of others but in self-respect.

*Humiliation* carries over themes from Kim’s earlier works—the analysis of capitalism and finance regimes from 2011’s *The humanities of money*, and the question of how to make meaning across the life course in 2009’s *The discovery of life*—while keeping a sociology of emotions front and center. Many of *Humiliation*’s case studies seem prescient: a section on the degrading training and mistreatment of cleaning staff brings to mind the shocking treatment and subsequent death of a member of the cleaning staff at Seoul National University in summer 2021. This book is rich and thought-provoking, and it will be useful both to scholars of Korean society and for the undergraduate classroom across disciplines. A final aspect of the book that is yet to be discussed is its multimedia component; QR codes throughout the book take readers to audio clips on Youtube featuring original instrumental music meant to evoke the emotions discussed in that section.

The title of Kim Chanho's most recent book, *Humonism* (2018), is a play on words combining "humor" and "humanism." Like *Humiliation*, it is an "emotional sociology," this time looking at global humor, Korean humor, and the revolutionary potential of humor. (The book in between the two reviewed here, *Ineloquent*, focuses on reclaiming one's time and the role of the imagination in a "good life"). The book has structure similar to *Humiliation*, with five chapters divided into several sections and a prologue and epilogue. It is similarly expansive as *Humiliation* as well, with chapter 1 devoted broadly to the biology of humor, chapter 2 to the history of humor, chapter 3 to different categories of humor, chapter 4 to social conditions for humor, and chapter 5 to the revolutionary potential of humor. In *Humonism* Kim echoes some of the points made in his previous works, asking readers to reflect on alarming statistics on depression, anxiety, and overall dissatisfaction with quality of life in South Korea despite dramatic economic progress. He opens the prologue with a quote from writer Yun Ko-eun (who recently became known overseas for her novel *The Disaster Tourist*): "People who cannot share their table cannot share jokes, and therefore cannot share truth" (14). Kim reflects on this quote later in the prologue, worrying over the rising number of people who mainly eat alone (the so-called *honbap*, or "eating alone" phenomenon) and thus lack a partner to engage with in the give-and-take of jokes. Humor is not a skill, writes Kim, it is a product of intellect. Just as the intellect is best nurtured in interaction, humor is best shared. Humor shared over Kakao or other social media platforms is enjoyable, but it is not a substitute for in-person human interaction—in part because of rising internet incivility, meaning that someone is much more likely to get a hateful comment online than spoken to one's face.

Like *Humiliation*, *Humonism* takes a wide-ranging approach to its subject and is full of literary examples, footnoted scientific studies, and satisfying translations of examples of global humor. Chapter 1 follows a discussion of the biology of happiness—referencing human and animal behavioral studies—with a thoughtful engagement with the ways that laughter can do violence and suggestions of how to move towards a "community of laughter." The final part of the first chapter contains the most echoes of *Humiliation*, reporting on the results of the 2014 Gallup survey on "Global Emotions." Among 143 countries, South Korea came in 121<sup>st</sup> in terms of "experiencing positive emotions" (48). Kim muses that the reasons for this seem quite obvious: fiercely competitive jobs and education



and high rates of bullying (*gapjil*). However, Kim wonders, given that South Korea used to be desperately poor and suffered under authoritarianism, is it reasonable to assume that people at least laugh more now than they did fifty years ago? As this particular Gallup poll only began in 2014, it is impossible to know using those metrics, but Kim hypothesizes that families were bigger in bygone days, so there were more reasons to laugh. “This is because hearty laughter arises in the relationships between people” (49). Humor and laughter in a low-birthrate society is certainly possible—the author certainly makes no pro-natalist statements, nor does he blame anyone in particular for demographic trends—but the tendency towards solitary activities and isolation (even pre-COVID) troubles Kim.

In chapter 2, *Humorism* presents a “grammar of humor” as part of a history of humor, exploring the etymology of the concept of humor in different languages and cultures. He argues that there are four main types of humor: 1) comedy as spectacle or something to watch (from *pansori* to “gag comedy” shows on TV to stand-up comedy); 2) funny stories that circulate in humor books or as textual internet memes but are often “canned jokes” (visual memes that increasingly circulate online can also be in this category); 3) pure happenings (a voice breaking humorously while singing, or accidentally wearing the same outfit as someone at a meeting, etc.); and 4) improvised wit (which typically constitutes more than half of all incidences of humor). The remainder of the chapter discusses various theories that seek to explain the occurrence of various categories of humor: energy release theory, superiority theory, and discord and reversal theory (the pleasure of nonsense). Chapter 3 goes into more detail, exploring the “six pillars of humor”: capture, expression, performance, a childlike mind, impudence, and sympathy. Chapter 4 goes into jokes as harassment, dirty jokes, forced laughter (as occurs under conditions of power discrepancy), emotional context, and the importance of emotional trust, before ending with a suggestion for a more robust theorization and practice of humor in education. Chapter 5 expands to sociopolitical context, tracing the roles of irony and satire in protest movements or less formally organized anti-establishment activity. This chapter in particular could be productively read alongside chapters from *Humiliation*, as it takes on the uneasy (and sometimes dangerous) relationship between satire and insult. The end of the chapter addresses the role of humor in healing from great historical wrongs and societal trauma, such as the Holocaust, the Korean War, or dictatorship. Finally, the epilogue performs a similar treatment on humor



as the previous book did on humiliation, calling for a “serious humor” that moves society in honest rather than superficial directions. Flippant humor has its place, but the need for thinking about what kinds of humor serve society and all its members is ultimately Kim’s message.

Both *Humiliation* and *Humorism* are thought-provoking interdisciplinary texts that may be of interest to those in anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, cultural psychology, or education. *Humiliation* has slightly more Korea-specific content, but both books are balanced between the particular and the universal. As emotions garner more interest across disciplines, Kim’s works urge us to laugh more but take humor seriously, and to understand the many facets of humiliation, so as not to judge ourselves against the opinions of others.

