INSECURE MILLENNIALS
COMING OF AGE IN SEOUL AND TOKYO

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE DIVISION OF THE UNIVERSITY OF HAWAI‘I AT MĀNOA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

IN

SOCIOLOGY

AUGUST 2019

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Keywords: Adulthood, Inequality, Insecurity, Japan, South Korea
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I sincerely thank all the individuals who have shared their time and stories with me in Tokyo and Seoul. I am also grateful for the members of Shutoken Seinen Union and Black Kigyou Union in Tokyo and Youth Union and Arbeit Union in Seoul. Without your kindness and understanding, this research was never possible.

At the University of Hawai‘i at Manoa, my teachers helped me with great mentorship and guidance and taught me how to engage with the empirical puzzle, theoretical gaps, and methodological challenges. They were both very supportive and critical at the same time. Patricia Steinhoff, my dissertation chair, has always been supportive since the first day I had met her and she has been the role model of how we should be as a scholar, teacher, and person. Hagen Koo has always been surprisingly kind and giving me critical but constructive feedback at different stages of my intellectual development. Without the comparative analysis of East Asia seminar that both of them had co-taught, I would not have imagined conducting this research. Manfred Steger’s globalization seminar and his brilliant comments have always been a source of inspiration for me. Jennifer Darrah have always been encouraging, and she taught me how to think about substantial questions in the research through her teaching and mentoring. Sun-ki Chai, in addition to insightful suggestions on research, gave me practical guidance about my career, which I sincerely appreciate. Young-a Park has been providing me with valuable insights and relevant works about contemporary Korean society.

Myungji Yang also provided me with invaluable insights from the very early stage of this dissertation and assisted me throughout the research process. David Johnson also encouraged me to think about the philosophical implications of the research.
I thank my friends Keith Scott, Oshiro Akino, Bae Jaehoon, Hwang Chiyeon, Choi Won Geun, Kim Hanna, Benjamin Schrager, Sakuma Sayaka, Azmeary Ferdous, Suzuki Rumika, Jae Harris Johnson, Igarashi Hiroki, Penn Pantumsinchai, Hannah Liebreich, and Shiratori Noriko for their kindness, critical feedback, and encouragement. I must also thank the participants of Asia-Pacific group in the Department of Sociology.

In Korea, the Department of Sociology at Chung-Ang University hosted me during my fieldwork period. I appreciate professor Shin Kwang-Yeong for his mentorship. Professors Lee Byoung-Hoon and Shin Jin-Wook kindly allowed me to attend their graduate seminars and present a part of my work. I also express my gratitude to the participants of these seminars. Without the help of many graduate students such as finding housing and interviewees, this research was not possible. In particular, I thank Kong Ju, Kim Hanna, Chon Jihye, Lee Sang, Ryu Han So, and Lee Hoe Young. My language teacher and friend Lee Seung Ji patiently assisted me to learn not only the Korean language but also culture and society. Ueda Kiheinarichika, Nakagawa Yu, and Yuyama Atsushi also provided generous assistance at various points of this research. I also benefited from the kindness of the participants of a study group organized by Furuhashi Aya and Ogata Yoshihiro. Bae Soyon and Sasa Hiroko, in particular, introduced me to a number of interviewees. Professor Chang-Hun Lee of Hannam University gave me important insights from early stage of this research. I also thank professor Miliann Kang for her kindness to provide me nice comments on this research. Many great friends I have met in Shinchon area also helped this research in various ways.

In Japan, the Graduate School of Asia-Pacific Studies at Waseda University was my academic home. Professor Nakajima Seio has always been supportive and I appreciate him for being a faculty advisor during my stay. Gracia Liu-Farrer and her students allowed me to attend
her zemi and gave helpful comments on a draft of one chapter of this dissertation. I express my sincere gratitude to the members of her zemi. I also received helpful suggestions from David Slater and Robin O'Day in the fieldwork working group they organized at Sophia University. Friends from International Christian University, Hiramori Daiki, Shimada Takuro, Horizoe Rio also contributed to this research. Professors Christopher Bondy, Ishio Yoshito, Yamaguchi Tomiko, and Kawaguchi Ryo equipped me with the tools to embark on my graduate education.

This dissertation was funded by Korea Foundation’s Field Research Fellowship, East-West Center, and the Center for Korean Studies at the University of Hawai`i. I am thankful for their generous support.

Finally, I thank my family for their continuous support.
ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines how young adults in East Asia’s two global cities perceive and respond to growing economic insecurity and inequality. In particular, it looks at the three competitive markets of education, labor, and marriage that shape young adults’ lives. Drawing on 14 months of ethnographic research in Seoul and Tokyo and interviews with 98 young adults from different socio-economic backgrounds, it incorporates two levels of analysis.

First, by focusing on individual and collective level dispositions, it describes gender and class specific forms of anxiety about education, work, and marriage that young adults confront in East Asia. Those who graduated from the most selective universities and hold relatively secure employment are often more anxiety-ridden about their future than those who hold irregular employment. College-educated women were afraid that their career opportunities would be foreclosed if they marry. At the same time, they also fear spending their entire life alone if they choose a career over private life. Young men in Seoul were expected to buy a house as a prerequisite to marriage, yet it is a difficult thing to afford even for those with secure employment.

Second, by looking at ways structural, institutional, and cultural contexts affect their experiences, it explores why people experience inequality and insecurity in the ways they do in different places. In spite of many commonalities, such as trajectories of economic development, the failure of the state to provide security to citizens, and levels of income inequality, young adults in Seoul are much more anxiety-ridden and sensitive to economic inequality than their peers in Tokyo. I found that young adults in Seoul have a stronger desire to enter the small world of top firms, schools, and neighborhoods among young people than their peers in Tokyo and are
stressed out from their commitment to competition. This in turn creates the perceived sense of relative deprivation, the source of perceived injustice.

The relational approach to economic insecurity proposed in this dissertation complements the theories of risks, precarity, and neoliberal subjects that are not fully equipped to explain variations in perception of insecurity and inequality. By applying Pierre Bourdieu’s concepts relationally, this dissertation demonstrated how differences in the organizations of the fields of work, education, and marriage can help account for differences in the ways young people feel, perceive, and respond to growing insecurity. The combination of these structural, institutional, and cultural contexts constitutes a conditional mechanism of subjective economic insecurity that might have the potential to explain cases other than Korea and Japan, although its applicability remains to be examined.
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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

COMING OF AGE IN SEOUL AND TOKYO

In 1925, Anthropologist Margaret Mead traveled from New York City to American Samoa seeking answers to intriguing questions: “Are the disturbances which vex our adolescents due to the nature of adolescence itself or to the civilization? Under different conditions does adolescence present a different picture?” (1928:11). Through careful analysis of the Samoan social structure and culture, she found that experiences of transition to adulthood are indeed strikingly different in the US, her native country, and Samoa. Her research eventually resulted in Coming of Age in Samoa, a classic text in Anthropology. This dissertation takes the spirit of the questions that Margaret Mead raised about a century ago in Samoa to two global cities in East Asia in the 21st century under that they are dealing with the pressures coming from restructuring in the global economy.

In today’s East Asia, young adults become adults much later than young people in Samoa in the 1920s. Unlike people on the island of Ta‘ū where Mead stayed, many young people do not become “adult” in their early 20s. From “Twixters” in the US to Greece’s 700 Euros Generation, there is no shortage of neologisms that mimic the lives of today’s young people who live with their parents in their late 20s to early 30s due to financial difficulties. In East Asia, media outlets are rife with accounts describing the harsh realities that young adults face. In Korea, about a decade ago, young people were called the 880,000 won generation, which was a neologism created by an economist and activist (Woo and Park 2007). At the time, many non-regular workers who had been born in the late 70s to early 80s were able to make only 880,000 won (about $650) a month in total, which was not enough to live on.
While the level of the minimum wage has been increasing under the presidency of Moon Jae-in since 2017, the situation surrounding today’s young adults are not hopeful. More recently, the Korean millennials are called the “three-give-up generation” (Sampo sedae), which is a popular slang term having its origin in the word used in the Kyunghyang newspaper’s article series in 2011 (Kyunghyang Shinmun Special Reporting Team 2011). The phrase satirically denotes the situation resulting from such an extremely low wage level. The “three-give-up generation” gave up intimate relationships, marriage, and having children. The list of give-ups expanded endlessly, and today’s millennials are called the “all-give-up” generation (Wanpo Sedae) (Hong 2015). Even BTS (Bangtan Sonyeondan), a globally popular K-pop band, takes up this concept in their song, DOPE (Jjeoreo).

Three give-up generation. Five give-up generation. Then, I like jerky so how about six give-up generation? [Korean words for jerky and six giving-up are both yukpo]. The media and adults sell us like stocks because they say we do not have a strong will (BTS 2019).

In this context, many young people are preoccupied to accumulate what they call “spec,” an abbreviation of specification pertaining to resume-building activities needed to gain secure employment. Various factors such as a degree from prestigious college, high scores in English proficiency exams, GPAs, experiences of studying abroad and internships, and extracurricular activities are considered “spec” (Cho 2015). In the wake of a series of political scandals in 2016 which eventually ended up in former president Park Geun-hye’s impeachment, many citizens were resentful against Chung-Yoo-ra, the daughter of Choi Soon-sil as a symbol of inequality. Choi Soon-sil has been accused of illegal intervention in state affairs by using her personal connection with former president Park. She is also said to have used her personal connection to
send her daughter Yoo-ra to prestigious Ewha Womans University under preferential admission consideration even though Yoo-ra had attended her high school only for 17 days in three years. Thus, Yoo-ra was considered to have obtained spec without efforts.

In Japan, those who had graduated from school and sought jobs in the period in the late 1990s to 2000s were called the “Ice Age Generation.” They entered the labor market after the Asian financial crisis and had difficulty attaining stable employment, which affected their subsequent life course. Many of them had no choice but to live with their parents. A sociologist invented a surprisingly derogatory concept of Parasite Single, which described young people who live with parents as parasitic and have little interest in becoming financially independent (Yamada 1999).

This further frustrated the young people who did not get a secure job. In 2008, Akagi Tomohiro, who was a 31 year old part-time worker back then, published an article expressing his wish that Japan would become involved in a full-fledged war with other countries.

On a Sunday morning after night shift before going home and going to bed, I went to a shopping mall and saw a father around my age enjoy shopping with his wife and daughter. It seems that people start rushing into marriage in their 30s even in the case of men. On the other hand, I am far from getting married, living as a parasite in (Kisei suru) my parents’ place, and even haven’t been able to feed myself for ten something years. For me, a 31 year old, the current situation of being a freeter is an unbearable humiliation (Akagi 2008).

Akagi called for equality in which everyone suffers. “War is tragic. However, it is tragic because ‘the have lose something.’ For me who ‘doesn’t have anything,’ war is not a tragedy but rather an opportunity.” NEET (those who are not in education, employment, or training) or “freeters” (who lack full-time employment) were also blamed (Genda and Maganuma 2004 has been
criticized for popularizing the notion of NEET. For critique of this term, see; Honda, Naitō, and Gotou 2006). As Akagi’s generation grow older, critics started calling them Parasite Mid-age.

However, curiously, in Japan, discourses like that of Akagi have never gained the level of wide-spread attention among today’s young adults. The majority of millennials in Japan seem to be much less resentful than are their counterparts in in Korea. Nowadays, young adults in Japan are called the enlightenment generation (Satori Sedai) mocking a concept in Buddhism because they no longer have any desire and hope and thus are said to reach the stage of enlightenment like a Zen monk (Abe 2013; Furuichi 2011, 2016; Harada 2013). Rather than being preoccupied with building a resume to attain secure employment, finding mundane happiness in their daily lives such as a BBQ party with friends or shopping at a suburb on the weekend, seems to be a more common response to inequality and insecurity, according to the popular media outlets.

Hence, young people’s perceptions of and responses to economic insecurity appear to be somewhat different in these two societies. Young adults in Korea are increasingly resentful of this grim reality. Many of them took to the street to impeach their corrupt president in 2016. In contrast, Japanese young adults appear to be largely unconcerned about inequality.

Indeed, there are notable differences in larger patterns of inequality and insecurity perceptions among young people in both societies. Figure 1.1 shows the cross-tabulation of the objective (Gini coefficient) and subjective (perception of inequality) measures of inequality based on the International Social Survey Program (ISSP)’s 2009 module. The Gini coefficient measures the dispersion of income distribution in one society, with 0 meaning complete equality and 1 meaning complete inequality where there are literally only the exact same number of the haves and those who have no income. Korea is the most equal society among 25 societies included in this chart as far as the gini coefficient is concerned. Nevertheless, more respondents
in Korea considered their society to be unequal than the respondents in other societies, including Japan, where the degree of income inequality is indeed greater than in Korea.

Figure 1.1 Cross-tabulation of Objective and Subjective Inequality

Source: ISSP 2009
Note: Gini coefficient is based on before tax transfers.

Figure 1.2 shows that 42.6% of young people in Korea compared with only 7.4% in Japan and 20.8% in the US think that “status, lineage, parents’ social standing” are important to be successful in society. Young people in Korea are also aware of insecurities underlying their lives. As in Figure 1.3, an international survey asked young people how much they are worried about work. 83% and 74.8% of young adults in Korea and Japan, respectively, worry about it, the highest rates among the surveyed countries. Thus, young people in Korea appear to be more aware of inequality and anxious about work.
Figure 1.2 Young People’s Views of Inequality

![Bar chart showing the most important factors for succeeding in society across countries.](chart)

Source: International Survey of Youth Attitude 2013

Figure 1.3 Worries about Work

![Bar chart showing how worried respondents are about work across countries.](chart)

Source: International Survey of Youth Attitude 2013
This gap is interesting, firstly because Japan and Korea share roughly comparable levels of income inequality. Table 1.1 shows various measures that capture the deviation in the distribution of income in Korea and Japan. Korea’s post-tax Gini coefficient is 0.31, which is slightly lower than that of Japan (0.34) and the OECD average (0.32). S90/10 and S80/20 are the ratios of average disposable income of the 10 and 20% richest group to that of the 10 and 20% poorest groups. The richest 10% group in Japan have 10.7 times more disposable income than the poorest group, and those in Korea have 10.2 times more than the poorest group in Korea. Similarly, the richest 20% group when compared the poorest 20% group, has 6.2 and 5.5 times more income in Japan and Korea. Other measures such as P90/P10 which compares the upper bound value of the 10% richest group to that of the 10% poorest group also indicate the consistent trend that the level of unevenness is more or less the same in the two societies, while Japan seems to be a little bit more unequal than Korea.

Table 1.1 Various Measures of Inequality

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<th>Gini coefficient (disposable income, post taxes and transfers)</th>
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<th>S80/S20 disposable income quintile share</th>
<th>P90/P10 disposable income decile ratio</th>
<th>P90/P50 disposable income decile ratio</th>
<th>P50/P10 disposable income decile ratio</th>
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<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>10.7</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korea</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>2.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>OECD Average</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>4.3</td>
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The second reason is because these two societies share a combination of important characteristics in the nature of economic development and forms of capitalism and welfare regime. Japan and Korea shared the developmental state model of the state-led formation of economy characteristic to East Asian tigers (Castells 1992; Johnson 1982). Then, both economies experienced the process that scholars call neoliberalization, characterized by a set of policy changes including but not limited to privatization of the public sector, deregulation of markets, promotion of free trade, and decrease in the government spending.

In the comparative political economy literature, both Japan and Korea are usually categorized into the same group of coordinated market economies (CME) along with such countries as Germany as opposed to liberal market economies (LME) like the US and UK (Hall and Soskice 2001; Song 2014). Whereas in CMEs, various economic actors rely on non-market-based coordination for productive operations, LMEs heavily rely on market mechanisms based on the principles of a laissez-faire economy. Accordingly, CMEs tend to develop stronger employment and social protection systems than LMEs.

Indeed, Japan and Korea appear to share these characteristics. Figure 1.4 and 1.5 show the cross-tabulation of employment protection regimes for regular and non-regular workers in 1990 and 2013. It is based on the measure called Employment Protection Legislation (EPL), which OECD constructed through their interpretation of labor laws in each country that quantify how costly it is for employers to dismiss employees. The score ranges from zero to six. Zero means that there is no barrier for dismissal and six means that it is technically impossible to dismiss an employee. While both Japan and Korea experienced a certain degree of deregulation from 1990 to 2013, both countries are distanced from LMEs like the US and UK and closer to
such countries as Denmark and Germany. Furthermore, Japan appears to have less labor protection compared with Korea.

Figure 1.4 Employment Protection Regime for Regular Workers


Figure 1.5 Employment Protection Regime for Non-regular Workers

Unlike the Nordic countries, however, Japan and Korea did not develop extensive social protection systems. In Esping-Andersen’s three-way typology of welfare states, both Japan and Korea are treated as exceptional cases that do not fit neatly with the liberal, conservative, and social-democratic models.

Japan, possibly with Korea and Taiwan, poses a particularly intriguing challenge to welfare regime typologies because it is such a unique version of capitalism to begin with: sustained full employment, highly regulated internal labour markets and industrial structure, compressed earnings, and a relatively egalitarian distribution of income, all overlaid by rather authoritarian employment practices, a conservative 'one-party' democracy, and 'corporatism without labour' (Esping-Andersen 1999:90).

While it is possible to question the validity of these rather crude categorizations, these works show that Japan and Korea are often considered to share the important characteristics of political economy that structure inequality and insecurity. If so, it seems to be reasonable to expect young adults in these two societies to exhibit more or less similar responses to the growing insecurity, or to predict that young adults in Japan are more aware of inequality and insecurity as the aforementioned measures show that Korea has slightly more egalitarian distribution of income and restrictive labor protection measures.

However, indeed, it is the young in Korea who react more sensitively to the growth in economic inequality and insecurity resulted from restructuring of the global economy due to advancement of technology and growing inter-connectedness of the world. It presents an interesting puzzle. This dissertation takes up this empirical puzzle seriously and asks two fairly simple questions. One is descriptive, and the other is comparative.

How do young adults in East Asia’s two global cities perceive and respond to growing economic insecurity and inequality?
How do structural, institutional, and cultural contexts affect their experiences?

As the first systematic study of young people’s response to growing economic inequality and insecurity in East Asia, this dissertation provides answers to these questions. In particular, this study looks at the three competitive markets of education, labor, and marriage that shape young adults’ lives.

Now I turn to briefly examine how, in a span of a few decades, Korea and Japan transformed from relatively egalitarian societies in which the majority of people believed they belonged to the middle-class, to the unequal societies that we see today.

FROM SECURITY TO PRECARITY

Japan’s Miracle

Roughly a century ago, the top one percent of income earners shared about 18 to 20% of income in Japan (Moriguchi and Saez 2008:716). This trend continued to around 1940. At the end of the 1930s, income inequality measured by the gini coefficient falls between 0.45 to 0.65 according to different estimations (before tax and government transfers) (Moriguchi and Saez 2008:716). For a reference, that of South Africa, one of the most unequal societies in today’s world was 0.65 in 2014 (The World Bank 2017a).

However, the series of wars curtailed the economic power of the elites to some extent and Japan’s gini-coefficient dropped to around 0.3 to 0.4 during WWII. In these years, about 3 million people died and many more were injured. One of the survivors recounted that “Tokyo, Ueno area’s under path was filled with street children, and countless kids starved or froze to death” (Kiyokawa 2017).
Since then Japan started following the path that made it the second largest economy in the world in 1968. The period of Japan’s economic development roughly spans the mid-1950s to the early 1970s. In 1956, the Economic Planning Agency proclaimed that “it is no longer post-war.” Japan’s gross domestic product exceeded that of “pre-war” period, which they calculated based on the average of 1934 to 1936. It became the buzzword of the year. In that same year, the United Nations gave Japan permission to join them as an independent nation.

In 1960, the cabinet of Prime Minister Hayato Ikeda proposed an economic plan called “income-doubling plan (shotoku baizou keikaku)” which aims to double the gross domestic product in 10 years. As journalist Kotaro Sawaki pointed out, economic development was akin to a form of religious belief in 1960s Japan, and “income-doubling” was the slogan to sustain such faith (Sawaki 2008). At first, Ikeda’s proposal to achieve nine percent economic growth every year was considered idiosyncratic. However, the combination of the massive public spending on construction of infrastructure, governmental support of the heavy industry, support for scientific technology, and trade liberalization resulted in more than 10% economic growth until 1973.

This process, often called “developmental state” model of economic development, was characterized by active involvement of the state in re-orienting economy to structures centered on large firms, Zaibatsu and later Zaikai (Japan) corporations (Johnson 1982). Sociologist Oguma Eiji and his colleagues argue that Japan became a highly-industrialized society around 1975, and Japan’s economy was praised by outside observers as “Japan as Number One” (Oguma 2014; Vogel 1979). Around this time, various measures of inequality such as the pay gap between men and women, and income gap between the new middle and working classes marked a record low.
Writing in 1971, sociologist Ezra Vogel pointed out that an element to be observed in the new social order of Japan after recovering from the war is “the emergence of a large ‘new middle class’” (Vogel 1971:20). Japan after the 1960s, in their own view, was “100 million, all-middle class society (Ichioku Souchuryu).” While it also depends on how the question is worded, over 90% of Japanese identified themselves as members of the middle class (Chiavacci 2008; Ishida and Slater 2010a). This number has been providing the basis for the myth of Japan as an all-middle-class society.

Indeed, government and corporations considered the creation of a middle class to be an important political project for political stabilization and creation of consumers. There were even the heated “middle class debates” over what the middle class means in the Japanese context (Murakami 1977; Tominaga 1977). Such terms as Chu-san (middle stratum), Chu-ryu (middle stream), and Chu-kan (the middle) were often used to refer to “middle class.” The rapid economic development provided the middle class with secure jobs and stable income, which enabled a new consumption style. The emerging middle class norm was typically symbolized by an aspiration to own a home or an apartment, which provided the goal of middle class lives. It operated as “a consumer dream and social contract” (Allison 2013: 22). The governmental housing policy and seniority-based management style contributed to making and sustaining such a social contract (Shibuya 2010).

**Miracle on the Han River**

Japan’s closest neighbor, Korea was one of the poorest countries in the world in 1953 when the Korean War finally came to an end. Today it is difficult to believe, but at the time the country was poorer than the Democratic Republic of Congo (Tran 2011). Like Japan, the rapid economic
development transformed Korea from a poor, agrarian economy to an industrialized nation-state as it is often narrated in the literature of Korean economic development. Since then, Korea has experienced the magnitude of industrialization in a mere few decades that took over a century in Europe, which Kyung-sup Chang described as “compressed modernity” (Chang 1999, 2010). In the late 1950s, more than 80% of working people in Korea worked in the primary industry but decreased to 25% of the entire workforce in the 1980s (Koo 1990:672).

In particular, Korea set off on a new development path usually described as “Miracle on the Han River” under the military regime of Park Chung-Hee in the 1960s. The development policy revolved around export-oriented industrialization, which manifested clearly in his Export-led Industrialization policy adopted in 1964 (Kim and Sorensen 2011:15). Korean exports increased from net value of $55 million US dollars in 1962 to an astonishing 44.4 billion in 1983 (Koo 1990:672). During the 1960s and 70s, the Korean economy increased its gross national product at about the rate of 10% annually, and about the rate of 8.5% in the Park era in particular (Kim and Sorensen 2011; Koo 1990).

Its successful economic development was far from a smooth and simple process. Rather it was a consequence of a combination of factors. At the international level, Korea’s relationship with other economies, particularly its deep but difficult links with the US and Japan are said to have played a significant role. If the Korean War boosted Japan’s economic development, the Vietnam War and construction bubble in the Middle East did the same to the Korean economy (Eckert 1990).

The virtual disappearance of the landlord class through Japan’s colonization and post-war land reform also had a significant impact. Pointing to the experience of the Philippines as Korea’s counter example, John Lie argued that the presence of a strong landlord class can limit
industrializing efforts (1988:12–14). Furthermore, the presence of entrepreneurs, skilled but cheap labor force, strong national identity, and Confucianism as a guiding ethical logic have enabled Korea to become the factory of the world in the 1980s (Eckert 1990).

The old middle class including landowners and small business owners have been decreasing in power, and instead, white-collar workers at large corporations and government bureaucrats have been gaining more influence. By the mid-1980s, two-thirds of Korean families considered themselves to be a part of the middle class (Koo 2008). During this period, many middle class “candidates” who did not hold enough economic resources to be included in the middle class also identified themselves as middle class.

As anthropologist William Kelly argued, in Japan and Korea, the new middle class should best be understood as the “social construction of industrial societies, cultural conceptions of modernity, and the relations between the two” (Kelly 1986:604), rather than to be a plain description of their material conditions. In Korea, scholars selectively used such terms as Jungsanchung (middle stratum) and Junggangyegeup (middle class), which is a direct translation of the “middle class.” Sociologist Myungji Yang argues that the Korean state, particularly the Park Chung-Hee regime, created the middle class as the basis of their nation-building project (Yang 2012).

The Crises after 1997

Japan until the late 1980s and Korea until the late 1990s were relatively egalitarian societies, though there was of course some inequality. 1997 was the key year of transformation for both economies. Japan enjoyed a bubble economy from the mid-1980s, and scholars often attribute its origin to the 1985 Plaza Accord. With increased public spending, numerous new resorts and
public buildings were built across Japan. Japanese firms acquired overseas trophy assets such as Rockefeller Center in Manhattan, chateaus in Europe, the Seattle Mariners baseball team, and Columbia Pictures. The number of job openings for college graduates was nearly three times the number of candidates at its peak (Recruit Works Institute 2019:1). Asset prices started declining by late 1991, and the burst of the speculative bubbles in the stock and real estate markets followed soon after. Then, the fever was gone almost overnight.

However, it was 1997 when significant changes in the Japanese economy came to light and Japan was thrown into the two decades of economic stagnation called the lost decades. The bankruptcy of mega financial institutions such as Yamaichi and Sanyo Securities as well as the broader Asian Financial Crisis created a hazardous situation. Firms fired employees and the unemployment rate suddenly jumped by nearly two percent in a year. Japan’s suicide rate increased by about seven percent as nearly 8,500 more people committed suicide in 1998 than in previous years. This is often considered an impact of the increased unemployment rate (Chen et al. 2012).

Similarly, the Korean economy was alive and well until it suddenly imploded in 1997. On July 1997, the Asian Financial Crisis started in Thailand as a result of foreign investors’ retreat from short-term and unhedged loans. The fear diffused quickly to other Asian economies including Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Korea. Despite the Kim Young Sam administration’s attempts to reform the financial system, it became clear by November that Korea did not have enough money to repay its debts to international short-term lenders. The financial meltdown forced Korea to rely on IMF emergency loans and their structural reform plan.
November 21st, the day Korea accepted an International Monetary Fund (IMF) bailout plan is remembered as the “second national day of humiliation” (Song 2009). The first day of humiliation is August 22, 1910, the day Japan colonized Korea. Korea’s GDP showed negative growth between 1997 and 1998. Many workers lost their jobs suddenly. After the crisis, more than 100 thousand people became jobless each month (Shin and Kong 2014:34) and it pushed the unemployment rate up from 2.5% before the crisis to seven to eight percent in 1998-1999 (Song 2009).

It was the very success of the developmental state model in East Asia which had led many to believe that the Asian Financial crisis exposed this model’s fundamental weakness and thus free-market ideologies appeared as an almost gleeful alternative (Stiglitz 2001:xiv). To put it simply, the IMF demanded two conditions in return for its bailout loan. One was the deregulation of exchange rates and financial markets, and the other was the reduction of inefficiencies in corporate operations and rigidities in the labor market (Lee 2015a).

Roughly ten years later in the U.S., a crisis of subprime mortgage-backed securities drove Wall Street into panic. In short, the mortgages were made to people who could not pay the money back, so after the mortgage notes were repackaged and sold to investors, the original recipients began to default on their loans, and eventually this caused a major financial collapse by the big investment banks that had repackaged the loans and sold them to investors. At that point, as Steve Eisman, known as one of the few investors who had predicted the burst of the system recounted, “Lehman Brothers had vanished, Merrill had surrendered, and Goldman Sachs and Morgan Stanley were just a week away from ceasing to be investment banks. Investment bankers were not just fucked: They were extinct” (Lewis 2010:187). In fact, they are not extinct.
The US government stepped in to save them and absorbed the losses in the financial system to avoid the bankruptcy of big financial institutions.

The crisis not only damaged the lives of numerous working and middle class Americans but also that of many workers across the Pacific. Legal employment protection systems were already loosened after the 1997 crises in Japan and Korea through the introduction of new policies and revisions of labor laws (Kojima 2010; Lee 2015a). It reduced the barrier for employers to fire employees, especially those who have a non-regular job, at times of crisis. Sociologists Shin Kwang-yeong and Kong Ju argue that the 2008 crisis caused even more serious damage to Korean society than the previous crisis by exacerbating the condition of labor markets, especially for the weakest social groups that were already affected by the 1997 crisis (2014:37–38). In Korea, the rate of employment dropped by almost two percent from 2008 to 2009, and the number of non-regular workers increased by 2.7 % between 2008 and 2012 (Shin and Kong 2014).

In Japan, the unemployment rate jumped by about 1.8 % from 2008 to 2009 (Kobayashi and Ohata 2010:162). The firms first started laying off non-regular workers and then regular workers. In the wake of this crisis, at least 240,000 temp workers lost their job, and an emergency refugee camp was set up at the end of the year for hundreds of temp workers who suddenly lost both their jobs and their housing (Osawa, Kim, and Kingston 2013:324). The number of non-regular workers in Japan increased by 7.6 million while that of regular workers decreased by 3.8 million from 1995 to 2008 (Osawa et al. 2013:315). Through the two crises, labor market polarization between regular and non-regular workers became a significant feature of economic inequality in both societies.
Rapid demographic change also intersects with the gloomy economy to shape hazardous situations across the social, political, and economic lives of the many (Chang 1999; Chiavacci and Hommerich 2017). Today, both Japan and Korea are known as the world’s fastest aging societies and confront the challenge of low birth rates. In 2015, Japan’s fertility rate stood at 1.46 and that of Korea at 1.24 when 2.08 is the standard to maintain the population at a steady level. As the traditional family system dissolved and the number of divorces increased, single-person household became increasingly common. In both societies, about a quarter of all households are single-person households today (MHLW 2016; Shin and Kong 2014:41).

Shin and Kong argue that the change in social institutions such as marriage shaped a new social risk (Shin and Kong 2014:42). Indeed, poverty tends to concentrate on single-father and single-mother households in both societies. In 2012, 34 % of the divorced and 54 % of the widowed compared with only 11 % of the currently married live in poverty in Korea (Shin and Kong 2014). In Japan, about half of single parent households lived in poverty in 2016 compared with one in ten households with both parents present (MHLW 2016).

Interestingly, even after the rise of economic inequality, the majority of people still see themselves as the part of the middle class in Japan. In 2018, 13.6 % of all respondents answered that their standard of living is close to that of the upper middle class, 58 % saw themselves to be at the middle, and 21.1% responded that they belonged to lower middle class (Cabinet Office Government of Japan 2018). Recently, scholars took up this interesting puzzle and argued that although distribution of self-identification did not change, the way the objective status impacts the subjective understanding of their location in the society changed. They argue that today’s Japanese evaluate their social status more realistically than previous generations, which they call “the quiet transformation.” (Hommerich and Kikkawa 2019; Sudo 2019).
Even from this very limited summary of recent history, we can see the magnitude and rapidity of social changes the two societies have gone through in the last decades. In a few decades after the 1960s, Korea and Japan have risen from being poverty-stricken countries to the world’s most affluent societies, where the vast majority of citizens believed that they were a part of the middle class. However, after the 1980s, the social contracts that used to provide security to individuals became dysfunctional. With limited social protections provided by the state, many individuals are left on their own. Education, jobs, families, home: the things that once were sources of security are now the source of anxieties for many. Thus, now we live in the period characterized by a wide-spread precarity marked by the loss of trust and social contract about “the work that is secure; work that secures not only job and income but identity and lifestyle, linking capitalism and intimacy in an affective desire for security itself” (Allison 2013:7).

Today’s young adults in Seoul and Tokyo were born into this anxiety-ridden situation and have spent their entire lives in it. How do they experience this increasingly unequal and uncertain world?

OUTLINE OF THE DISSERTATION

Following this introduction, chapter two introduces the theoretical and methodological approach of this dissertation. After this chapter, attention shifts to three major markers in their journey to adulthood: education, work, and marriage and the institutions associated with them.

Chapter three explores how young adults navigate the increasingly uncertain world of work. I identify three different responses in the fluid labor market, each of which roughly corresponds to the volume of resources they embody. It also compares the experiences of different categories of young adults, to examine why the ones I call insiders are anxious despite
their secure employment, and people in Seoul tend to be more anxiety-ridden than their peers in Tokyo.

Because educational credentials are the key to gaining secure employment, chapter four rewinds the clock and explores the trajectories of education among young adults in both cities. Interviewees in Seoul often talked enthusiastically about painfully long hours of studying during high school years, constant fear of failing, and strong pressures from parents, whereas in Tokyo, young adults’ narratives about education focused less on exams. This chapter illuminates how and why young adults and their parents in Seoul are more committed to education and also more stressed out from it.

Chapter five moves from the front stage of young adults’ life to its backstage and explores how insecurity and inequality intersect with marriage and family making. Despite rapid social changes in the last few decades such as decreased economic capacity of young men on the one hand, and increased opportunities for young women outside of the home, on the other, patriarchal family norms largely remain intact. This chapter captures the feelings of individuals who are caught between expectations imposed on them and the reality they face.

Chapter six explores how young adults feel and think about the inequality in opportunities and distribution of income that they experience in the realms of work, education, and love. Although the two societies share a comparable level of income and wealth inequality, I find that interviewees in Tokyo are much less likely to think that their society is unequal, and even if they recognize inequality, they rely on an individualist as opposed to a structuralist explanation of inequality. I also attempt to explain the observed differences in ways young adults in the two cities understand inequality.
In the concluding chapter, I synthesize the findings from the preceding chapters to reflect on a conditional mechanism that produces a divergence in the coming of age experiences of young adults in times of inequality and insecurity. It uncovers how the seemingly homogenizing forces of neoliberalism are mediated by national and local level cultures and institutions to produce diverse effects at the subjective level.
CHAPTER 2  THE STUDY

DELAYED ADULTHOOD

The story about the astonishing growth of economic inequality and insecurity is not unique to Japan and Korea. Globalization has transferred various risks from the shoulders of government and business to working people. Neoliberalism as a new mode of governing economy, and society more broadly, has legitimized the government and corporations to outsource risks to us. As economic competition across national borders intensifies, researchers observed that manufacturing jobs have been relocated to countries with a cheap labor force. Knowledge based jobs and various forms of unstable service jobs have replaced the secure blue color jobs. These changes occurred at the time when government spending on public goods has been severely curtailed. Furthermore, neoliberalism has also transformed the subjectivities of individuals and now many of them appear to be willing to support policies that would contradict their interests.

Such transformations in the real world also have shifted the landscape of academic work. Social scientists across disciplines from political theory to demography are increasingly wary of the fact that the burdens of these two intertwined changes fall heavily on the shoulders of young people. As Ruth Milkman (2017) pointed out, today’s millennials are more educated than previous generations but trapped in the increasingly fluid labor market. The clear path that used to guide the journey from youth to adulthood has been blurring or disappearing altogether.

1 Anthropologist Sherry Ortner even argues that the recent growth of inequality and precarity initiated anthropology’s shift toward “dark anthropology,” which “emphasizes the harsh and brutal dimensions of human experience, and the structural and historical conditions that produce them” (Ortner 2016:49). The experiences of hardship and insecurity among the poor and exceeding prosperity of the rich have been among the most well-discussed topics among sociologists as well since the 1990s (Khan 2012; Newman and Massengill 2006).
They become adults in a world that has lost an understood contract and trust about work. Millennials in advanced economies today face the loss of what their parents’ generation felt they deserved, something that they took for granted.

At this juncture, some scholars including Milkman see that a combination of young people’s lived experiences of insecurity, plus generational characteristics such as being the digital native, and social conditions make them a new political generation (Milkman 2017; Ross 2018). There is some evidence of social movements mainly led by young adults such as The Black Lives Matter movement or the 2011 Occupy Wall Street uprising. Others, like Guy Standing, however, argue that young precarious people need collective voice, but it is difficult at this point. In such a situation, the discontent of the precariat and their cry for stability and recognition can lead them to “be attracted by populist politicians and neo-fascist messages, a development already clearly visible across Europe, the United States and elsewhere” (Standing 2011:25).

A psychological notion of emerging adulthood, which refers to the period in which “the scope of independent exploration of life's possibilities is greater for most people than it will be at any other period of the life course” (Arnett 2000:469, 2006) became enormously popular. From a sociological perspective, however, experiences of adulthood are rendered structurally unequal (Silva 2012, 2016). It is primarily the scarcity of secure employment which made markers of adulthood other than getting a job, such as leaving home, getting married, or having children, delayed or even foregone for some people but not necessary for others.

Empirical research shows that experiences of economic insecurity are mediated by inequality of individual and collective dispositions. In the 2000s, there were a few large scale research projects on transition to adulthood in the US, which resulted in publication of multiple
volumes (Danziger and Rouse 2007; Kasinitz 2008; Settersten Jr., Furstenberg, and Rumbaut 2005; Waters 2011). These and other sociological studies of transition to adulthood examined how such factors as race, gender, and class combine to affect their experiences of transition to adulthood (Contreras 2013; Gonzales 2015; Osgood 2005). For example, DeLuca and her colleagues’ collective project found that young adults in low-income neighborhoods in Baltimore tended to experience what they called expedited adulthood characterized by strong pressure to become independent quickly (DeLuca, Clampet-Lundquist, and Edin 2016:151–52).

Scholars are also aware that cultural and institutional contexts have impacts in shaping the transition to adulthood\(^2\). Drawing on a large number of interviews, Katherine Newman (2008, 2012) convincingly showed how the same demographic changes of delayed adulthood are interpreted differently in Japan, Western Europe, Nordic countries, and the US.

In this vein, East Asian societies are worthy of attention because of the rigidity of social norms, rapidity of the changes that have occurred in the region and lack of strong welfare states that make many young adults confront challenges of the gap between social expectations and reality. As shown in the GDP per capita and GDP growth rates of Korea and Japan (see Figure 2.1 and 2.2), Korea has experienced a surprising degree of economic development in the span of just a few decades (Chang 1999). Japan’s industrialization was less dramatic but still much more condensed than European experience (Suzuki et al. 2010). Then, these societies rapidly outsourced much of their industrial production to countries with lower labor costs, even though their own multinational industrial companies still controlled the output. As Figure 2.2 shows, in 1998, Korea experienced minus five % GDP growth due to impacts of the Asian Financial Crisis

\(^2\) In the US, scholars showed that coming of age experiences in between places like Ellis, Iowa (Carr and Kefalas 2011) and New York City (Holdaway 2011) are starkly different.
in 1997 and Japan had the same experience in 2009, the year after the 2008 Global Financial Crisis. In both societies, the nature of the development of economy and welfare regimes created a strong dependency on large corporations and made vulnerable those who are not covered by the social protections provided by large corporations.

Figure 2.1 GDP Per Capita

In this context of rapid change, the rigid ideals of the breadwinner model and the
associated models of adulthood (adult as Jigjangin in Korean and Shakaijin in Japanese) did not
change as much. Arne Kalleberg points out, “precarious work has had especially pronounced
effects on the transition to adulthood and establishing families in countries such as Japan, which
has traditionally been characterized by a well-defined, rigid progression to adulthood that
presupposes a strong attachment to work organizations” (Kalleberg and Vallas 2017:17). Mary
Brinton, in her lucid account of the failure of the once successful school to work transition
system for high school graduates in Japan, argues that increasing difficulty in gaining access to
secure jobs translates into a difficulty for young people to secure their location in society (or ba
as she calls it) (Brinton 2010:2–5). Demographers caution that the rampant job insecurity will
further decrease fertility rates of countries like Korea and Japan, even though they are already
among the worlds’ fastest aging societies (Park and Standefur 2005; Raymo et al. 2015; Raymo and Shibata 2017; Shirahase 2014).

Despite all these characteristics that make East Asia a unique place for the study of transition to adulthood in the 21st century, there simply is no account of coming of age experiences in the region that look at young people’s subjective experiences and the objective contexts that shape it. As the first systematic attempt of its kind, this dissertation contributes to understanding young people’s coming of age experiences in East Asia, paying particular attention to the interplay between global, national and local forces. Doing so will enrich a broader sociological knowledge about how institutional-cultural contexts affect what it means to become adult in the midst of a massive transformation of the global economy.

THE RESEARCH

Between June 2017 and August 2018, I conducted 14 months of fieldwork in Seoul and Tokyo, the capital cities of Korea and Japan, which resulted in interviews with a total of 98 young people in both cities (55 in Seoul and 43 in Tokyo). I also conducted follow-up interviews with a few of them. To supplement this data, I also make use of various survey and statistical data to map out the overall trend of rising inequality and insecurity in Japan and South Korea as well as the character of institutions of work, education, and marriage. Popular discourse in the news media outlets will also be discussed briefly to better understand the context. Finally, the dissertation also relies on first-hand insights gained from participant observation of various activities of four individually-affiliated unions in Seoul and Tokyo that aim to ameliorate young people’s employment conditions, as well as four months of working as a part-time worker in a parcel delivery service yard in Tokyo.
Seoul and Tokyo

Subjective understanding of inequality and insecurity, which is conflicted and complex by nature, cannot be fully captured by opinion polls and surveys. The semi-structured interview is open enough to allow unexpected answers and surprising findings but also structured enough to enable comparison across individual respondents and groups. Meanwhile, the single case study is not the ideal way to investigate patterns and mechanisms that recur across diverse settings. This complexity requires a comparative approach, which can shed light on how different conditions in otherwise similar settings shape different outcomes through certain mechanisms.

In this study, the underlying logic of comparison is what John Stuart Mill called the method of difference, in which scholars investigate the mechanisms by which overall similarities and a few crucial differences produce different outcomes (Mill 1970:206; Skocpol and Somers 1980:184).

With 25.6 million people living in metro Seoul and 36 million people in Tokyo, and the concentration of schools and corporations, these two cities are the home to many young people. Seoul alone hosts one-quarter of young adults in Korea. These two cities share certain similarities that make them a good pair for comparison.

First, as hubs of information, finance, and innovation in the global network of the capitalist system (Sassen 2001), these two cities have considerably different features from other local cities in Japan and Korea. The two metropolitan areas are home to half the population of Korea, and one-third of the Japanese population. Residents of both cities have among the highest average income in their countries making inequalities more visible than in other cities. These are the places where various sorts of inequality are more clearly manifested than local cities.
Second, among the interviewees whose life is relatively well protected, the majority are office workers in Tokyo or Seoul where the headquarters of large Japanese and Korean firms are concentrated. Had I conducted the same research in small cities in the rural areas of Japan and Korea, the result could have been somewhat different. For the above reasons, this choice is a sensible strategy for this project.

During the fieldwork period in Seoul, the Department of Sociology at Chung-Ang University hosted me. I rented a room in a boarding house in Shinchon, a busy college town where students of nearby colleges hang out. By staying here, I also came to know the students and alumni of the schools in this district. In Tokyo, I was affiliated with the School of Asia and Pacific Studies at Waseda University and stayed in my parents’ apartment about 10 minutes away from school by subway.

A Typology of Responses

Rigorous probability sampling is not realistic for this research. Rather, this study applied purposive sampling to ensure that groups of interviewees share certain characteristics that are relevant to the research questions (Bryman 2012:422–23). The research focuses on millennials between the ages of 20 and 34. The majority of them are working, but some of them are still in college or graduate school. They have gone through at least two major events in life: entrance to post-secondary education and the job market. These transitions are events that are likely to evoke the sense of insecurity. At this early stage of life, they share the uncertainty that they may experience downward social mobility compared with their parents.
However, as Karl Manheim discussed in his classic essay, in which he attempted to articulate the generation as a sociological category, there is no point in believing that people share the same experience simply because they were born in the same period.

The fact that people are born at the same time, or that their youth, adulthood, and old age coincide, does not in itself involve similarity of location; what does create a similar location is that they are in a position to experience the same events and data, etc., and especially that these experiences impinge upon a similarly 'stratified' consciousness (Mannheim 1952:297).

Rather, it is what Manheim calls the generation-unit, sub-groups in one generation, which share the same “‘stratified’ consciousness.”

Consequently, I identified three major responses to economic insecurity in the course of this research. These ideal-typical responses were an outcome of neither pure deduction nor induction. It is a combination of both, the approach scholars call abductive reasoning following pragmatist philosopher Charles Peirce (Tavory and Timmermans 2014). Because existing literature suggested the great degree of inequality in insecurity among two groups of young people I call insiders and outsiders, I initially looked at these two groups of young people with different economic situations.

I consider young workers holding regular employment in large white-collar workplaces to be “insiders,” using the standard measure of having or 300 more employees, the criterion of large firms used in government statistics. Their response to insecurity is what I call security-seeking. When one’s future feels uncertain, one possible response is to cling to the jobs that provide security. These jobs are increasingly scarce, and not available to everyone. It is the option that interviewees in this study who were endowed with ample resources pursued. Coming
from middle-class or upper-middle class families, they have been given life chances that were out of reach for many people in the same generation.

In contrast, outsiders are those who have contract-based employment or employment in small businesses with far fewer than 300 employees. Their employment is less secure than insiders and they do not have access to the same level of social protections as insiders. Many young people are outsiders and caught in the growing chasm between the desire for security and the grim reality. They still exercise their agency outside of labor market institutions as the growing number of studies have documented. However, when it comes to their career choice within the labor market, what they can do appears to be limited.

Despite my assumption that interviewees would fall into two groups of insiders and outsiders of social protection systems distinguished by forms of employment, upon my arrival in Seoul, I kept encountering young adults who work in the non-profit sector. I had my first interview with Ji-su, who worked for a Christian non-profit organization. A few days later, my second interview took place in the small office of a charity foundation where Yoon-jung worked. Four among my first ten interviewees had their employment in the not-for-profit sector. They tend to come from middle or upper middle class backgrounds, have good enough resumes to get a regular position in the private sector, but decided to work in the non-profit sector. They could have earned more income in a private company but chose to work for something else.

As the number of interviewees who were neither simply “insider” nor “outsider” grew, I became curious if their presence hints at another pathway to adulthood. Indeed, most post-industrial societies have seen astonishing growth of the non-profit sector in the last few decades. When the entire economy was soaring in the early 2000s, Japan’s non-profit sector grew by more
than four percent annually (Salamon 2010:201). According to one report, this sector hires eight and four percent of the total workforce in Japan and Korea, respectively (Salamon 2010:188).

Eventually, I decided to call this form of response to growing uncertainty, “meaning-seeking.” Meaning-seekers deliberately chose unstable forms of employment to pursue what they love or think is meaningful. Meaning-seekers see that their work is temporary by nature and that Boram or Yarigai—something that makes life and work meaningful—compensates for the lack of security. What they do is similar to what communication scholar Brooke Erin Duffy calls aspirational labor: “a mode of (mostly) uncompensated, independent work that is propelled by the much-venerated ideal of getting paid to do what you love” (Duffy 2018:4).

This insider/meaning seeker/outsider framework reflects the specificity of labor markets in Korea and Japan, where there exist huge disparities of capital power, productivity, and level of protection between large conglomerates and small businesses, and in addition, where some relatively well-credentialed young people choose meaningful employment over high security (Arita 2016; Song 2014). | Within each of these three schemes to respond to insecurity that I call security-seeking, adjusting to insecurity, and meaning-seeking, respectively, there are minor variations that I will describe more fully in the following chapters.

In total, I interviewed 33 insiders (12 in Seoul and 21 in Tokyo), 29 outsiders (17 in Seoul and 12 in Tokyo), 26 meaning-seekers (16 in Seoul and 10 in Tokyo) and 10 job-seekers (all in Seoul).

Among individuals I interviewed in Seoul (55) and Tokyo (43), at the time of the interview, the average age was 30 years old (born in 1986) in Seoul and 28 years old (born in 1988) in Tokyo. More than half the interviewees in Seoul are females (29 of 55) whereas male interviewees are a bit overrepresented (26 of 43) in Tokyo. 89% (Seoul) and 79% (Tokyo) of
interviewees attended college or graduate school. In Korea and Japan, about 70% and 58% of high school graduates attend college as the national averages. The education levels of my interviewees are higher than the national average, but it is understandable given the characteristics of the two metropolitan areas.

The majority of interviewees in Tokyo work in workplaces that employ more than 300 people, whereas in Seoul the majority work in small to medium-sized enterprises regardless of their employment status. Overall, 33% of the interviewees in Seoul and 23% in Tokyo hold non-regular jobs. According to government statistics, 32% of people between 25 and 34 years old in Korea and 28% in Japan hold non-regular employment (Kim 2015). It should be noted, however, that labor unions and some scholars in Korea argue that the government statistics underestimate the number of non-regular workers.

**Gaining Access**

When I first arrived in Seoul in June 2017 to conduct a preliminary study, I did not know too many people. I first gained access to the field through the introduction of Korean students at the University of Hawaii. Both in the cases of Seoul and Tokyo, I first posted a call for interviewees on my Facebook account. Luckily enough, many friends were in Seoul for summer vacation. They were kind enough to introduce their friends to me and also introduced me to members of Youth Union where I conducted participant observations. I also gained access to a study group of young researchers and journalists who are based in Seoul and whose native language is Japanese. They also helped me to find interviewees.

It was not too difficult to find willing insider interviewees because many friends of mine from college belonged to this group in Japan. In Korea, friends of my friends tended to be in this
group. Furthermore, interviewees were also willing to introduce their friends to me after the interview. Thus, I first conducted insider interviews and then gradually proceeded to interviewing outsiders both in Tokyo and Seoul.

I have studied Korean at the University of Hawaii, Ewha Woman’s University, and had a personal tutor during my fieldwork period. Nevertheless, at the beginning of the research, I was not confident enough to conduct interviews without the help of a native speaker. An MA student at Chung-Ang University agreed to help me as a research assistant and we conducted a few interviews together. Although she was very helpful and generous, soon I learned that I can manage the interview by myself and the presence of a native speaker does not necessarily make the interview easier.

When an interviewee says that she grew up in a neighborhood called A in Seoul and graduated from B high school, it contains a lot of self-explanatory information about her social backgrounds for those who are familiar with the context. At first, I lacked this sort of background knowledge. However, with two native speakers conversing in their native language, I tended to lose an opportunity to ask what appear to be common-sensical questions for them as I was afraid of disrupting the conversation. After a few attempts, I decided that it would be easier to conduct interviews by myself. Since a surprising number of young Koreans I met spoke Japanese and English more fluently than I do, I also conducted some interviews in Japanese or English when interviewees suggested that I do so.

After each interview, I asked the interviewee to introduce their friends to me if they appeared to be willing to do so. This strategy worked well for insiders. However, hardly any outsiders introduced me to their colleagues or friends. Consequently, I had to rely heavily on the network at Youth Union and Arbeit Union to find outside interviewees.
After six months of fieldwork in Seoul, I arrived in Tokyo and started replicating the same study. Though I expected it to be less difficult to find interviewees in Tokyo where the majority of my friends and my family live, the process was no less easy than in Seoul. I encountered the same difficulty in finding outsiders in Tokyo. An owner of an affordable Izakaya restaurant near my place told me that the majority of their regular customers fit with the description of outsiders and agreed to cooperate to find interviewees. However, the snowballing method did not work well here either. Consequently, I recruited interviewees through my participant observations in Tokyo Young Contingent Workers’ Union and a group of unions affiliated with NPO POSSE as well as the parcel delivery service backyard where I worked for four months.3

In Korea, I was an outsider. I was a foreign graduate student who was interested in Korea but whose language level is not nearly close to theirs. Yet, perhaps because I lived in a college town and regularly went to graduate school, I was able to socialize with many young adults who were attending or had graduated from nearby schools. Many young adults whom I interviewed speak languages other than Korean and have lived in other countries, and they were sympathetic to me.

In Japan, I was a partial insider. I grew up in the same education system as my interviewees and am fluent in Japanese. But as I have never had a full-time job, I lacked what other young adults consider commonsensical knowledge as Shakai-jin – how should a person in the corporate world dress, talk, and play. Someone in his late twenties, who is still in school and

3 My conversation with anthropologists David Slater and Robin O’day, who have been studying the lives and politics of Japan’s irregular workers for years, confirmed that it is very difficult to find irregular workers who are willing to cooperate with interviews.
interviewing people without having a full-time job is a strange state of being in Japanese society. I was subjected to a lot of curious gazes by other people. While I was not very fluent in Korean and lacked some background knowledge about the Korean society, I felt as if I were a more of an outsider in Japan, perhaps because of the presumed cultural proximity. Consequently, I believe that the depth of my interviews in Seoul is no less than those I conducted in Tokyo.

Interviews

Typically, I contacted the interviewee by email, text, or messenger apps such as Kakao Talk in Korea and Line in Japan. We would meet in a location that is convenient for interviewees, usually a café or restaurant in an office district, although sometimes I traveled to a suburb where interviewees lived. All the interviews were audio-recorded with the permission of the interviewee. I took detailed hand-written notes (usually consisting of five to six pages) during each interview. After each interview, these notes were turned into a more descriptive summary of the interview in password-protected digital format (usually seven to ten pages long). Aside from the interview summary, I also made field notes after each interview.

I asked interviewees to reconstruct their life from their childhood to the present, with some attention to how they thought about their imagined future at different times. At the early stage of this research, I had a concern that it might be challenging to elicit personal stories about anxieties that can be both too personal and too mundane a topic to disclose to a stranger. Hence, I prepared many follow-up questions to probe the answers to the initial question. To my surprise, interviewees in Seoul were generally not shy about expressing their anxieties and discontents logically and eloquently. In Tokyo, however, I encountered interviewees who were not very articulate about their anxieties. In such cases, I tried to delve deeper into their thoughts and
feelings by asking multiple follow up questions and also clarifying the context and reasons for their lack of anxiety, since the relative absence of anxieties among interviewees in Tokyo is by itself a major finding of this study.

Generally, interviewees told me that the interview was a positive experience. As one interviewee reflected her experience of the interview with me on her Facebook post, “it was like half of the coaching session where you are asked about your life although it is half because he did not give me any advice,” the interview provided them with an opportunity to reflect on their lives. Interviews also seemed to provide good opportunities for venting. Mario Small (2017) showed that people tend to confide personal and intricate matters to others they are not very close to, or someone who barely knows them, because confessing personal matters can be risky. In both Seoul and Tokyo, I was outsider enough from the networks of most of the interviewees, which made me someone safe to share their thoughts, but insider enough to understand the context of their anxiety, sorrow, and anger.

Participant Observations

I also conducted participant observations of activities of four of the most influential labor unions for young people, Youth Union and Arba Union in Seoul and Tokyo Young Contingent Workers’ Union and a group of unions affiliated with NPO POSSE in Tokyo. These four unions share the basic structure and strategy of individual-affiliate unions that emerged in the context of declining union membership and density. They rely on social movement style campaigning and extensive use of online media to organize those who are not likely to be organized by enterprise unions (Kojima 2017; Royle and Urano 2012; Suzuki 2008; Takeuchi-okuno 2010; Watanabe 2018; Weathers 2010). At the same time, these unions diverge in some important respects, such
as the extent of human resources they possess, and the strength and nature of solidarity among members. I have attended meetings, individual labor consultations, study groups, collective bargaining sessions, similar sessions mediated by labor relations committee, and informal parties after these events. I also joined a number of protest and petition activities with them on the street and in front of various corporations.

Finally, I also worked in a parcel delivery service yard in Tokyo to familiarize myself with the arrangement of flexible employment. My visa-status and fellowship did not allow me to engage with any employment in Korea. In Tokyo, initially, I applied to dozens of non-regular jobs in this period through several temp staffing agencies. I was invited to only two interviews and rejected by both, so instead I was able to work at a service yard where I had previously worked. Working as a part-timer helped me to build emotional bonds with some of my interviewees in Tokyo, which I believe contributed to improving the quality of interviews. Though I had previously worked in the same workplace before, working outside for hours in extremely hot central Tokyo was physically taxing\(^4\). The experiences of working there gave me practical sense of how tough it is to make a living with this job, which paid only 1,050 Yen (about 10.5 USD) an hour and how it leaves people little time, energy, and incentives to join the collective action to alter their situation.

All names are pseudonyms. All the direct quotes are from recorded interviews or fieldnotes, and I translated interviews conducted in either Japanese or Korean. Minor grammatical editing has been done on the selected quotes. Following the custom, in this

\(^4\) A historic heatwave hit Japan that summer. Across the country, more than 90,000 people were taken to the hospital by ambulance due to heat stroke, and 160 of them eventually died (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communication 2018). I also suffered from heatstroke several times during my time in this workplace.
dissertation, Japanese and Korean names are spelled in order of family name followed by the given name. For the sake of simplicity, I converted currency based on the exchange rate of 1 US dollar = 100 Japanese Yen/ 1,000 Korean Won.

One question I encountered in this study was about how to account for variations in young adults’ experiences of economic inequality and insecurity in contemporary societies. Through addressing this question, this study makes a contribution to the literature about insecurity.

THEORIES OF INSECURITY

Insecurity, Precarity, and Governmentality

There are three major streams of theories related to this topic. One is a group of social theories about risks represented by the works of Ulrich Beck (1992, 2009), Anthony Giddens (1990, 1991), and Zygmunt Bauman (Bauman 2000)\(^5\). Beck argues that Western societies have moved from a period characterized by industrial processes to one in which social hazards and the reflexivity associated with it proliferated as a result of industrialization, globalization and technological development. In the risk society, nobody is certain about the magnitude and possibility of global risks that we face. Giddens also sees that uncertainty in contemporary society has been unleashed by modernization and globalization and the consequences are more

\(^5\) These arguments have been criticized for the lack of serious attention to class as a subject of analysis and even called “exemplary anti-class theorists” (Atkinson 2008:2). For example, Zygmunt Bauman argues that today’s capitalism engages people as consumers not as producers and hence work and class no longer serves as the core tenet of identity (Bauman 2005). Yet, they also recognize that risks are not equally distributed. Beck argues that “risks seem to strengthen, not to abolish, the class society. Poverty attracts an unfortunate abundance of risks. By contrast, the wealthy (in income, power or education) can purchase safety and freedom from risk” (Beck 1992:35).
profound than that of the previous eras in the sense that now these are man-made risks. In these theories, job insecurity or economic insecurity is conceived as one inducer of broader ontological insecurities of our time, which scholars call with different names such as “second” (Beck 1992), “liquid” (Bauman 2000), or “late” (Giddens 1991) modernity.

The second stream of theories concerns precarity and precariousness. As job insecurity has grown, the resulting precarity and ontological instability became a widely shared concern among social theorists. Similarly to Beck and Giddens, theorists of precarity see uncertainty as an inherently political problem rather than simply a part of the objective reality. Among anthropologists, in particular, precarity became the word of the day (Allison 2013, 2015; Han 2018; Lorey 2015). Theorists have been investigating various modes of precarity and its consequences for humans. The theories of precarity also tend to inform us that it has a universalistic character. Political theorist Isabell Lorey observes that “precarization is not an exception, it is rather the rule” (Lorey 2015:15).

It is spreading even in those areas that were long considered secure. It has become an instrument of governing and, at the same time, a basis for capitalist accumulation that serves social regulation and control. Precarization means more than insecure jobs, more than the lack of security given by waged employment. By way of insecurity and danger it embraces the whole of existence, the body, modes of subjectivation (Lorey 2015:15).

Thus, it is not only a matter of unfortunate minority groups whose job is in crisis.

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6 While it is less relevant to this research, another line of theorization about risk has been represented by Mary Douglas (1992) who sees risks as a cultural construct and not necessarily a new development in contrast to Beck (1992) who emphasizes the negative impacts of industrialization and globalization that proliferated reflexivity about risks (Elliott 2002; Lupton 1999; Wilkinson 2001). Lupton (1999) also counts the Foucauldian perspective, which identifies risks as a governing technology as a third major approach.
In his late career, Pierre Bourdieu was highly critical of neoliberal globalization and active advocate of the anti-globalization movement. In one of the essays in *Acts of Resistance*, he argued that “job insecurity is everywhere now.”

So insecurity acts directly on those it touches (and whom it renders incapable of mobilizing themselves) and indirectly on all the others, through the fear it arouses, which is methodically exploited by all the insecurity-inducing strategies, such as the introduction of the notorious 'flexibility', - which , it will have become clear, is inspired as much by political as economic reasons (Bourdieu 2000a:84).

Similarly, Anne Allison, one of the pioneering anthropologists in the study of precarity argues that what she calls ordinary refugeeism - longing for an intimacy attached to a time and place that no longer exists- is prevalent in the 21st century.

In the ordinary refugeeism of the present, traces of the reproductive futurism of the past are preserved, kindling a desire for an “ordinary life” that frustrates, and excludes, an increasing many. No longer is precarity, insecuritization, or even poverty the purview of the exceptional few; its spread to even college graduates and those who manage to get (then lose) decent jobs means that no one is totally “safe” today (Allison 2012:366).

Thus, the precarity theorists argue that the impact of labor market flexibilization is more far-reaching than we imagine. Though, in reality, there are many older people whose lives are very precarious (e.g. Abramson 2017; Sallaz 2017:596), there is also a wide spread concern that the growing insecurity among young people can threaten the society as a whole in the long run. East Asian societies are a case in point.

Theorists also argue that insecurity demobilizes the public (Bourdieu 2000a; Castel 2016:166; Harvey 2005:42; Standing 2011, 2014). The third stream of theories about subjective impacts of neoliberalism, in particular, emphasizes this aspect. Scholars argue that flexible work in new capitalism erodes one’s subjective sense of the self (Sennett 1998, 2006). Scholars draw
on Michel Foucault (1991, 2008)’s critique of neoliberalism as a scheme of governance to examine how discourses about efficiency, competition, entrepreneurialism, and individual autonomy have proliferated under neoliberal globalization and changed our modes of being in the world (Brown 2015; Ganti 2014; Ong 2006; Van Oort 2015; Read 2009; Rose and Miller 2008; Türken et al. 2015).

Wendy Brown analyzed that neoliberalism is “undoing” basic democratic principles, and one of its consequences is that “labor disappears as a category, as does its collective form, class, taking with it the analytic basis for alienation, exploitation, and association among laborers” (Brown 2015:38). French sociologist Robert Castel pointed out that historically, individuals first required the support of property to be considered responsible agents (Castel 2016:165). However, today’s precarious workers “are often doomed to live on the edge, lacking certainty about what tomorrow may bring; they are not in control of their present and cannot organize their future” (Castel 2016:166). Similarly, Bourdieu argued that one needs to grasp the present to grasp the future, which is what the precariat lacks today.

The unemployed and the casualized workers, having suffered a blow to their capacity to project themselves into the future, which is the precondition for all so-called rational conducts [sic], starting with economic calculation, or, in a quite different realm, political organization, are scarcely capable of being mobilized (Bourdieu 2000a:83).

Thus, there exist a broad consensus among theorists that chronic economic insecurity demobilizes the public.

*Are Risks Evenly Distributed?*

While theorists tend to emphasize how prevalent uncertainties are, quantitative studies prove that these insecurities are not equally distributed. These theories have also been criticized for
presupposing a particular model of reflexive and rational actors as a basis of such generalization.

Deborah Lupton’s extensive review of risk theories argues that the;

self-reflexive individual, as presented by Beck and Giddens, is a socially and economically privileged person who has the cultural and material resources to engage in self-inspection. But many people, however, simply lack the resources and techniques with which to engage in the project of self-reflexivity (1999:114).

Building on Lupton’s critical review, Marianne Cooper, in her study of economic insecurity among families in Silicon Valley concludes that;

these inequalities in options, information and income mean that we are not all living in the same risk society equipped with the same resources. Rather, individuals live in different types of risk societies in which they are more or less vulnerable and more or less on their own (2008:1252).

Furthermore, Ralph Fevre (2007)’s intriguing study of employment insecurity found that Beck, Giddens, and Richard Sennet’s social theories of uncertainty, ironically, do not find support in the very societies that they had in mind such as the US and UK, although other societies such as Spain, Mexico, and Portugal among others seemed to support their arguments.

In the US, the publication of The Great Risk Shift: The New Economic Insecurity and the Decline of the American Dream by political scientist Jacob Hacker sparked interest in this topic (Hacker 2006). The empirical investigations that followed Hacker’s initial work gave a new twist to the study of economic inequality by showing how and why the perception of economic loss faced by individuals and households matters (Western et al. 2012). Many studies examine the impacts of job insecurity, rather than that of economic insecurity in general in the US and Europe (e.g. Burgard, Brand, and House 2009; Fullerton and Wallace 2007; Gallie et al. 2017; László et al. 2010) and Japan and Korea (e.g. Genda 2006; Kim and Park 2006).
In their extensive review of economic insecurity in the US context, Bruce Western and his colleagues report that despite the spread of insecurity, it tends to concentrate more severely on the lower half of the households. Consequently, they argue that “whereas rising economic inequality, at least since the late 1980s, is a story about increasing incomes at the top of the distribution, rising insecurity appears to be a story about increasing risks to households at the bottom” (Western et al. 2012:355). Thus, the effects of economic insecurity are not evenly distributed across different class groups. Furthermore, scholars who analyzed large-scale comparative data found that there is a variation in subjective economic insecurity based on the national-level social protection systems and markets (Mau, Mewes, and Scho 2012).

If so, an important question is how to account for the individual or collective level variations in risk perceptions. Although hundreds of researchers have investigated larger processes of transformation in security and inequality, this question has been less studied. A few illuminating accounts such as Cooper (2014)’s study in Silicon Valley and Allison Pugh (2015)’s research in four different U.S. cities show how families cope with uncertainty and individuals’ experiences differ based on their class, race, and gender. Both Cooper and Allison find that the responsibility to deal with such insecurity falls on the shoulder of women when neoliberalism enters the realm of intimacy. Furthermore, these studies pointed to how inequality and insecurity combine to generate consequences for people’s lives (Cooper 2014; Pugh 2015:202).

Furthermore, following Arlie Hochschild’s approach to emotions (Hochschild 1983), both Cooper and Allison’s works showed how feelings are central in everyday experiences of insecurity and inequality while other studies implicitly assume that insecurity is primarily about thinking.
However, as researchers rely on case-studies within US cities, there remain much to be understood about how perceptions of and responses to insecurity vary according to institutional and cultural conditions depending on national politics and social policies. Cooper and Allison’s research does not fully answer the questions pertaining to structural, institutional, and cultural contexts of insecurity and inequality. In other words, there is almost a systematic neglect of the context in our attempts to understand the experiences of economic insecurity and inequality.

To this end, I found Pierre Bourdieu’s social theory of fields in its relation to symbolic power and various forms of capital useful to resolve the observed tension between theories and empirical studies of insecurity. While Bourdieu wrote about job insecurity, to my knowledge, he did not articulate a theory of insecurity using his concepts.

**Bourdiesian Approach to Insecurity**

*Relational Approach to Insecurity*

An approach inspired by Bourdieu’s social theory provides powerful language to build on the existing studies of insecurity by unpacking why people perceive and respond to insecurity in the ways they do in different places and times. As his famous formula, “[(habitus)(capital)]+field=practice” (Bourdieu 1984:101) expresses, this series of concepts explains the logics of social action in a relational manner, in which changes in one element affect other elements.

Like Bourdieu, I do not assume that the particular forms that economic insecurity takes are knowable before going to the field; I do not posit “discrete, pre-given units such as the individual or society as ultimate starting points of sociological analysis” (Emirbayer 2002:287). In this sense, this dissertation departs from the variable-based analyses that assume that particular forms of insecurity mean more or less the same thing to individuals embedded in
different contexts, which enables the simple comparison of magnitudes. Rather, one objective of this dissertation is to explore responses to economic insecurity in the transactional context in which they were embedded. Losing a job in Denmark and the US have totally different meanings and consequences. Similarly, the experience of job loss today can be significantly different from the time when our parents’ generation were in their 20s.

Drawing on Bourdieu’s theory, this dissertation incorporates two levels of analysis. On the one hand, it looks at how differences in the nature and amount of resources individuals possess in a particular field shape different subjectivities, interests, and strategies. On the other hand, it compares the fields of education, work, and marriage in Seoul and Tokyo to examine what it means to have a particular form of capital in these fields and how it affects young adults’ sense of insecurity. Let me briefly introduce a few key concepts proposed by Bourdieu that I will use in this dissertation.

*Field and Symbolic Power*

Relatively early in his career, in the 1970s Bourdieu developed his notion of field, though the concept was already popular in other disciplines such as Physics, Mathematics and Psychology (Hilgers and Mangez 2014:2–3). The field is a social space in which actors orient their actions toward enhancing their social positions. In Bourdieu’s analysis, individuals must compete for advantage in a particular field, which he likens to competing in a game. Each actor follows the taken for granted knowledge in the field that people rarely question (Bourdieu and Eagleton 1991:114; Swartz 2013:80). This study will explore such practical logics of insecurity that are so commonsensical that people rarely question them.
Bourdieu offers a theory of how power -and struggles by actors in the field over power- becomes misrecognized as something other than power relations. In this framework, struggles over power are struggles over the power of categorization. “The struggle of classifications is a fundamental division of class struggle. The power of imposing a vision of divisions, (…) is the political power par excellence; it is the power to make groups, to manipulate the objective structure of society” (Bourdieu 1989:23). Thus, symbolic power is the capacity to create symbolic boundaries between oneself and others, and it is the central dimension of politics. Bourdieu shows that those in an economically dominant position can use symbolic violence toward those who lack “legitimate” tastes and credentials, in order to maintain their relative advantage in the social hierarchy. The key to this symbolic politics lies in misrecognition and normalization, through which we become inclined to believe that hierarchy is a “natural” product.

The analogies of fields is helpful to understand differences in the ways the three competitive arenas of social life -education, work, and marriage- are organized in Seoul and Tokyo and how that allow misrecognition and normalization among young people.

This study is not the first one to employ a Bourdieusian framework to analyze variations of insecurity (Cooper 2008; Silva 2013). In the end, Bourdieu is one of the most frequently cited theorists in sociology (Medvetz and Sallaz 2018; Sallaz, Jeffrey and Zavisca 2007), and scholars of insecurity often drew on his ideas, even if they did not apply the set of concepts systematically. However, these analyses tended to single out capital and habitus among Bourdieu’s concepts7. In contrast, this dissertation makes comparisons at different layers of

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7It reflects a general trend in American sociology that capital is used much more often than Bourdieu’s other concepts. From 1980 to 2004, 45 % of all 235 articles that appeared in the four
power resources (capital) and social spaces (field) to illuminate the context-specific mechanisms that shape young adults’ experiences of economic insecurity and inequality. Thus, it looks at the two levels of field struggle outlined by Bourdieu. On the one hand, actors compete with each other within the field. On the other hand, a field also competes with other fields.

_Differences in Power Resources (Capital)_

First, people react to insecurity in different ways because they have different power resources (capital) available to them. One’s location in a field corresponds to one’s objective relations to other actors, defined by the amount of power resources individuals possess. Individuals, groups, and organizations each possess a combination of different forms of capital (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:97).

Economic capital refers to monetary income, accumulated wealth, and ownership of productive assets. Cultural capital is competence in demonstrating cultural knowledge, and it can be further divided into embodied, institutionalized, and objectified states (Bourdieu 1986:243–44). Social capital is the networks of relationships with other individuals. Whereas these forms of capital are also conceptually developed by other scholars, Bourdieu emphasizes the power of the symbolic. Symbolic capital “is the form that the various species of capital assume when they are perceived and recognized as legitimate” (Bourdieu 1989:17). For Bourdieu, social structures produce and at the same time are produced by practical logics of insecurity that are pre-reflexive and intuitive ways of reasoning.

key Sociology journals (American Journal of Sociology, American Sociological Review, Social Forces, and Social Problems) and used Bourdieu’s concepts cited capital. In contrast, only 9 % of these articles used Bourdieu’s major concepts relationally as Bourdieu intended (Sallaz, Jeffrey and Zavisca 2007:28–29).
Cooper argued that Bourdieu’s general framework is helpful to “recapture the classed nature of the skills, resources and dispositions that the ideal risk subject supposedly possesses” (Cooper 2008:1237). His approach allows us to examine why individuals perceive and respond to insecurity in the ways they do, depending on the nature and volume of capital individuals and groups embody. At the same time, not only capital, but also the fields in which capital is situated, merits attention.

*Differences in Social Space (Field)*

Second, the meaning and value of a particular form of capital is different across places and times, because each field has its own rules and thus enforces specific forms of struggle for actors.

Above each specific field, such as the field of higher education or journalism, there is what he calls the field of power, which is not linked to specific activities but rather is an arena of struggle among different fields (Bourdieu 1996:263–65; Swartz 2013:Chapter 3). The Field itself has capital and competes with other fields over power resources. A field has relative autonomy, but it is subject to two principles of hierarchization by economic and cultural forces. Each specific field is most likely to be influenced by the field of power. As the autonomy of a field decreases, it is more likely to be affected by external forces.

This relational approach allows to synthesize the two lines of thoughts pertaining to the relationship between subjective and objective insecurity. While culturally oriented approaches to insecurity underscore the far-reaching and political nature of insecurity, empirical studies show that insecurity is not equally distributed. These approaches place different emphasis on subjective and objective dimensions of insecurity. While political theories of insecurity
emphasize subjective insecurity as a scheme of government, empirical studies tend to see it as more or less a direct consequence of the rise in objective insecurity.

In my formulation, objective insecurity still matters, but subjective insecurity is not a pure reflection of material conditions. It is mediated by people’s their daily experiences that cannot be counted by numbers. Thus, this dissertation is about both the subjective, or more specifically, mostly pre-reflexive modes of thinking, and the structures that produce such practical understandings.

Now I turn to the first substantive chapter, which examines young adults’ strategies and interests in the labor market filled with risks.
CHAPTER 3 WORK

INTRODUCTION

The growth of labor market flexibility is the central problem that confronts young adults as they come of age in East Asia. In Japan and Korea where the breadwinner family model has been at the heart of social protection systems, the growing difficulty among young men to fulfill the provider role is particularly troubling. It also creates a contradictory situation in which many young adults have to further intensify their commitment to their job in order to construct adulthood, because other markers of adulthood such as family-making and home ownership are difficult to attain without secure employment.

As shown in Figure 3.1, the World Values Survey reports that more than 80% of respondents under 34 in Korea and Japan worry about losing their job or not finding one in 2010 (Inglehart et al. 2014). Figure 3.2 shows the result of a comparative survey of six countries conducted by the Japanese government. 77% and 66.8% of Korean and Japanese young adults worry about “getting a job.” These are the highest rates among the surveyed countries including the UK (58.6) and the US (54.2) (Cabinet Office Government of Japan 2014). Another recent government survey in Japan found that nearly 90% of people under 29 prioritize a job that is “stable and they can keep working for a long time” when choosing a job (Cabinet Office Government of Japan 2017). In both countries, initial employment after the end of schooling is crucially important because it mostly determines the range of career choice options they will have later on.
Figure 3.1 Worries about Job Loss (Age under 34 years old)

Source: World Values Survey Wave 6 (Inglehart et al. 2014)

Figure 3.2 Worries about Getting a Job

Source: International Survey of Youth Attitude (2013)
In the last decade, there has been considerable research about precarious employment, and by now we have a fairly good understanding of why job insecurity has increased and its consequences for individuals and households. Social theorists tended to problematize the growth of job insecurity on the ground that 1) it affects everyone in society, 2) young people tend to be affected severely, and 3) there seem to exist no escape from this situation as precarity demobilizes workers. Nevertheless, only a small number of studies look at the experiences of young people who navigate the increasingly fluid labor market in East Asia. The existing literature concentrates on worker’s agency outside of the labor market by looking at alternative forms of collective organization by precarious workers, which are often initiated by the middle-aged men and women.

Against this background, this chapter explores the trajectories of young adults from different class backgrounds as they maneuver through the uncertain labor market. Their experiences provide a window onto processes and impacts of larger social changes that young people have gone through.

**JOB INSECURITY IN KOREA AND JAPAN**

While the vast majority of the working population was composed of non-regular workers before its miraculous economic development from the 1960s to the 1980s, steady economic growth during this period contributed to the decline of precarious employment in Japan (Gordon 2017:11–12). The lives of a certain group of people have always been precarious (Chun 2016), yet Japan’s patriarchal employment system provided “salaryman” and their families a high degree of security, and perhaps more importantly, enabled them to predict their future. Both blue-collar and white-collar employees hired as regular employees by large firms (usually
directly out of school), enjoy essentially permanent employment with regular pay increases, membership in an enterprise union, and strong legal protection against firing and layoffs. In a more or less similar manner, in the process of rapid economic development, middle class formation happened in Korea (Koo 1991; Yang 2018).

Since the 1980s, job security has been declining in many industrialized countries. Scholars attribute its causes to globalization of production and growth of the service economy under neoliberalism (Alberti et al. 2018; Kalleberg 2009, 2018; Standing 2011). Firms responded to the heightened competitions beyond national borders by making their workforce flexible or relocating the production process to places where labor was cheap. And neoliberalism provided strong justifications for companies and states to seek for flexibility at the cost of workers’ security.

As a result, non-regular service jobs increased while blue collar regular jobs decreased. As neoliberal reforms allowed companies to meet more of their labor needs without offering regular employment, between 1982 and 2012, the number of non-regular workers increased by nearly 14 million in Japan (Gordon 2017). The proportion of non-regular workers grew by more than 20% from 1984 to 2014, and today they comprise about 37% of the work force (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications 2015). That of Korea increased by about 10% from 1996 to 2014 (Lee 2015a). Non-regular workers constitute more than one third of the entire working population in Japan and Korea today. The percentage of workers employed in the service sector among the entire working age population grew from 54% to 69% in Japan, and 37% to 69% in Korea in the period of 1980 to 2013 (The World Bank 2017b).

Non-regular jobs come with lower income and fewer benefits than regular employment. In 2013, male regular workers in Japan earned 45% more than male non-regular workers on the
basis of hourly wages (OECD 2015). Similarly, regular workers earned 38% more in Korea in 2014 (OECD 2016). Non-regular employment is particularly problematic in Japan and Korea because, in the process of rapid economic development, the two countries shaped a “welfare through work” model of welfare state policies. Employment is at the core of the social protection system along with the family (Miura 2012; Song 2009). This resulted in the gendered dual system of social protection, in which insiders (regular employees of large firms) were protected while outsiders (non-regular employees and workers at small firms) were not (Miura 2012; Schoppa 2006; Song 2014).

In this context, there is an emerging consensus among scholars that, first, the growing dualism between regular and non-regular jobs is the fundamental problem of today’s Korean and Japanese labor markets (Ito 2012; Kambayashi 2017; Song 2014). Second, it has not only led to the growth of income inequality, but also has shifted discourse about class from one “middle-class society” to “divided society” (Chiavacci 2008:22–23; Ishida and Slater 2010b). The young are the ones who bear the cost of this structural change most severely (Song 2018). About one-third of the working population between age 25 and 34 work as non-regular workers (Statistics Japan 2015). From 1982 to 2007, ten-year job retention rates among Japanese between 25 and 29 years old (their age in the base years and at that point they had zero to four years of tenure) decreased from 47.3% to 38.3% (Kambayashi and Kato 2012:29). The problem of youth employment had initially focused on “freeters” and NEET problems (Genda 2011; Kosugi 2006), and the social policies directed at addressing workers’ presumed lack of effort and will to improve themselves (Song 2018).

Much ink and paper have also been spent to examine the causes and process of labor market flexibilization in both Korea (Koo 2008; Lee 2015a; Shin 2011, 2013; Shin and Kong
2014) and Japan (Gordon 2017; Gottfried 2014; Higuchi 2016; Osawa et al. 2013; Osawa and Kingston 2015; Song 2018). Some scholars have also adopted comparative approaches (Ito 2012; Kalleberg and Hewison 2012; Lee 2016; Lukacs 2015; Song 2012, 2014). As shown in Figure 3.3, the declining power of labor unions has not been a secret, and scholars argue that traditional labor unions in both Korea and Japan have come up short in addressing the grievances of newly emerging groups of precarious workers (Kojima 2017; Royle and Urano 2012; Suzuki 2008, 2015; Weathers 2010).

Figure 3.3 Union Denisty Rates, 1995-2015

![Union Denisty Rates, 1995-2015](image)

Source: (Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training 2018a:225)

Yet, compared with the macro trend, we know much less about the impacts of this social change on human subjects and their agency. Though there are a growing number of ethnographic and interpretive studies, virtually all of them focus on the experiences of men and women with non-regular jobs called Bijeong-gyujig in Korea (Chun 2009a, 2009b; Lee 2015b) and Hiseiki Koyō in Japan (Kojima 2010, 2013; O’Day 2012). Their subject of research tended being middle-
aged men and women. Although there are important exemptions in Kojima Shinji and Emma Cook’s contributions that explore the life-world of precarious workers in Japan (Cook 2013, 2016; Kojima 2013), all other works focus on alternative forms of union or social movement activities through which precarious workers raised their voice. It is quite understandable because they are the ones who are affected directly by the growth of the labor market flexibility and often political activities outside of the labor market appear as the only way they can exercise their agency.

As briefly reviewed in introduction, there is a gap between the arguments made by theorists and the focus of recent empirical research. First, though theorists predict that job insecurity affects everybody, the empirical literature focuses exclusively on the experiences of non-regular workers. Second, very few empirical studies examine the experiences of the young, although theorists problematize precarious employment on the grounds that many young people are affected by this social change. Third, while theorists worry that these young adults would turn to populist politics and support the political fractions whose aims contradict their collective interests, or simply remain silent, the empirical research tends to focus on a brighter side of the story: emergent collective voice by precarious workers. Moreover, the majority of young adults do not take part in protest activities, and in that regard non-regular workers are not really different from regular workers. Hence, I contend that we also need to know the experiences of more diverse groups of young people whose lives take place in the context of growing job insecurity.

Thus, this chapter explores how young people try to come to terms with their growing insecurity in the labor market, given the choices available to them. Drawing on analysis of the interview data, I explore the three major responses that young adults chose to deal with growing
inequality and insecurity in the realm of work. While I found these responses in both Seoul and Tokyo, there were also more subtle differences that I explicate before concluding the chapter.

INSIDERS: SHACKLED BY SECURITY

Sang-min Han

At Starbucks in Gwanghwamun, I met Sang-min Han, a calm man in his 30s wearing a navy shirt and chino pants with an employee ID of a Chaebol corporation handing from his neck. A few weeks earlier, I had interviewed Sang-kyu, who works for another Chaebol corporation located in a building across the street from this Starbucks. Sang-kyu was so kind that he not only bought me a sandwich for lunch but also introduced me to his friend from college Sang-min, and I met him on National Foundation Day. On the national holiday, the entire district looked empty though it is usually packed with business people and tourists. Yet, Sang-min was working in the office on the holiday. Most insider interviewees in Seoul are almost native fluent in their second or third language. So is Sang-min, who speaks Japanese as if he is a native speaker.

A native of Gyeonggi-do, a suburban area surrounding Seoul, Sang-min moved to what he describes the “cheap-side of Gangnam” when he was seven. Back then, his father was teaching earth science in a public high school. He hoped for Sang-min and his sister to receive high-quality education in Gangnam. As Sang-min recalls, "they (parents) often told me that they want me to become a doctor but I was not good at studying.” Attending a public high school in Gangnam made him think of the difference between himself and his friends. “There were so many rich parents in Gangnam. Businessmen, lawyers, and doctors. My friends wore good and expensive clothes. When I visited one of my friends’ house, I found that their place is very spacious and had many imported home appliances.”
Despite the fact that he spent about 12 hours at school every day, no university offered him admission on his first try. After a year of study, he got offers from a few universities including Korea University, one of the SKY universities. There, he majored in business because he thought that major would bring him a job. In his senior year, he did internships at a bank and an automobile company. He did not like the environment of the former, and the latter rejected his job application. So he sent his résumé to another 40 to 50 different companies. He was eventually accepted by a big telecommunications company. Despite the great effort he made to gain his current employment, he finds his job to be a bit boring. At the time of the interview he was responsible for making a three to five year sales plan.

I do not like the job that much. Rather, I have a strong sense of responsibility and obligation. I have kids, and I will have no money if I don’t work. It is not that I have been doing the same job since I entered the company. I did various jobs, and there were the ones I liked and the ones I really hated. I liked the job to write a report about our prospects. That was interesting and fun as I liked researching about new consumer trends. But now, I do not like this job, in which I produce a sales report.

His typical day at the office starts at 7:30 or eight and ends at nine or ten in the evening. Overtime payment is already included in his salary, so he does not benefit from staying in the office for long hours.

I used to think that working overtime is a normal business. I thought having loyalty to the company is a very important thing. But my idea changed as I started thinking that I want to spend more time with my children. Last year I got a call from home while I was in the office. [His wife said that] “the child cries in pain, the child is sick and I will go to a university hospital. Please come quickly.” So I told the team leader that "I am sorry. I am sorry, there is urgent business, my child is sick." It was around 4 p.m., and we went to the hospital together and got a check-up. Fortunately, it was not a major illness, and we came home to eat dinner. Then, I had returned to the office again and worked until around 10 p.m. Then, the next day the leader told me that I must work more and that I must not confuse my job with family affairs. I was quite shocked at the time. I saw these kinds of
things in the automobile company too but back then it was not my business, and I did not feel it directly.

It was one of the many instances that made him think of quitting the job and find a more meaningful and sustainable career. He had applied to one position at a multinational corporation, which did not go well. He also considered moving to the non-profit-sector but long working hours is a common problem in that sector, too, and his salary will be reduced significantly. Although he works for what he describes as “one of the top ten percent companies” in the country, Sang-min still worries about the possibility of a layoff. His job appears to be stable, but he thinks that the industry is changing swiftly, and his employer’s growth is stagnant. He should be able to work until sixty, but he does not believe in that possibility.

Sang-min: It is officially possible, but it is just a matter of formality. When the company encounters difficulties, there are possibilities...of mass layoffs. I have to think about the career. I think it [staying in the company] would be difficult. I have many concerns about it.

Yuki: Then, you might have to be laid off at some point?

Sang-min: Yes. There were already three mass layoffs since I entered (this company).

Sang-min is quite pessimistic about his future. “In the end, what matters is the company’s growth or development. I am concerned because there is little prospect for it.” He foresees that his economic situation will not be any better than now as even if he will get a promotion in the current company, it will not increase his salary much. His concerns resemble that of his friend

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8 While technically it should not be possible for an employer to lay a regular employee off unless they go bankrupt, some interviewees in Seoul shared Sang-min’s concern. Both in Japan and Seoul, there appear to be instances in which regular employees have to accept voluntary early retirement due to the pressure from the employer.
Sang-kyu. In Sang-kyu’s workplace, employees usually become a team or department manager (Timjang or Gwajang) when they turn 49. The next promotion is to a managing director (Sang-mu) at around the age of 53. However, the promotion from department manager to managing director is highly competitive, and most employees have to leave the company at that point if they are not promoted.

Another anxiety is related to his children’s education. He lives in Mapo, an area that is popular among expats with a mix of old shopping streets and high-rise buildings where the quality of public school education might be better than many other areas in the city. “Well, there are good schools, too, but my wife does not trust the public education system. I don’t know too well but my wife thinks, among private schools, the kind of schools that put more emphasis on the sort of activities like sports or music would be good.” However, private schools in Korea can be expensive. “Public education in Korea is very competitive. There are various problems. I worry about it. But if you send your kids to a private school, tuition would be expensive. I worry about it too.”

He recently started studying fortune-telling and it helps him to vent his stresses.

Sang-min: I study fortune-telling. I have been to fortune-tellers many times and I became interested, so I started studying by myself.

Yuki: So can you tell your fortune?

Sang-min: Yes, I can.

Yuki: Does your life look okay according to it?

Sang-min: That’s not really the case [laughing]. Well, fortune-telling is fortune-telling in the end.

After the interview, he returned to his office to finish up his work.
Insiders like Sang-min, are the ones who hold relatively secure employment in large corporations and thus appears to be safe from the growing job insecurity. Yet, their jobs are often demanding. When asked about the most stressful time in their life, insiders usually talked about their first year at the workplace. They had to adjust to a life in which they stay in the office for very long hours and are subject to their supervisor’s requests that were ridiculous at times. Many insiders have regularly performed 100 overtime hours in their workplace, which goes beyond the officially recognized death-from-overwork (Karoushi) standard of 80 hours of overtime per month in Japan. I was surprised to learn that so many insiders in this study had mental or physical health problems during the first few years of employment. Some were even hospitalized or took a medical leave.

Yoshihide is a guy in his early 30s and a graduate of an elite private university in Tokyo where he studied Chinese. He is a typical example of the insider who works in a harsh working environment. He works in a large housing company where he sells factories and other industrial buildings. This industry is notorious for its masculine culture. When I was having a casual conversation over cups of beer with Ken who introduced Yoshihide to me, he told me that;

Ken: In our first year, we went on a trip together with some other friends. On our way, Yoshihide was repeatedly saying that his hands were hurting so I asked why. Then, he said that, in the previous night, his boss told them [new graduates] that they don’t understand the weight [Omosa] of working for this company and then asked them to make a billion yen [approximately one million USD, a rough total amount of the annual sales of their team] amount of fake bills by cutting paper to actually feel how heavy it is. They couldn’t finish it up, so Yoshihide kept cutting paper at home after work. I was like, does the boss mean the actual weight of money [laughing]?

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9 This is a standard that Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare sets. When an employee passes away and her/his average overwork hours went beyond 80 hours in the immediate two to six months, her/his death is usually considered to have resulted from overwork.
But what made him suffer most was the weight of the pressure imposed on him.

Yoshihide: Mm… from around the third year [the company] started demanding the numbers, I mean the result [of sales] and it was the time I think I suffered most.

Yuki: Did you have your quota?

Yoshihide: It was not exactly a quota but there was a gap between where I wanted to be and where I really was, and that was the problem (…)

Yuki: Do you have less stress now compared with that time?

Yoshihide: I think so…, I think I have less stress compared with that time. Back then I couldn’t sleep.

Yuki: For how long?

Yoshihide: About two years.

Though Yoshihide told me he learned how to manage it, his current work environment also seems to be stressful. He works for 12 hours a day on average. His employer recently prohibited employees from staying in the office after 8:30 p.m. due to the recent government-mandated “work style reform.” It was implemented after Matsuri Takahashi, a 24 year old graduate of the University of Tokyo and an employee of a large advertising agency, jumped from the employee housing building on the Christmas day. Depression from excessive overwork was seen as the cause of her suicide. However, when the amount of work does not change, leaving the office early only means that they have to work somewhere outside of the office without being paid. Yoshihide thinks that he has to get at least two multi-million-dollar-deals per year to maintain his income level. He needs the sales incentives to keep paying the mortgage of an apartment he recently purchased, where he lives with his wife and one year old child. Although, in the past,
the rewards tended to be collective to a work group in Japanese corporations, Yoshihide receive individual sales incentives.

For most young adults I talked with, however, long hours of work by itself are not so problematic. Rather, the problem for many young adults in Tokyo is that their job is both long and boring. Since they work for long hours, they hope that what they do is at least worthwhile for these hours. However, in the end, they are part of a large bureaucratic system and hardly have any control over the duties they perform.

Mika is a woman in her late 20s to whom I was introduced by her colleague. She is a non-career track (Ippanshoku) worker in a large insurance company whereas regular positions for women are called career track (Sougoushoku). It is a tenured position but their duty is limited to general office work and they will not be relocated to other regions. Even today, less than one in five newly hired career track workers were female while more than four out of five non-career track office workers were female (Ministry of Health Labour and Welfare 2015). Now, she is dispatched to a sport-related NPO from her employer. She likes her current position better than her previous position, although it comes with a heavier workload and more pressure,. Mika recalls her first few years at work.

Mika: It was really boring. I went to the office and sometimes I finished all the work by 1 p.m. I had done all the work for the day and had to look for something to do. It’s like I just had to kill time for four hours. Like doing internet surfing (for four hours). I thought it was very inefficient. I received the salary even though I didn’t do anything. So it’s not good for the company, and I thought that the company should make use of human resources better.

Yuki: In terms of the company’s atmosphere and evaluation system, doesn’t it matter how much you work?
Mika: No. There’s no relationship. It is a seniority-based system. They say that they appreciate those who work more, but the HR department doesn't look at it. So, the longer we stay, the more salary we get.

Yuki: Is there an evaluation system?

Mika: Technically yes.

Yuki: Is it just an evaluation from the boss?

Mika: I don’t know…rather than an evaluation from the boss, perhaps, the person who works most in the cohort receive some incentives. Like that. So it is not like someone receives more and others receive less. Everyone receives the same, and some extraordinary people get a bit more on top of that.

Yuki: Does it mean that you can stay in the company unless you want to quit?

Mika: Yes, no problem at all.

Yuki: I see. So there will be no chance that you will be fired?

Mika: No, never ever. Ha ha ha ha ha ha. It is a really indulgent environment.

Her position was secure although she did not have many tasks to perform in the office. But she was suffocating from boredom, so she attended a school after work and acquired a license to become a sports instructor. She considered leaving the company, but her parents were strongly opposed. So she requested the company to move her to another department, and eventually, they sent her to the foundation where she works now. Her current position is much more demanding than the last one. She must stay in the office longer, and she has to work on weekends quite often because her duty is to plan and support sports events that are usually held on the weekend. Unfortunately, she rarely gets substitute holidays. Yet, this job gives her a sense of meaning unlike her last position.

As Mika’s narrative suggests, interviewees who have a secure job often find themselves in between what they want to do and what their parents expect them to do.
Son-ha was born in the same year as Mika in Chonan, a local city about 50 miles away from Seoul. She works for a large bank but has been stressed out from the strong family pressure.

You know Korean parents are very much interested in children’s education right? My mother was really interested in education. She pushed me to… do you know Koshi [the exam to become high-level civil servants]? (…) My parents wanted me to take Koshi.

To keep up with her mother’s expectations, Son-ha studied hard in one of the foreign language high schools. This special type of high school is intensely competitive and considered a source of inequality in the Korean society as I will discuss in the next chapter. Then, she attended Seoul National University to keep up with her mother’s expectation. Her parents also sacrificed a lot as she recalls her high school years, “the difference between students, financially (was large). Until middle school, all my friends were kind of similar. Very equal background. (…) But in high school, it was totally different. And tuition was really expensive. My parents barely could afford it.”

Son-ha refused to prepare for Koshi because she did not want to devote her entire college years to study for an exam. She also does not like the intensity of high-level civil service positions. “Because I wanted some part of life. Not only just work.” However, as a result of the continuously rising expectations of her mother, getting a job in one of the most secure companies in the country only made her mother unhappy.

She (Son-ha’s mother) doesn’t think my employer is a good enough company for me. Like I said, she wanted me to go and take an exam like Koshi, so it’s like lower expectation. So she didn’t totally approve of my entry into this company. That kind of affected me because, you know, getting approved by parents means something to me. And I was sent to the Chonan branch first. The headquarters is in Yeoi-do, Seoul, so I expected to work in Seoul, and I wanted to, but they sent me to the Chonan branch. (…) I
didn’t want to go to the Chonan branch because it feels like…stepping back. I was born there, I went to high school, and then (went to) Seoul. Then going back to Chonan is kind of stepping back.

On her part, she considered the job in a branch in her hometown as a regressive move. Furthermore, she did not enjoy the job itself much.

I wanted to get into [this company], and I was happy at getting into it at first. And then, my training started, and it was kind of different from what I expected. Because the company culture was kind of oppressive and hierarchical and the work didn’t seem very interesting. Working at a bank, the work is not like very dynamic or creative or anything, so it was kind of different from my expectation.

She admitted that she seriously considered quitting multiple times. Yet, these young people are also fully aware that their jobs are a scarce good that many people in the same generation yearn for.

Especially when I had a bad day, when I came home, opened the internet, and looked for a job. Why did I choose to stay? Well, it is hard to find another job. And I have to admit that mine is a really good job and it can’t be easily thrown out.

After a few years, Son-ha was relocated to the headquarters in Seoul and assigned a job to produce reports, a job she does with great pleasure. Yet, she does not know when she will be assigned to another position, which she might or might not like.

Many interviewees shared experiences akin to what anthropologist David Graeber calls “bullshit jobs,” – the job “is so completely pointless, unnecessary, or pernicious that even the employee cannot justify its existence even though, as part of the conditions of employment, the employee feels obliged to pretend that this is not the case” (Graeber 2018:19). These jobs are predominantly white collar ones, and according to a YouGov survey conducted following the
initial publication of Graeber’s article on this topic, more than 37% of full-time workers in the UK believed that their jobs are sort of “bullshit,” and another survey conducted in Holland found an even higher rate (Graeber 2018:17).

As Graeber argues, it must be demoralizing to wake up every morning to do the kind of work one believes makes no difference to the world whatsoever. Finding happiness in private time is one option but, as in the case of Sang-min, spending most of their time in the office, they often lack time to spare. Hence, insiders typically find themselves to be on the edge; they want to seek something meaningful, but they must give up their security for that to happen. They are both secured and shackled by their jobs.

Giving up one’s freedom in exchange for a certain level of security is a basic form of the social contract, whether its authority is the government or the employer. In a sense, there is nothing new in this dilemma, which is as old as the history of modern philosophy as it was discussed by such theorists as Hobbes, Locke, and Rosseau. However, perhaps what makes many insiders like Sang-min concerned is the fact that the promise of such contracts is declining (Rubin 2012). Like them, their parents’ generation sacrificed a part of their family and leisure time. On top of that, some of today’s millennials expect that their employer may betray their loyalty at some point. Young insiders are increasingly aware that the deal is not fair anymore. In Korea, there are young people like Sang-min and Sang-kyu who see dismissal as a normal part of their career course.
MEANING-SEEKERS: IN SEARCH OF YARIGAI OR BORAM

Yusuke Tokuda

Yusuke is a thin and calm man in his early 30s. I met him for the first time when I visited the service yard of a parcel delivery service company in a messy shopping district in Tokyo where I worked when I was a college student. I was there with a hope that my former colleagues will introduce some young adults to me. However, like many other blue-collar workplaces, they were having difficulty recruiting young workers, and I was recruited to work for them. Hence, I worked with Yusuke for four months.

This job is more complex than it appears. Every morning, in the period of a few hours, five or six of us have to unload cargo boxes from more than a dozen trucks, each loaded with hundreds of parcels, sort them out by hand based on either the sender or addressee information, and deliver them to different shop floors of a large retail store with many different departments in an eight story building. In the small service yard that often became chaotic in the peak hours, Yusuke always took care of mistakes I made without complaining, such as sending boxes to the wrong floor.

While making ends meet with part-time jobs, Yusuke has been following his lifelong dream of achieving success in the music industry. He grew up in the Southern part of Japan and attended a music school in Fukuoka before moving to Tokyo. His parents have always been supportive of him. “Actually, once I thought about quitting the band activities [when I was] around 25, maybe 25 or 26. I told my parents that ‘I think I should quit’ but my parents encouraged me to keep doing it.” When he was 27, “there was a live audition in Fukuoka. We planned to move to Tokyo if we won. If we didn’t, we planned to stay in Fukuoka. And we won.” That is why he moved to Koenji, the mecca of the indies rock scene in Tokyo. He also
married his girlfriend when he moved to Tokyo. After a few years, his band from Fukuoka broke up. Yusuke thought about quitting playing music altogether, but soon he was asked to join a new band.

Since he finished his schooling at twenty, Yusuke has experienced many different kinds of contract-based employment. In Fukuoka, he worked for a convenience store for six years where he was a manager responsible for the operation of a store. He recounted this period as the most stressful time in his life. “Like, I went back [to the convenience store] to place an order [for the next day], or I started my shift after my live performances. I also worked at midnight like from evening to morning.” After moving to Tokyo, he first worked in his current workplace because he wanted to work in a less stressful environment. He then quit and got two jobs: a call operator of a smartphone seller, and a guitar teacher in a music school. Being a call operator was an emotionally taxing job, and the music school paid too little. Feeling, “I’ve had enough,” he returned to his current job, which he finds much less stressful.

I don’t have to think about anything. Of course, it is physically demanding, and the income is much less compared with the job at a call center, but it is mentally [less demanding] that I don’t have to think about it the day after. That’s important. There were things like that in the convenience store. Like I received a complaint from a customer and couldn’t solve it in the same day, so I had to think about how to explain it to them until the next day.

In addition to working for a parcel delivery service company for about 120 hours a month, he works for 80 hours a month at the central kitchen of a restaurant chain where he marinates meat. At night, he has paid jobs assisting live performances of other people’s band and his own band activities about three to four times a week. In addition to regular live performances, he uploads
the songs they cover on YouTube every week. He is quite busy. “I only have one or two days off a month, the day without any appointment.”

We had an interview on one of those few days he took a day off. Over cups of beer at an affordable Izakaya close to his place, Yusuke jokingly told me that he worries about the future.

Yusuke: The thing that concerns me? I might have to collect empty cans.

Yuki: What?

Yusuke: I might have to collect empty cans. I might have to collect aluminum.

Yuki: Ah, do you mean that you might lose a place to live in the future?

Yusuke: Yeah, I keep having that sort of worries. Well, no, you don’t have to write it down like that. Hahaha. But if I can’t work.

Yuki: Hahaha, so it is not a very concrete worry?

Yusuke: No. There is a worry that if I don't have any place to work, I have to eat with temp jobs. So, I really think, people who work in entertainment are living now by risking their future. Of course it is another story for those who are already popular. But people who do not make it there, they risk their future for now. But there is enough attraction in entertainment so that’s why I keep doing it.

Yuki: Is it a worry that is scary? Or…?

Yusuke: It is scary. It is very scary. When you are young, you can spend a night with a 100 yen cup noodle or something you bake out of floor and water. You can live with that for a week or month. As you grow older, if you keep doing it, it ruins your health. And I really feel it since I turned 30.

The “temp jobs” that he referred to is day labor. In our workplace, we sometimes had day laborers dispatched from temp agencies and they were often looked down on by other non-regular workers. At the same time, he is also optimistic about his future. He “will for sure be richer” because “probably I will sort things out in the next ten years. If I keep doing it, there will
be more income from that [music]. If I quit, I will work for a company and the standard of income will get better.”

Meaning-seekers consent to have precarious jobs in exchange of freedom to pursue what they love or think is meaningful. Yusuke’s career path, which centers around his love of music despite his fear about the future, is one such instance. The act of meaning-seeking is oriented toward the future, and meaning-seekers are investing in the possibility that their work will be rewarded. Nevertheless, their future is so unpredictable that even trying to anticipate it makes little sense. Thus, they focus on maximizing satisfaction at the present moment by avoiding trying to predict the future.

Shifting Values

Jeffrey Arnett (2006)’s heralded notion of emerging adulthood, which is a self-focused period characterized by self-exploration, possibilities, and instability, seems to fit well with the experiences of meaning-seekers in this study. However, while Arnett’s argument assumes that today’s young adults will eventually settle down in the traditional model of adulthood pathways after a prolonged period of transition, many meaning-seekers are already determined to live by continuously exploring their interests. They appeared to have not much interest in the sort of middle-class lives portrayed in Arnett’s study with a stable job, a house in the suburb, and children.

Yusuke is in his early 30s and already married, but both he and his wife have no interest in having children. Even though he foresees that he will “sort things out in the next ten years,” he already knows what he wants in his life. “I want to continue my band activities until I die, under
any condition. Even if I get a regular job and do not have time for music, I still want to play guitar and keep doing music.” He is no longer in the period of self-exploration.

Kiyomi, a cheerful woman in her late 20s works hard to become an actress while working at a hamburger shop in a congested shopping district in Tokyo from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. six days a week. After she leaves the hamburger shop, she walks to a nearby hostess bar and works from 6:30 p.m. to midnight, followed by an hour long train ride home. After graduating from a vocational school, Kiyomi was hired as a wedding planner by a large firm providing wedding services. However, after working there for a few years, she started suffering from an intractable illness. “I thought it was strange. But I assumed it was because I did not want to go to the company. Exceeding stress. It was not because of stress, but I developed the illness.” She lost her job and stayed in her house for almost two years. “Back then I had a boyfriend I had been dating for a long time. So I assumed that I would marry him and keep working. But there was a health problem, and sometimes my mind was going down, so we broke up…” Then, she started attending a voice training course through which she regained the hope to live. “I didn’t know when I will die, and I thought I would do what I want to. I liked music and acting, so I took that opportunity to start it.”

Kiyomi has to work more than 12 hours a day because she has little income during the production period of a play. The production usually takes every day for about a month, and she is not paid for that period. Currently, she is paid a certain amount per show and also gets a rebate from the tickets she is required to sell, which is better than the treatment many other young performers receive.

I no longer have it [a quota] but people in their first or second years of the career have it. Like you have to sell at least 30 tickets. You get a 500 yen rebate per ticket after 30
tickets. It was hard. You are tied down to the project for a month. Suppose you invite 40 people. You only get 3,000 yen [about 30 USD]. No no, 5,000 yen [about 50 USD]. 500 yen back per ticket for 10 tickets. If you don't sell 30 tickets you have to buy them all. You have to pay money. But many people are doing it.

Last year, she was featured on five different shows, and seven shows in the year before. It means that she virtually had no income for half of the year. While she has to be featured on many shows to gain popularity, doing so can impoverish her.

For someone like Kiyomi, work is only a means of subsistence, but others pursue their meaning of life through work. A typical type of work they do is related to various non-profit organizations. These jobs are compensated, but often the level of compensation is much lower than the private sector. While they have a certain level of income security compared with other groups of meaning-seekers, the degree of autonomy and freedom they have tends to be less than that of others.

Sae, a thin and calm woman in her late 20s, has been working for a small NPO in Tokyo since she finished graduate school. She grew up in suburban communities around Tokyo. She was first interested in non-profit jobs when she was little. Though she did not know how to obtain these jobs, assuming language skills would help her, she attended a university that specialized in foreign language and studied English and Arabic. She was also active in organizing a student group promoting peace, where she organized events concerning the Japan-US security treaty. She then studied in a master’s degree program focusing on gender and development.

Upon graduation, she wanted to work for either a non-profit or a consulting company. However, the former often requires at least three years of work experience and the latter is often short-term employment. Her current organization was exceptional because they were interested
in recruiting young people and thus did not require prior work experience. She applied to the position and was accepted as a regular employee. In this organization, her job is to plan various events such as their annual international youth conference as well as more general duties such as fundraising and public relations. She said that she is fulfilled by what she does now.

I just came back from a study tour for middle and high school students the day before yesterday. Because of my age, I am often expected to be the mediator between us and young people in Japan and abroad, like high school students. I really feel Yarigai [something that make a job worth doing] in making a movement with young women and thinking about them.

Sae feels that she is contributing to the world through her job, through which she helps to reduce gender inequality and inform younger generations of people. In this way, she constructs the “meaning” of her life through her job.

Usually, she works from 9:30 a.m. to 7:30 p.m. and takes a vacation once a year. “In terms of vacation, I think I am privileged. But in terms of salary, it is very little so living by myself, supporting myself is very hard.” She now lives with her parents and pays a small amount of rent.

I have my own room, but I want a bit more privacy. [laughing] How to say this... I am 26 already so I think I can come home whenever I want to or stay overnight, but my parents worry as I grew up in an overly protective family. It’s troublesome every time they ask me about that. When I stay late, they ask me ‘what did you do?’

At the same time, she finds that “in terms of salary, living alone would be difficult. If I do that I cannot save any money.”

Last year, she was stressed out from the amount of work and personal relationships in the office, so she was determined to quit and move to another non-profit organization or enroll in a
Ph.D. program. But then, somehow her workload was reduced significantly, which changed her mind. Now she wants to work at this organization at least until the end of this year. The presence of her middle-class parents allows her the privilege of not being bothered by financial concerns for now. However, when it comes to the future, her outlook is not so hopeful.

I hope my salary will increase, but once I leave my parents’ place, saving money would be difficult. This organization is relatively financially stable though certainly there are many problems. I do not have any worry about being fired suddenly, but generally speaking, NGOs are said to diminish in the first four to five years after their foundation. So if I move to a start-up NGO, I think it is very likely that I will be in the situation like ‘I don’t have any money from tomorrow.’

In both Japan and Korea, one characteristic policy response to the perceived “youth employment problems” was to encourage young people from middle-class backgrounds to make their own jobs (Furuichi 2012; Song 2009). Indeed, many young people tried making their own jobs to carve out their future.

Hyong-u, a man in his late 20s, runs his own political organization in Seoul and works as a “political popular idol.” He is an entrepreneur type among my interviewees. Aside from running his own political organization, he is currently funded by a political think-tank to work on an individual project. He chose to run an international exchange program among young people with financial support from the foundation. He grew up in a fashionable neighborhood near Gangnam where his parents ran a small, inexpensive restaurant. There, “I think I was at the very bottom. I was poor. Back then I felt ashamed but now feel I was able to do what I wanted to do so I feel confident.”

His father’s restaurant went bankrupt when the Asian financial crisis hit in 1997, and the family had to flee from their apartment and started living in Hyong-u’s grandmother’s house. He
had to rely on student loans to attend college and had to work part-time to earn his living while his friends enjoyed their time in college and traveled to other countries. He also had to help his parents to pay off their debt after graduation. Hyong-u recalled that he was stressed out through most of his 20s because of the family’s financial problems that started from the financial crisis.

Hyong-u wanted to become a journalist, so he majored in journalism in college and did an internship at a newspaper company. There, he helped to cover the Sewol disaster, in which a ferry headed to Jeju island capsized and sank near Byeongpungdo, which killed more than 300 people, the majority of whom were high school students. Through this experience, he found that his personality does not match well with a sort of “assertiveness” required for this occupation, as he puts it. For him, interviewing family members of the victims felt insensitive and painful.

He then decided to pursue his other interest in politics. After graduating from college, he worked in an office of a politician, as Hyong-u resonated with the politician’s call to close the gap between the rich and poor. After that, he spent a year in Sapporo, Japan studying the language while working full-time at a restaurant. There, he had many chances to compare his native Korea with Japan, which directed his interest to the youth problem, particularly about employment issues.

Upon returning from Japan, he helped run an election campaign. After his contract had come to an end, he stayed unemployed for five months. While he was offered jobs from some politicians, they were all closely connected to Park Geun-hye, and Hyong-u’s political stance did not allow him to work for them. Then, he was recruited to work for the current political think tank after a person in the organization read his interview article. He works about four days a week from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. although he does not have to come to the office at a specific time. Hyong-u enjoys his job.
I like it (the job) now. If I were in a big corporation, I would gain more money, but I would not be happy in terms of my life. My friend works for Hyundai Motors, an automobile company. That person goes to the company at 7 in the morning and leaves the office at 11 p.m. But I think money is not everything in life, so I chose the political activities I do now.

In ten years, he expects to become a politician. If not, he at least hopes to become a known figure in the world of politics as he is one of the few people in his generation actively working in politics.

Still some others are loath to be tied to the workplace and try to achieve a lifestyle that gives them the freedom to travel whenever they want to. For them, the pursuit of this lifestyle itself is meaningful, and thus their job is the means through which they achieve this goal.

I met Hee-yun, a woman in her early 30s, in a cozy café specializing in herb teas in Hanok village in central Seoul. She was wearing a simple sweater coat, whose fine quality one can instantly recognize. Hee-yun was born in Paris while her father was pursuing his Ph.D. and the family lived there for a total of eight years until they moved back to Korea when his father took a professorship in a university in Korea. Since then the family has been living in a wealthy district outside of Seoul where a number of IT companies are headquartered. She graduated from a foreign language high school as a French major and then studied molecular biology at Ewha where she obtained BA and MS degrees. Graduate school life, however, was different from what she had expected, so she gave up the idea of pursuing a Ph.D. program and has been living like a nomad since then.

Since she couch-surfs around the world multiple times a year, flexibility is an important criterion in choosing a job. As a private tutor for rich Korean kids who are either in schools in English speaking countries or want to attend one, she can offer a class through Skype from other
parts of the world. Even when she stays in Seoul, she sometimes works for only 10 hours a week while sometimes she has to work for 10 hours a day. She lives in a shared house near this cafe, and she needs only about 1,000,000 Won (about 1,000 USD) a month to sustain her life. She earns more than that from her current job, so she does not worry about her economic situation too much. Although she enjoys tutoring, especially students who are interested in the subject, she is also aware that this job is not something she is into from the bottom of her heart. Her mother also keeps telling her to get more stable employment, but it is also difficult to quit because the job is convenient and there is nothing particularly annoying about it.

Considering her background, it comes with little surprise that she does not worry too much about her economic situation in the future. What matters more to her is the problem of finding something that makes her keep going. At the moment, she does not have a focused goal in her life. She is interested in studying environmental science or working in an environmental organization. At the last minute before she turned 30, she applied for a working holiday visa in Australia, but she is not certain whether she wants to go there. Her eventual goal is to become self-sustainable by having her own farm, to which “I will invite you someday [laughing]” as she added jokingly.

Meaning-seekers tend to have a belief that money and security are not something worthwhile to sacrifice their life for. Hee-yun does not see much necessity to work long hours because she does not need much money to sustain her life. I asked her if her unstable income makes her worry.

I have that sort of idea, but I don’t use much money. In my idea, because I don’t do shopping, all the money I use is for rent, foods, transportation fees. I don’t use the money on other things. I often use less than 1,000,000 Won [about $900] a month. Yes, I try to live on 10,000 Won [$9] a day, but I don’t do well [laughing]. But usually, the card bill is
less than 500,000 Won [$450] a month. And rent… I think I can live under 1,000,000 Won a month.

In Tokyo, Reo, a nomadic web designer who recently returned from his year-long stay on Ishigaki island, one of the remote islands of Okinawa, is also not bothered too much by his unstable income for the same reason as Hee-yun.

I don’t buy things much, and I [usually] live in a shared room. During my time in Ishigaki, I was allowed to live in a quaint house for 10,000 yen [about $90] a month. Now I also live in a shared room. It is about 40,000 yen [$360] including utilities. It’s in Sasazuka so I can go to Shinjuku and Shibuya [major commercial districts in Tokyo] by bicycle. I wanted to run around Tokyo with a bicycle.

One can suspect that they are exceptional because of the environment of their upbringing since both of them lived in foreign countries for a long period of time. However, many others made similar comments. Hae-young’s, a woman in her twenties whose parents are struggling to run a supermarket in Seoul after her father quit a full-time union staff position at a large telecommunication company. She now works for a labor union and shares the same opinion.

I am not the kind of ‘style’ where you spend really a lot of money. When it goes well my cost of living is 300,000 Won [$270] per month, and even when I need a lot of money, when I spent the most it was 700,000 Won [$630] [laughing]. So I might be better than other people in this respect. I don’t need to pay rent too. If I need to pay rent, it takes a lot of money.

A shared understanding among meaning-seekers is that there are things worth more than money in life. That is the very reason they chose the path they are walking down. Seung-woo, a young man who is pursuing a Ph.D. in Mathematics while working part-time along with political activities in Seoul, told me:
Yuki: If you can do the job you want, you don’t need much money?

Seung-woo: Yes, yes. That’s what I have been told. I don't’ have much desire for wealth. I do the job that I want.

Yuki: So you are not interested in a good car or a good house?

Seung-woo: It would be good if I have it [laughing]. It would be good, but I think rather than to live in a good house, to help people in a difficult situation, or rather than to ride a good car, to enable everyone to have opportunities for education is more important.

In the meantime, their middle-class upbringing and experiences of staying abroad allowed them to question the orientation toward security and shaped the passion that drives them. In this sense, meaning-seeking as a response to uncertainty is rendered structurally unequal. First, they live in two global cities in East Asia that are economically more prosperous than many other regions in the world. Second, their families possess high amounts of economic, cultural, and social capital. The jobs that meaning-seekers typically have pay less and are much more unstable compared to the ones insiders have. Like insiders, the four sub-groups of meaning seekers tend to come from middle-class backgrounds. This point will be discussed in the next chapter in relation to their educational histories.

Furthermore, today’s young adults live in a particular period in which meaning-seeking appears as an attractive alternative to the insider pathways. Millennials in Japan and Korea spent most of their lifetime, especially the coming of age period, under a gloomy economy. While the impacts of the crises were borne more severely by firms at the margin of economies, there is also a long list of big companies that used to be considered safe but failed, such as Daewoo group or Japan Airlines. Mass media have been filled with the bizarre image of employers betraying the long-term loyalty of their employees in times of trouble. The sense of hopelessness, or precariousness, was further exacerbated by the global financial crisis in 2008. When nobody can
escape from insecurity, as the case of insiders in Seoul in the previous section illustrated, it makes sense to shift their attention away from security and instead choose what young adults think will make their life richer in other ways.

In the long run, however, the fact that the most privileged interviewees in terms of class and education such as Reo and Hee-yun who graduated from elite private universities consent to work for low-wages can have an adverse effect on everyone else. Economist Robert Frank, in his book *Falling Behind*, shows an intriguing mechanism through which rising inequality damages the lives of the middle-class. One major argument he advanced is that the concentration of income and wealth at the top and the conspicuous consumption of those in that narrow stratum alters the context in which competition over consumption to define the middle-class status takes place. Despite the fact that the disposable income of middle-class American families has not changed significantly in the last several decades, today they spend more money to buy things he calls “positional goods” such as bigger houses and better cars. Thus, “it has raised the cost of achieving goals that most middle-class families regard as basic” (Frank 2013:57).

A reverse pattern of the same mechanism can be observed in the consumption pattern of meaning-seekers, which I call “the falling standard of adequate.” In the long run, the consent by a relatively privileged group of young people from middle or upper-middle class backgrounds to lower their standard of living and work for low wages in exchange for freedom can have deleterious effects on others, because their consumption and working patterns can influence the standard of the markets.
Turning to the Present

Insecurity derives in part from one’s forecast of her or his future. For meaning-seekers it is difficult to “colonize the future” to borrow from Anthony Giddens’ metaphor of uncertainty and risk in the age of late-modernity (Giddens 1991). As they tend to assume that their current situation is temporary, their perception of insecurity is often a conflicted mix of innocent optimism and sweeping pessimism. Yusuke “will for sure be richer” in ten years and hopes to buy an apartment in Tokyo. “Ideally, the standard of living gets higher, buy an apartment here, bring my parents, and take care of them. That’s the ideal life.” At the same time, he worries that he “might have to collect empty cans” and live as a day laborer.

I worry about the situation of me living long, to the extent that life gets pointless like until 80 or 90 years old and running short of money. If I were single, that should be fine, but I am married. Let’s say if I quit [playing music] today, I can live if I were not picky [about the job] but what I most afraid of is that the current situation continues until I am 40 or 50 (…) If I quit music, I have no choice but to go back to Fukuoka or Nagasaki. And the only education I have is music. It is my only ability and that is the anxiety.”

For meaning-seekers, things can turn in many different directions both positive and negative, whereas outsiders tend not to expect a substantial improvement in their living standards. Furthermore, some meaning-seekers even tend to embrace flexibility and instability as an integral part of their life and identity. Yusuke’s workplace has been suffering from a chronic lack of human resources and was unable to catch up with the market demand. The managers wanted someone like Yusuke to become a regular worker, but that was out of the question for him. For him, the flexibility that allows him to play music is more important than security, at least for now.
One response to uncertainty in this context, which is rational to the extent of their knowledge, is to turn their back on the future and find satisfaction with the present. When asked about her forecast for the next ten years, Kaho, a woman in her early 30s who recently became a freelance writer for online media after working for some different companies in Tokyo, responded that she does not think about the future. “Ten years later…I am very bad at thinking about the future, so I don’t think at all. Ten years later I will be 43. What will I be doing? I hope to be the same as now. Sleep when I feel sleepy, eat something delicious when I am hungry.”

It is not that she does not worry “about the future, yes there are many uncertain factors, many, but there is no point of worrying so I just try things out. When I quit the regular work, it was scary, but I just tried.” As Kaho’s comment suggests, especially for meaning-seekers whose lives are entrepreneurial to some extent, worrying about the future seems not to be worthwhile. Their narratives are guided by the “act before you think” type of entrepreneurial trope. Tatsuya, who works at a theme park but travels overseas to participate in various street dance international competitions that are often held in Europe said, “if I feel really anxious, perhaps I will do something. Like if I worry about money, then I will think about what to do to earn money, and I think I can solve the problem.”

Sometimes they also explain their indifference to the future in light of their personal traits. Dong-min, a man in his 30s whom I met at a union activity in Seoul and one of the few individuals who did not attend high school, noted that despite his precarious employment status as an irregular worker in the local government office, “I don’t know about the future, but that is not making me anxious. I am a bit optimistic when it comes to this. My colleagues might be anxious, but I am optimistic.”
After talking about both his worry about years to come, and his optimistic forecast of the more distant future, Reo, the nomadic web designer in Tokyo in his mid 20s, concluded by returning to the present: “so I think if I can live a moment in which I can see the bright future, and keep living that moment, is more important than whether I can actually make it or not.” Given the higher level of unpredictability in their careers, to “live a moment in which I can see the bright future” rather than to try to grasp the future is one response to uncertainty that insiders and outsiders can choose.

After speaking about his prospect of a better economic situation and fear of becoming homeless, Yusuke, the musician in Tokyo, says,

Realistically speaking, I am satisfied. I enjoy my current life. I really wish this life to continue forever. It’s not like my health is declining and not that I can’t make ends meet. Sometimes we can treat ourselves and go out to eat Yakiniku [Japanese BBQ] once a month. This situation is a lot of fun. If I were in the situation to eat like a lot of delicious stuff, I am the kind of person to be spoiled. I am a self-destructive person, so I use as much as I have. You can just say I am complacent. Of course, as a goal, I want to increase my income. But I don't want to change my standard of living. I don't need to change it. Well, ideally, I would like to go to a convenience store and buy what I want without looking at the price tag rather than to walk to Seiyu [a grocery store chain Walmart owned until recently that is known for its reasonable prices], but only that much is enough.

Yusuke and Kaho’s desires appear to be much more moderate than that of insiders. Their resignation from consumption is both an underlying cause and consequence of becoming a meaning-seeker and reflects their response to get by in an increasingly uncertain world.
OUTSIDERS: PRACTICALLY ADJUSTING TO INSECURITY

Shigeki Takimoto

I came to know Shigeki when he was dispatched as a day laborer to the workplace where Yusuke and I worked. He came to supplement our short labor force after two guys both in their fifties had quit following an emotional outburst when they had separate quarrels with the manager. After some casual conversations in the workplace, he agreed to be interviewed, and we met again in a family restaurant in a bustling commercial district in Tokyo.

When we met in front of a police station, he was wearing a gray hooded sweatshirt and black sweatpants. He had spent a long day putting diced tomatoes on packaged spaghetti in the central kitchen of a convenience store chain located outside of Tokyo. Because of this convenience store chain’s all noodles 50 yen discount campaign that week, he had to work overtime.

The interview took place only a month after Shigeki had moved to Tokyo from a major city in Northern Japan where he was born in 1993. His parents run a family-owned hardware store in the central part of the city. After graduating from a private high school, he attended a private college in this local city and majored in Economics. He was also accepted to a public university in another area, but because it was right after the great earthquake of 2011 hit his hometown, he decided that he could not leave his family. For a similar reason, after he finished college Shigeki looked for a job in his home city. He planned to look for jobs in a bigger region if he did not get a job after applying to five companies. A Securities, a large security company’s local branch was the only company that offered him a job offer, and he accepted it.

A Securities was contracted by the city’s new subway line and thus Shigeki was dispatched to a subway station as a station attendant. This new workplace consisted of
approximately 40% new graduates and 60% people in their 40s and 50s. Shigeki described the
majority of older workers as the “out-there” people who cannot perform the job satisfactorily.

They say ‘I can’t do this job’ and quit. It would be better if they work for at least three
months but it was like... three people quit in the first month, five people quit in the
second month, and eight people quit in the third month. So the supply (of human
resources) cannot catch up.

Because of the unusual speed of turnover, young workers like Shigeki had to make up for the
shortage of labor.

It was a negative spiral. Because of the environment, workers quit one after another. We
had both day and night shifts, and when we were most busy, I have gone to the workplace
at 9 in the morning, and I came home at nine the next morning. So the work starts on
Monday and finishes on Tuesday. Then, I go again on Wednesday and come home on
Thursday. After my work finishes at nine on Thursday morning, I am told to come back
again at six that evening. I work from 6 p.m. on Thursday to 9 a.m. on Friday. I come
back again at nine on Saturday and come home on Sunday. Finally, I have a day off on
Monday and return to work on Tuesday morning. I was fine for the first month, but I
almost reached my physical limit in the second month [of this shift].

He felt sick after two months and consulted with the manager, but his request to improve
working conditions was flatly denied. He eventually quit and spent a year to improve his health
condition because, at that point, “just standing was hard by itself.” Then he thought it was a good
opportunity for him to try something new and he moved into a tiny apartment in a suburb of
Tokyo, which costs only 42,000 Yen [about 420 USD] a month.

He registered with a staffing agency and is dispatched to different workplaces four to five
times a week. One day, he works for a moving company, the next day he works for a cleaning
company. Yet another day he works with us in a parcel delivery company, and the next day he
works for a factory of the convenience store. As such, he performs different jobs in different parts of town every day. His job is a source of anxiety for him.

There are two sorts [of anxiety]. First, I feel anxious about my life now, so I have to find a job [full-time job] first. Second, when I worked for the previous company and was tired from overwork, I wondered why I was working. Well, I did not dislike the job too much, but it was not the job I really wanted to do. It was not like I can do anything for that job. At the same time, it is not that I was obliged to work to feed my family. I felt like I was working just to survive. That was what I felt during the busiest period. So my other anxiety is, if I get a job now and I hit this wall again, I don’t know what I should do (...). I want to find something that can keep me going beyond just working. Well, I am not sure if I can find it. That is making me anxious.

Out of labor shortage, our employer was very much interested in recruiting him. The company offered him a non-regular position, in which he has good chances to be promoted to a regular position in a few years. He decided to work for this company soon after the interview. He is now hoping to find a job that will enable him to get by in Tokyo and plans to stay there at least until 2020 when the Olympics will come to town.

*Practically Adjusting to Insecurity*

Outsiders have contract-based employment or pseudo-regular employment. Though much writing about precarity focuses on the experiences of non-regular workers, I found that there are two types of outsider jobs. One is the many varieties of non-regular employment, including but not limited to part-time jobs, contract jobs, and agency work. These are the typical precarious jobs. Another form of outsider employment I encountered in this research is pseudo-regular employment that I call precarious regular jobs. Precarious regular jobs seem to take the form of regular or permanent employment, but workers do not have access to the stability of regular pay increases that regular workers have traditionally enjoyed. These two forms of outsider jobs are
uncertain from the workers’ perspective and the workers bear the risks of employment instead of employers.

Shigeki who has worked as a station attendant at a subway station, had been hired as a regular worker by A Securities upon graduation from college. However, when he fell ill from overwork and quit A Securities, he became a day laborer in Tokyo. While the literature tends to focus on the difference between regular and non-regular employment, Shigeki’s experience illustrates that the boundary between the two is often tenuous. In the context of labor market flexibility, inequality of security exists not only between standard and non-standard employment but also within standard employment arrangements. According to a 2013 report by the Japanese Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare on “disposable use” of young workers, among 5,111 investigated workplaces, 82% (4,189) had violated labour laws in one way or another (2013a). As the concern over this form of precarious employment has grown, the Ministry opened a temporary consultation line and on its first day of operation they received 1,042 requests for consultations mainly from workers in their 20s and 30s (MHLW 2013b). Takashi’s experience at T Housing, a big company having nearly 10,000 employees across the country, helps us to understand the reality of such employment.

I came to know Takashi, a man in his 20s through my participant observation of union activities in Tokyo. On a scorching hot day in July, Takashi and a group of union members gathered at a major business district in Tokyo, and protested against Takashi’s former employer, T Housing.

The first regular position Takashi he had been offered in his life was at T housing. According to the contract, his work hours are from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. in addition to 89 hours of de facto overtime hours per month, which is already included in his salary. However, the available
record collected by the union shows that he typically worked at least 100 hours a month in addition to 160 regular hours. He arrives at the office at 8:30 and joins the morning assembly. A month’s quota is placed on each employee’s desk, and they are forced to shout out that quota and how much they sold in the month in front of colleagues. Afterward, they have another shouting assembly within the department to which they belong. At the beginning of the month, there is also a “no-result person” speech time. Employees who have not sold anything during the period are forced to confess publicly that they are bad employees. The company’s housing products are million-dollar deals, and the housing market is already saturated in the area where he was assigned, so no one in his or previous cohorts has ever gotten a contract. Virtually everyone is deemed “no-result persons.”

At 9:30 a.m., employees are dropped off at random points in town with a map and sales materials in hand from a Toyota minivan that the department manager drives. They randomly visit around 35 relatively large houses they found on the map. Usually, workers ask landowners to lease their land to T Housing for 35 years. The owners lend their land to T Housing which pays monthly rental fees. But the owner has to vacate the premises and pay them construction fees for a rental apartment and will also have to pay maintenance fees when the apartments are built.

They go back to the office around noon and write a report for the manager to read. Then, they make documents to show to the possible customers they just visited that morning and the rest of the day is spent to revisit them. At 8 p.m., Takashi calls the manager and ask if he can go home. Most times the manager tells him to keep visiting new houses until he gets something. If he finds a customer who is interested, he has to come back to the office and stay until midnight to finish crafting a specific sales plan for that customer. The next morning, at 8:30 a.m., he
returns to the office for another shouting assembly. On the weekend, sometimes the manager shows up at Takashi’s place without notice and kidnaps him to the office.

T Housing has a mechanism to encourage no-result persons to leave. At the end of the first year of employment, they reduce the base salary of those who did not get any contracts by 50,000 yen (about 500 USD). Three months later, they reduce the salary by another 50,000 yen. At this point, the remaining base salary is only about 40,000 Yen (about 400 USD) per month and 89 hours of overtime payment is added to that. If they were at least paid the minimum wage (956 Yen [about 9.5 USD] per hour in 2018) in the area where Takashi’s office is located, for 249 hours as Takashi’s employment contract specifies, their monthly salary before deductions should be around 240,000 Yen (about 2,400 USD) a month. And this simple calculation does not even include unpaid overwork beyond 249 hours. Hence, they are not even paid the minimum wage. According to Takashi, T Housing also benefits from networks their employees have. T Housing hires workers in the area where they grew up. The purpose is to make employees sell their products to their friends and families using their personal networks. One of Takashi’s senior workers forced his own grandfather to sign a contract to lend his land, an act that broke his family apart.

When Takashi decided to quit after six months of employment, all but one employee in his cohort had already left the company. So had everyone in earlier cohorts. If an employee still chooses to stay despite the reduced salary, the company finally fires her or him at the end of the second year. This mechanism enables the company to exhaust labor in a short period of time. Upon telling his boss of his intention to resign, however, the department head tried to ban Takashi from applying for another job, and threatened him, “if you get a new job I will tell them (new employer) that you quit us like this so you will never get a job.” Even after Takashi
submitted his resignation notice, the manager still called him every day and then started calling his family.

Thus, these marginal regular jobs take the form of regular, permanent employment, but they are oftentimes as precarious as non-regular jobs from the workers’ perspective and the workers bear the risk of employment instead of employers. Furthermore, the degree of labour exploitation in precarious regular employment is also comparable to or even more severe than that involved in non-regular employment. These employers, called “black companies” in the mass media, tend to hire a massive number of workers that they cannot afford to employ for the long term and exploit their labor force as much as they can. Often, workers must quit “voluntarily” when they reach the limits of their physical or mental capacities. The employer does not expect this labor to reproduce because they can replace it by hiring new workers. Hence, it is mainly unscrupulous large corporations that systematically “use and dispose” young workers.

The difference between meaning-seekers and outsiders is that whereas the former deliberately chose unstable employment the latter often lacked other options. For outsiders, to imagine a brighter future is often a difficult task. Takashi had accepted the job offer from T Housing and endured harsh working conditions because it was a regular position.

Sometimes, workers rely on individual-affiliate unions that emerged in the context of declining union membership and density. In Tokyo, I joined and observed the activities of Tokyo Young Contingent Workers’ Union and a group of unions affiliated with NPO POSSE. These are relatively new (founded in 2000 and 2014) and small unions with less than ten full-time staff members. In Seoul, I also joined the activities of Youth Union and Arbeit Union (founded in 2010 and 2012). They rely on a form of union organizing that utilizes social movement style
campaigning and online media to organize precarious young workers who are not likely to be organized by enterprise unions (Kojima 2017; Royle and Urano 2012; Suzuki 2008; Watanabe 2018).

Another marginal insider, Yoshiki, a man in his 30s, worked for JP Drink, which is a subsidiary of a major beverage producer. JP Drink alone has around 5,000 employees across the country. Yoshiki was offered a job at a big company in his final year in college. But then the 2008 financial crisis hit, and the company canceled the job offer. Fortunately, he gained another job offer as a regular employee at an IT company ten days before his graduation. In that company, however, he had to perform more than 200 hours of overtime hours per month on average. He usually worked from 7 am to 1 am without any overtime payment. Despite working that long, his annual income was less than three million JPY (about 30,000 USD). That is why he moved to JP Drinks.

However, long hours of unpaid work are normalized at JP Drinks, too. Yoshiki typically drives a truck and fills about 20 vending machines with canned beverages each day. On the contract, they are supposed to work for seven hours and 45 minutes a day starting from 9 a.m. In reality, they have to come to the workplace around 7:30 in the morning and work until 9 to 9:30 p.m. without any break. This resulted in more than 110 hours of overtime work per month, and many of these hours were not paid due to the illegal operation of de facto overtime hours system. The following is an excerpt from a dialogue between Yoshiki and one of the full-time members of the union in an article published from the monthly magazine that this union publishes. “In my experience, even if you quit a black company, you will end up with another black company. One friend of mine changed jobs seven times from graduation until he turned 30 and all of them were
at black companies” (Kita 2018:98). Often precarious young workers find union organizing is the only way to exert their agency.

When individuals face the challenge of growing job insecurity, their choices are to stay loyal to the company, voice to make a change, or exit the system altogether as Albert Hirschman argued in his famous typology of responses to dysfunctions or misbehavior of states, organizations and firms (Hirschman 1970). Through participant observation of alternative forms of union organizing among young people in Seoul and Tokyo, I learned that there are young people who decided to “voice.” It is increasingly difficult to believe that simply quitting the current job will make their situation any better when there are not enough secure positions. Young workers are not overly socialized cultural dupes who lack the ability to question their situation. They are keenly aware not only of their pain but also the inadequacy of their resumes that places them in particular positions in the labor market. At some point, however, workers reach their limit. Precarious regular jobs are simply not sustainable. For example, when Yoshiki’s application for another regular job was rejected, the only choice left for him was to resist.

First of all, I didn’t have a choice to keep doing this hard work without making any action. Because there was a time I could not stand in my room if I keep doing this work. I might fall again. So at first, I was thinking about changing jobs and then asking them to pay unpaid overtime hours. However, even if I want to change jobs, I could find only ”black companies” and there was barely any job with good working conditions. So I decided to fight while staying in the company (Kita and Aoki 2018:85).

Yet, unfortunately, the vast majority of precariously employed young people remain non-unionized. Voice appears as a rather rare response among the disadvantaged young adults. They often lack time or other resources to join protests. Thus, young adults often choose to be resigned
and adjust to the insecurities associated with their jobs. Takashi recalled his experiences at T Housing that even though “people were almost dying from overwork (Karoshi), and other people stopped coming to the company,” he kept working without questioning.

Workers are in tough situations, and they have an awareness of its pain and want to quit, but as it was especially the case for me, since I was able to enter T Housing, the very big company listed on the first section [of the Tokyo Stock Exchange], I did not have any idea that the big company can do wrong things. I thought “ah.. this is the way it is.’ It was hard, but I thought, "maybe this is the way it works." I had a day off and had an appointment, but the boss ordered me to come to the office, saying the branch manager had requested, then I had to go back and canceled my appointment with friends. When he suddenly came to pick me up [on the weekend], I only thought “ah…this is the way it is…” I kept working without questioning.

He persisted despite the fact that Takashi’s job at T Housing did not provide him the comparable protection that the conventional regular employment provides. Although Takashi finally decided to raise his voice against his employer through consultations with union staff members, as he observes, most young adults “keep working without questioning” even under harsh working environments.

When there are not enough resources to initiate action, the only response they can take is to be resigned. At the same time, paradoxically, for some, the fact that many of them work for nearly minimum wage provides them with some sense of security. Unlike insiders, they can find a job with comparable salary and benefits easily even if they lose the current position.

The studies that look at experiences of labor market insecurity have tended to focus on non-regular workers in a particular geographical setting. In this respect, this study’s data is unique because I interviewed young adults from a variety of class backgrounds in two different cities. Two interesting conclusions can be drawn from this. First, as theorists of insecurity, precarity, and risks suggested, it seems to be true that “job insecurity is everywhere now” at least
at the subjective level. Meanwhile, my findings suggest that it does not mean everybody experiences the same level and form of insecurity.

Table 3.1 shows the number of job changes interviewees have experienced so far. Given the small size of the sample, the purpose of this table is only to show a pattern among my interviewees and I do not have any intention to generalize findings beyond the sample of this study. Both in Seoul and Tokyo, objectively speaking, insiders are less likely to have the experience of job changes than others. 75% of insiders in Seoul and 81% in Tokyo do not have the experience of changing a job. Despite their seemingly secure economic situations, insiders are often even more anxious than others in this study. Second, this tendency is stronger among interviewees in Seoul, while most interviewees in Tokyo with secure employment were free from such a concern. Why so?

Table 3.1 Number of Job Changes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Seoul (N=45)*</th>
<th>Tokyo (N=43)</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0 (23)</td>
<td>0 (21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insiders (12)</td>
<td>75% (9)</td>
<td>81% (17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaning (16)</td>
<td>44% (7)</td>
<td>30% (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outsider (17)</td>
<td>41% (7)</td>
<td>8% (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>One or more (22)</td>
<td>On or more (22)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>25% (3)</td>
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<td>56% (9)</td>
<td>70% (7)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>59% (10)</td>
<td>92% (11)</td>
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*Excluding job seekers

WHY DO INSIDERS WORRY SO MUCH?

Sang-min, a regular employee of a Chaebol corporation in Seoul, forecasts his future as not so bright. Takuya, a man in his early 30s who works for one of the biggest accounting firms in
Tokyo, worries about his future as he sees his once middle-class but now economically struggling parents. Takuya thinks that his father must have made a substantial amount of money when he was a manager in a large home building company. But after sending two children to private schools, his parents are economically struggling now. In particular, the remaining payments on the 35-year mortgage on their house in central Tokyo is the source of their headache. He had lent them money when his parents were experiencing hardship, and they have not yet paid him back. It made him wonder how much saving is enough for his future. He used to live in a rental apartment, but now he has returned to his parents’ place and pays 80,000 Yen (about 800 USD) a month to help his parents pay off the mortgage. Even Mika, who has perhaps the most secure employment among all the interviewees as a non-career track employee of a large insurance company in Tokyo, expects that her economic situation will be tighter in the future unless she marries a financially stable person.

Here, it is important to consider on what basis they define their insecurity because, essentially, insecurity is a relational phenomenon. When I was talking to Munenori, my high school classmate who is a regular employee of one of the biggest banks in the country, he told me that he does not have money. As he explains, “the reason is because, since I work for a bank, I cannot do investments such as stock or virtual currency exchange. We can’t do that.” At first, it sounded strange as a remark of someone who has the most stable job among us who graduated from the same class. But he does not compare himself with all the people in his generation.

Yuki: Do you think you are better off than the average of your generation in general?

Munenori: I think I have less at least for now.

Yuki: Seriously?
Munenori: Ah...but it is like, there are groups of people who have kids and who don’t have kids, married and unmarried, employed and unemployed. So perhaps there is no point of comparing Yuki and me in terms of how much money we have now. Then doesn’t it mean to compare with the similar kind of people? If so, I think I am similar to others of my age.

Their primary subjects of comparisons are of two sorts –with their peers in the same generation unit and their parents. His subject of comparison was not me but a group of people who belong to the same generation-unit, as Karl Manheim articulated. Takuya explained it succinctly. “Because the worlds we lived in were too different,” it was only after he started working that he came to know people growing up in totally different situations from his own middle-class family “like growing up in a broken family, having a lot of debts or criminal records.”

To put it crudely, there are two sorts of insider jobs in both cities: public and private. In both cities, people feel that the public sector is the most secure arena of labor markets. It is, indeed, a place where one’s future is secure as long as they have a regular position. One characteristic of insiders in Korea was that their family members were not affected severely by the economic crises in 1997 and 2008 whereas many people introduced in other chapters experienced significant life changes like losing their place to stay almost overnight. At the same time, the number of non-regular positions is increasing in the public sector, and they are far from secure. During the research period, one friend of mine got a job offer at a city government office in Tokyo and quit his non-regular job at a big corporation. To his surprise, when he called the city office a week before the starting date of employment, he was informed that it turned out that there was no vacancy and he was told to wait until someone quit.
The degree of security that regular employment in the government provides is the reason why many parents expect their children to become high-level civil servants in Seoul. Indeed, many young people spend up to several years preparing for extremely competitive examinations to become civil servants. Ji-hye among my interviewees had studied for three years to prepare for an examination to become a diplomat, which she finally gave up as she became ill due to long-hours of studying and stress coming from it. Kwon Ji-hun, a man in his 20s who just graduated from college also prepared for an exam (which he eventually gave up like Ji-hye) explained to me that civil service exams are regarded as fair.

The number of people doing it [preparing for civil service exams] is growing. Perhaps you may know about it. The growing tendency. Getting a job is increasingly difficult. There is an image that civil service [exam] is at least fair. Fair. If you get a high score, then you can get [a job]. If you study hard you can get [a job]. It is an honest exam. In the last few years, there were many news reports about private corporations accepting people who did not answer well in the interview. This is not fair. There is an image that those who can make it make it anyway [regardless of whatever they do]. So many people are taking civil service exams. The mass media says that it is a social problem and I think so too.

He refers to a popular rumor about sons and daughters of the powerful having been given special considerations when they apply to prestigious colleges or companies.

They compare their security not only with people in their generation-unit, but also with that of their parents. Kenji, a 25 years old man who works for a large pharmaceutical company in Tokyo, told me that “since I know I enjoyed a privileged life, now I am worried if I can provide the same level of comfort to my child” even though he had neither a wife nor a child at the time of the interview. It is a common concern among insiders in both cities. They sense that it is increasingly difficult to attain as much comfort and security as their parents’ generation who
were their age during the period of economic development when incomes of all classes grew in a more or less similar manner.

Kenji also predicts that his relative social position will decline in the future since his company does not pay as much as other large pharmaceutical companies in Japan. Given the fact that his company’s average annual salary is more than twice that of the overall labor force in Japan, it seems to be surprising at first. But it is also true that, on average, some other pharmaceutical companies pay almost 1.5 times more than his company does. Although he has very stable employment and a high salary, he worries because he compares himself to his parents and people in his generation-unit.

Second, insiders have more to lose than outsiders, which makes them anxious. British sociologist Kevin Doogan argues that “precarious employment is less a matter of estimated job risk and more about anxiety over the cost of losing jobs and welfare benefits” (2009:12). When a question about economic insecurity is included in a social survey, it is most likely to be about the perceived likelihood of losing their jobs in the future, from an employee’s point of view what matters more is what they will lose when they lose a job, rather than simply its likelihood. These perceived costs have at least a few aspects.

First, their current jobs are a scarce resource that many people aspire to, which is available only to the few. Like Jung-hoon and Kiyomi in this study, if you were an outsider and working for a hamburger shop, you are most likely to gain the same level of payment and benefits in any other hamburger shop in town. What they can get from McDonald’s and Burger King are not too different. It is not the case for insiders. Just as Son-ha noticed that nowhere else in society could she find a job that pays as much as her first job at a Chaebol corporation, many among my interviewees were well aware that what they get from their company –salary, benefits,
and status—are difficult to regain if they lose it. It creates a stronger dependency on the job they have now.

Second, they have invested more to gain their current job. Sang-min, Takuya, and Mika and their parents had invested enormous financial costs before they obtained the insider status. Insiders’ parents moved to expensive neighborhoods like Gangnam for their children’s education. They also paid for special or private schools, cram schools, and other extracurricular activities that often include studying abroad. There was also an emotional investment, which often created conflicts between insiders and their parents over what the parents want them to be and what they want to be. Insiders endured emotional strains resulting from extremely long hours of studying for exams. The insider’s job is a fruit of all these cumulative efforts, and it is too costly to lose for both their parents and themselves.

Third, their job comes with more social expectations, especially from their parents. Simple altruism explains a part of the reasons why parents invest so much money in their children’s education in Seoul and Tokyo. However, it is also true that they expect something in return after their retirement and this tendency is stronger in Seoul than Tokyo. While it is not always the case, parents sometimes see the cost of education in a manner akin to gift-giving, which forms a moral relationship between individuals. In his classic study of potlatch, Marcel Mauss called this compulsory system “total services,” in which “one must give back to another person what is really part and parcel of his nature and substance, because to accept something from somebody is to accept some part of his spiritual essence, of his soul” (1990:12).

For most interviewees, it was virtually impossible to reject the various forms of support from parents and get away from the expectations imposed on them, because to refuse to accept is “tantamount to declaring war; is to reject the bond of alliance and commonality” (Mauss
The parents’ expectation of reciprocity makes it difficult for their children to leave the insider path.

In sum, I argue that there are two primary reasons why insiders tend to feel insecure. First, they tend to compare themselves with the privileged few in their own or previous generations rather than all people in society. Second, they have more to lose than outsiders.

WHY ARE INSIDERS IN SEOUL SO ANXIETY RIDDEN?

In his book *The Precariat*, Guy Standing referred quite often to Japan’s “legendary salaryman” and its demise. “Those still clinging on are under pressure, many being replaced by younger workers and by women with none of their employment security. The precariat is displacing salaryman, whose pain is revealed by an alarming rise in suicides and social illnesses” (Standing 2011:17). Some of the interviewees in Seoul seem to foresee themselves in the position that Standing describes in the near future. Interestingly, however, most Japanese young salarymen and women in this study tend not to be bothered too much from concern about being laid off. This reveals that context matters in the discussion of young people’s experiences of inequality and insecurity.

It is not that interviewees in Tokyo do not worry. Rather, the crucial difference is that most insider interviewees in Tokyo believe that their employer will not lay them off, although many of them also hope to quit the job voluntarily at some point. There are two possible lines of explanations pertaining to structures, institutions, and culture.
Fluidity of Labor Market

One reason for this divergence is that the labor market is simply more fluid in Korea than Japan, especially for the young. Rigorous empirical research has found both quantitative and qualitative evidence that the once successful high school to work transition model in Japan has been declining (Brinton 2010), yet there are still people finding employment through this path. For example, Hayato who works as a truck driver in a subsidiary of a large parcel delivery service company in Tokyo found this job right after his graduation from a public high school through the job reference service of the school. While he has to work 13 hours a day, he receives enough salary to support his wife and two children and receives the same level of benefits as employees of the parent company. It has enabled him to purchase a newly built house in his hometown in a Tokyo suburb at the age of 24. While it is easy to infer that the case of Hayato is no longer a common path among Japanese millennials, there are still many of them finding such employment.

This is due to the different nature of labor market liberalization that occurred in the two societies. Japan still has the longest average years of job tenure among OECD countries while South Korea has one of the shortest. As shown in table 3.2, the average job tenure for those between 25 to 54 years old is 11.6 years in Japan and six years in Korea. To be more specific to the case of insiders, while scholars who study the labor market in Japan tend to emphasize the demise of the traditional employment system characterized by life-time employment and seniority-based wages, in comparative perspective, this system appears to be relatively more persistent in Japan than in Korea. Jiyeoun Song, in her comparative analysis of labor market reforms in Korea and Japan, characterized the former as “liberalization for all” and the latter as “liberalization for outsiders, protection for insiders” (Song 2014). Korea’s labor market reform
was more drastic than that of Japan because it capitalized on the crisis situation after the Asian financial crisis in 1997 (Klein 2010; Stiglitz 2003). Insider’s perceptions of insecurity at least partially reflect such differences between the labor markets in the two societies.

Table 3.2 Average Length of Job Tenure

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<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Length of Job Tenure 2016 (Years)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>11.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korea</td>
<td>5.8</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Source: (Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training 2018a:123)

Another central factor is what can be called a cohort effect. In Tokyo, those who graduated from school and sought jobs in the period in the late 1990s to 2000s. Typically, they are called the “Ice Age Generation.” They entered the labor market after the Asian financial crisis and had difficulty attaining stable employment, which affected their subsequent life course. Similarly, those who left school in the early 2010s and entered the post-2008 crisis labor market are called the “New Ice Age Generation.” These two groups of young people who are in their late 30s to early 40s today and in their late 20s to early 30s are the ones who bore the most severe impacts of labor market flexibilization and the lack of secure employment. Figure 3.4 shows the ratio of the number of new job openings to that of job seekers in Japan. If this ratio is one, it means there is one job per job seeker. Two means there are two jobs per job candidate. Thus, the larger the number, easier to get a job, at least theoretically. While this Figure does not break up numbers by age group, it shows the overall trend in the likelihood of getting a job. For much of the periods between 2004 and 2014 as well as 2009 and 2012, there was less than one
job per job seeker, making it difficult for new graduates to obtain employment. More recently, the ratio has been much more favorable for job seekers.

Figure 3.4 Ratio of New Job Openings to Job Seekers in Japan

From a comparative perspective, however, there appear to be even less chance to obtain jobs for young people in Korea. Figure 3.5 shows the ratio of new job openings to job seekers in Japan and Korea from 2003 to 2017. The Figure includes the period in which Japan’s new ide age generation sought their first job after leaving school. Even right after the global financial crisis of 2008 when the number of job openings rapidly decreased, Japan’s labor market seemed to provide more jobs per candidate than that of Korea.
Furthermore, as Figure 3.4 shows sharp increase, the number of job openings increased after 2013 in Japan. Figure 3.6 also shows that, after 2013, the unemployment rate among young adults in Japan decreased rapidly while that of Korea shows the opposite trend. In 2018, there were approximately 2.4 jobs per job seeker in Japan. It was in this context that my interviews in Japan took place. In actuality, very few interviewees would have benefitted directly from this trend because they gained their initial employment earlier than this period. However, there is a good chance that media reports affected the interviewees’ perceptions.
Meanwhile, it has to be noted that the reality seems not to be as rosy as it appears to be in Japan too. It is because this rate has been pushed up by the growth in the number of what I call outsider jobs. Figure 3.7 shows the openings to candidates ratio among students who graduated from college or graduate school every March in the last ten years. In 2019, there are 9.91 job openings per candidate in small-size workplaces with 300 or less employees (Recruit Works Institute 2019). In contrast, there are only 0.37 jobs per job seekers in the large-size workplaces with 5,000 or more employees, which is the worst record in recent years. We can also see that the ratio for the middle to large size workplaces has been consistently low. It is the rise and fall of jobs at small-size workplaces that primarily affect the overall ratio.
Figure 3.7 Ratio of Job Openings to Job Seekers among New College Graduates in Japan by Firm Size

![Graph showing the ratio of job openings to job seekers among new college graduates in Japan by firm size.]

Source: (Recruit Works Institute 2019)

Figure 3.8 shows the ratio by industry. In 2019, while there are about twelve and ten times more job openings than the number of people seeking jobs in the logistics and construction industries, respectively, only 0.21 openings are available in the finance sector. While blue-color, insecure, and demanding jobs at small companies are readily available, insider jobs appear to be as difficult to attain as they used to be.
Figure 3.8 Ratio of Job Openings to Job Seekers among New College Graduates in Japan by Industry

In sum, there are two relevant structural forces at play. First, Korea’s labor market appears to be more flexible and provides fewer opportunities for young people than that of Japan. Second, Japan had already passed the worst periods of youth employment when this research was conducted, though it remains unclear how long this trend will continue. In contrast, the situation has only been worsening in Korea. However, the gap in these structural conditions are subtle differences and it is difficult to attribute the discrepancy in young people’s experience of inequality and insecurity solely to their objective magnitudes. We also need to understand the institutional-cultural context which gives meaning to inequality and insecurity.

**Domination of Capital**

An analysis of characteristics of the institutional arrangements of Japanese and Korean economies can offer insight into the question regarding the divergence in young adults’
responses to insecurity in the realm of work. Pierre Bourdieu argues that there are two forms of struggles in the field. One struggle is over the distribution of capital within the field. In this sense, in the field of the Korean economy, cultural, economic, and social capital concentrate on the small group of Chaebol corporations. The second form of struggle is over the very definition of the legitimate form of capital in a given setting (Swartz 2013:35). In this sense, the state and businesses in Korea appear to be successful in imposing their “vision of divisions” (Bourdieu 1989:23) to society. Consequently, an overly concentrated desire to enter the small world of Chaebol corporations among young people creates the perceived sense of over competition and relative deprivation, the sources of perceived injustice in Seoul.

In Korea, the five largest Chaebols - Samsung, LG, Hyundai, SK, and Lotte- comprise about a half of the Stock Index, and sales revenues of the ten largest Chaebols account for more than a half of Korea’s GDPs (Premack 2017). In 2018, these corporations comprised only less than 0.2 % of about 650,000 enterprises in Korea but produced 41 % of all the profits (Bang 2019). Japan developed its economy, which privileges and revolves around a small number of the Zaibatsu conglomerates, even before Korea. Thus, the Japanese economy shares fundamental similarities with that of Korea. One of these commonalities is a huge disparity between large corporations and small and medium-sized enterprises. However, today, the concentration of various forms of capital appears to be somewhat more moderate than Korea, making it easier for young adults to pursue security.

Many interviewees in Seoul considered that getting a job at either Chaebol corporations or the public sectors are the most viable option to seek security. Yet, opportunities to enter these two fields are scarce. This is the source of anxiety among young adults whom I talked to in this study. Figure 3.9 shows the number of enterprises by its size. Only 0.11 and 0.37 % of
enterprises in Korea and Japan employed more than 250 individuals (data from 2015 in Korea and 2011 in Japan). It means that more than 99% of firms in both countries are small to medium-sized enterprises. 93% of enterprises in Korea, compared to 86% in Japan and 78% in the US have less than ten employees. What is distinctive about the Korean labor market is that these small enterprises provide the largest share of employment.

Figure 3.9 Enterprises by Size

Figure 3.10 shows that nearly 30% of all workers compared with 13% in Japan and 10% in the US are employed by firms with less than ten employees. By the same token, only 20% of workers in Korea compared with 47% in Japan and 57% in the US work for enterprises that have 250 or more employees. Thus, among these three societies the relative number of jobs at large corporations that are likely to provide more security is most limited in Korea. On top of that, the inequality between large and small enterprises is greater in Korea.
Figure 3.11 shows the average wage of workers by firm size in the three countries. On average, compared with the wages of firms with 500 or more employees, workers in the workplace with less than four employees are paid only 32.6% of wages in Korea, 65.1% in Japan and 64.8% in the US. While both Japan and the US have a severe problem of income inequality between large and small-sized enterprises, the degree of discrepancy is not comparable to that of Korea. A part of the problem is that workers in these small workplaces are paid less than their peers in other countries. Equally problematic is the fact that workers in large companies are paid more than those in other countries. Table 3.3 shows that workers in enterprises with 500 or more employees in Korea are paid 6,097 USD a month on average compared to 4,079 USD in Japan and 4,736 USD in the US. Thus, on the one hand, it appears to be more difficult for young people in Korea to get what I call insider jobs. On the other hand, the relative gain from these insider jobs is greater in Korea and young people are exposed to more
expectation to gain employment at large firms despite the structural difficulty built into the system.

Figure 3.11 Average Wage by Firm Size

![Average Wage by Firm Size](chart.png)

Source: (Kwak 2018)

Table 3.3 Average Monthly Wage of Firms with 500 or More Employees

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<tr>
<td>6,097</td>
<td>4,079</td>
<td>4,736</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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Source: (Kwak 2018)

From a perspective of the outside observer, it seems to make less sense in Seoul to choose “security-seeking” as their response to growing insecurity and inequality in the labor market, because such secure jobs are more scarce in Seoul than Tokyo. Nevertheless, young people in Seoul are motivated more than their peers in Tokyo to pursue this strategy. These inequalities have been shaped by the nature of rapid economic development and the ways in
which states have been intervening in shaping the market. Chaebols are endowed with more symbolic capital, “esteem, recognition, belief, credit, confidence of others” (Bourdieu 2000b:166), than the Japanese large corporations in their local environment. Symbolic capital designates the social authority to endow certain actors and organizations as legitimate and thus enable public recognition of positions occupied in social hierarchies. The jobs at these corporations are simply more respectable and I found that this tendency is stronger in Korea.

In this way, inequality of insecurity is symbolically normalized throughout Korean society even more so than in Japanese society. Although Japan’s labor market does have the same tendency, the concentration of symbolic power is even more severe in Korea than Japan. It leads many young adults in Seoul to employ an unrealistic strategy in the labor market.

In this context, “Hell Korea (Hell Joseon)” became a buzz word, which compares today’s Korea to the highly aristocratic Joseon dynasty. In this hell, those with “golden spoons” (born in a privileged family) simply take advantage of their privilege and achieve an easy success. For those without “golden spoons,” however, life is a constant struggle for security, in which “failing to enter the corporate world means having to wallow in the pool of joblessness” (Koo 2015). Thus, observers point out that being born in Korea is “tantamount to entering hell, where one is immediately enslaved by a highly regulated system that dictates an entire course of life” (Koo 2015).

For Bourdieu, neither brute force nor material possession are sufficient to exercise power fully. Power requites justification and legitimization.

No power can be satisfied with existing just as power, that is, as brute force, entirely devoid of justification - in a word, arbitrary - and it must thus justify its existence, as well as the form it takes, or at least ensure that the arbitrary nature of its foundation will be misrecognized and thus that it will be recognized as legitimate (Bourdieu 1996:265)

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For this reason, symbolic power, the power of “imposing the vision of legitimate divisions, that is, at constructing groups (Bourdieu 1989:22)” is the first and foremost expression of domination in modern societies.

In contemporary societies, the legitimization of hierarchy is based on two pillars of naturalization and mis-recognition through which individuals conceive domination as if it were “natural.” David Swartz argues that

Bourdieu’s symbolic power does not suggest “consent” but “practical adaptation” to existing hierarchies. The practical adaptation occurs pre-reflexively as if it were the ‘thing to do,’ the “natural” response in existing circumstances (Swartz 2013:39).

It is part of the reasons why many outsider interviewees in this study chose to adjust practically to insecurity rather than to protest injustices. At the pre-reflexive level, even the dominated take for granted the idea that social hierarchy and their location within it are “natural.” Thus, the social reality that does not correspond with their interests is often left unchallenged and accepted as it is.

As a result, the nature of domination of capital in the Korean economy creates a strong aspiration for employment at Chaebol corporations, which is the source of perceived injustice and also exacerbates of the sense of uncertainty among young people. The same mechanism is also observable in Japan, but the domination of capital is much more severe in Korea than Japan.

**CONCLUSION**

Though researchers and journalists have been observing the growth of job insecurity in the last few decades in East Asia, we lacked understanding of how young adults from different class
back grounds experience these changes. In this chapter, I have sought to illuminate different trajectories of young adults as they try to navigate their transition to adulthood in the increasingly fluid labor market and their worries associated with it.

The first response, which I called security-seeking, is characterized by the strategy to hold on to the security that the traditional employment arrangement of white collar jobs in large corporations provides. These jobs are an increasingly scarce commodity available only to the few who have enough “specs” such as degrees from top universities, as the interviewees in Seoul call it. Despite enjoying the privilege of secure employment, young adults are often stressed out from doing jobs that they sometimes think are pointless.

In contrast, the second response, which I called meaning-seeking, is a strategy to find joy in doing something that they love. I identified four different approaches within the scheme of meaning-seeking. As Brooke Erin Duffy (2018) cautions, for many of these approaches, their labor is not rewarded by the level of income comparable to secure employment, but they consent to that situation in exchange for flexibility and freedom. Their experiences suggest that flexible work is not always bad for everyone. Yet, the fact that the most privileged interviewees in terms of class and education consent to work for low-wages can alter standards of competition and rewards in the labor market.

Compared with that of insiders, outsiders’ responses in the labor market tended to be oriented toward short-term goals. An interesting impact of this difference in how they anticipate their future is that many insiders are even more anxious than outsiders. It is especially so because they compare their security with different subjects of comparison. At the same time, although young people in both Seoul and Tokyo are going through similar structural changes, there are
both subtle and profound differences in the experiences of insecurity among young people in the two cities.

As such, individuals’ perception of insecurity or inequality is not a pure reflection of material conditions. It is mediated by their daily experiences that cannot be measured numerically. Three domains of life – work, education, and intimate relationships - are especially crucial in shaping their perception of inequality and insecurity. In contemporary societies, educational institutions are at the heart of misrecognition and normalization of domination through what Bourdieu calls the cultural arbitrary, “an imposed set of values, beliefs, cultural ideals propagated by the educational system” (Swartz 2013:84). Hence, I now shift my focus to young people’s experiences in the realm of education.
INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapter, I discussed three different responses to the growth of uncertainty in the realm of work. Such variations, however, are the product of their history up to the present. Pierre Bourdieu argues that educational credentials are the central scheme that “objectifies” such histories and helps define social order. Without having what is considered sufficient economic, cultural, and social capital, there is not even any point to discussing the “choices” they made in the first place. While their agency is important, we cannot ignore constraints imposed on them. Bourdieu sees that “the scope of human freedom (…) in my opinion, is not that large” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:199).

It is crucial to examine education if we are to understand diversities in young adults’ perceptions and responses to the changes in social structure. With the growth of the knowledge economy, it has been said that the value of educational credentials has been inflating (Kariya 2011). Meanwhile, this trend takes place in the context of the “opportunity trap”: the universalization of higher education makes educational credentials difficult to “cash in” (Brown 2003:149–50). How does this conflicting reality in education intersect with the problem of inequality and job insecurity in East Asia?

When it comes to education, Korea and Japan represents a nearly perfect pair because only a few nations in the world share the degree of similarities in the culture and institutions of education that Korea and Japan have in common (Park 2013; Seth 2002). Surprisingly little inequality in educational attainment characterizes education in Korea and Japan, especially through middle school compared with other societies. The education system in post-war Japan
was modeled after that of the Allied Occupation Forces, which is based on the 6-3-3-4 system and followed what is called the general education model, in which the majority of students receive general education that prepares them to enter higher education institutions as opposed to the apprenticeship model seen in Germany, in which many students receive vocational training. Later, Korea’s education system was structured following both the American and Japanese models.

Both societies are notorious for their phenomenal “examination mania” as many observers described it. The underlying Confucian culture that both societies share is the dominant explanation of this trend (Seth 2002). Today, millennials in both societies are among the most educated group of people in the world. Yet, such a transformation happened in a relatively short period of time. In Korea, in particular, although more than 70 percent of millennials (age 25 to 29 in 2010) completed some form of higher education, only about 20 percent of their parents’ generation (age 55 to 59 in 2010) did so.

With declining number of students, today, there is a place in higher education for every person who wants to attend in both Japan and Korea. However, the competition for the top schools remains stiff in both countries. Some decades ago, the educational competition in Japan was very similar to what is now found in Korea characterized by extreme pressure to enter top schools. Today, however, young adults and their parents in Seoul are committed more to education and also are more stressed out from their commitment than their counterparts in Tokyo. Changing demographics and economics, plus some changes in the education system have led to this situation.

As Figure 4.1 indicates, when asked about their worries, nearly 80 percent of Korean youth and 65 percent of Japanese youth, respectively, said that they worry about getting into
college. The rates are substantially higher than that of other societies, such as 39 percent in the US and 31 percent in the UK. Another international surveys found that Korean students are the least happy among OECD countries despite their level of material fulfillment, which is ranked the second highest. Although the relationship is not demonstrated clearly, journalists often attribute this to excessively long hours of study (Byun 2017). Furthermore, though scholars often report Korean parents’ unusual commitment to English education of their children (Abelmann, Newendorp, and Lee-Chung 2014; Abelmann, Park, and Kim 2013; Park and Abelmann 2004), I did not find a comparable trend in contemporary Japan.

Figure 4.1 Worries about Getting into School

![Bar chart showing worries about getting into school across different countries](image)

Source: International Survey of Youth Attitude (2013)

This chapter rewinds the clock of young adults’ life histories and focuses on education to examine, first, their lived experiences of economic insecurity and inequality. Second, going beyond simple and impressionistic arguments that solely focus on the uniqueness of either Japanese or Korean education culture, this chapter explores the ways institutions and cultures of
the education market mediate social structure and what Bourdieu calls mental structures and its subtle variations in the two different educational fields of Seoul and Tokyo. In particular, I will focus on their experiences after high school because it is the stage in which the school systems in Seoul and Tokyo diverge. Because education is, in most cases, a joint project between parents and children, I also look at the support parents provide to children and the expectations they impose.

The chapter is structured in the following order. First, it briefly examines the typical education experiences of the three different groups of young adults introduced in the previous chapter. Second, I examine the experiences of educational competition in both cities and parents’ involvement in it. Third, the chapter explains how subtle differences in the arrangement of education fields shape different experiences of educational competition governed by different common beliefs about education. In conclusion, I explain why these differences in the fields of education matter to understand perceptions of economic insecurity and inequality among young adults in Seoul and Tokyo.

EDUCATIONAL TRAJECTORIES

Education and Capital

The intertwined nature of one’s educational background, occupation and social class is one of the most researched topics in sociology (For example, about Japan and Korea see Ishida 1993; Lee and Brinton 1996). Exclusion of the powerless from accessing scarce resources by the use of categorical difference has often been considered a root-cause of persisting inequality (Massey 2007; Parkin 1979; Tilly 1999; Weber 1978). In contemporary societies, Bourdieu argues that
the two poles of economy and culture shape the dynamics of domination via the mediation of educational credentials.

The structure of social space as observed in advanced societies is the product of two fundamental principles of differentiation—economic capital and cultural capital—the educational institution, which plays a central role in the reproduction of the structure of social space, has become a central stake in the struggle for the monopoly on dominant positions (Bourdieu 1996:5).

More recently, cultural sociologists have shown that subtle differences in ways we behave and the kind of connections that we have cultivated before and during school years shape the possibility of access to elite jobs (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Brinton 2001; Khan 2011; Rivera 2015).

These insights resonate well with the trajectories of insiders in Seoul and Tokyo. In Seoul, it appears to be almost impossible to get an insider job without a degree from a top-ranked university or from a university in an English speaking country. There appear to be more employment opportunities in Japan, where there are simply more large corporations. In Tokyo, the vast majority of insiders had degrees from the top universities. Meanwhile, a few insider interviewees gained secure employment through the traditional high school to work transition system where school teachers play the role of mediator (Brinton 2010).

*Insiders*

Typically, insiders are the “winners” of intense educational competitions. While some parents in Seoul, like those of Young-jin and Sang-min were quite straightforward about what they wanted their children to become, when I asked interviewees about their parents’ expectation regarding education and career, the most common response was that “they did not tell me anything and
asked me to think of what I want.” However, as the interview proceeds, it usually becomes clear that parents not expressing their hope explicitly does not mean that they do not impose many expectations. They often express a whole lot of expectations to their children and implicitly guide them to pursue a prestigious degree, a style of parenting termed concerted cultivation by sociologist Annette Lareau, in which children are seen as “projects” to be developed (2003).

With some notable exceptions, many of my interviewees in Seoul were born and raised around the city and attended prestigious high schools, usually foreign language or science high schools. Though the tuition of these elite schools is usually two to three times more expensive than that of regular public schools, their parents were capable of affording these costs. For example, at Minjok Leadership Academy, one of the best-reputed schools from which a few of my interviewees graduated, the annual expense of tuition, boarding, and other miscellaneous fees cost about 20 million won (approximately $18,000) a year. In competitive environments, many interviewees studied more than 12 hours a day when they were high school students. Then, they obtained a bachelor’s or graduate degree usually from the three top universities of Seoul National, Korea and Yonsei (SKY universities where Seoul-raised children, especially the graduates of special high schools, are overrepresented in the student bodies).

The education system through high school is different in Japan, where there is no equivalent of special high schools, and resourceful parents like those of Takuya and Mika tend to send their children to private schools, sometimes from kindergarten. It virtually assures their children’s entrance to a high school or university in the same system. However, the picture is analogous to Korea in the sense that insiders attended the elite schools in their education system. For example, a few of my Japanese interviewees graduated from Kaisei Academy, an elite private school in Tokyo which has sent the largest number of students to the University of Tokyo
for nearly four decades. Others attended selective private or public schools. Then, they proceeded to study at the top national or private universities like Tokyo, Keio, and Waseda.

However, I do not want to overemphasize the homogeneity of the insiders. There were some instances where they had graduated from what is considered a second-tier university but managed to obtain secure employment due to their unique combination of skills and credentials. For example, one interviewee was highly fluent in Thai and had a few years of working experience in the Japanese embassy in Thailand even before he graduated from the college, which brought him an insider job although he did not graduate from a typical elite university.

_Meaning-seekers_

For insiders, class, education, networks, and cultivated and embodied dispositions have a lot to do with the reasons they ended up with their career path. We can imagine that these elements are less relevant for meaning-seekers, who deliberately chose unstable forms of employment. However, a choice to prioritize “meaning” in life over security is often shaped by their educational trajectories and support from their family. The experience of Yu-jin, a 27 years old woman who works in the music industry is illustrative.

In the Chuseok holiday, which is the Korean Thanksgiving, Seoul felt empty as people traveled to their hometowns and many shops closed their doors. In a fresh juice café in the unusually silent Hapjeong-dong where many chic cafes and restaurants concentrate, Yu-jin appeared wearing a yellow and red retro-look sweater and light-blue baggy jeans.

Yu-jin is not someone I would expect to find in the flexible end of the labor market though she has already changed jobs four times in a few years. Her father runs a dental clinic in a large local city. Her mother was very committed to Yu-Jin’s education and even became “the
leader of the committed parents club” in which parents exchange information about good
teachers and private institutions. Yu-Jin was sent to a private English school from the time she
was four years old, which gave her native fluency. After graduating from a foreign language high
school in the local city with a major in Chinese, she earned a BA in Business Administration
from Seoul National University. So, she has as much “specs” as any insider interviewee in this
study. She does not think her parents are richer than her friends’ parents, but she also thinks that
their economic power allowed her to avoid economic concerns.

It depends on friends, but since I went to foreign language high school, there were a lot of
students from pretty rich families because, in every country, I think richer families invest
more in the education of children so… I don’t really consider money is a really important
part of my life because my parents are like they are kind of rich so I had no experience of
lack of money when I was a student…now I do, hahahahahaha [laughing].

Thus, she was not affected by the 1997 Financial crisis very much, although many of her friends
appeared to have been affected.

It didn’t really affect my life, but I do remember how that felt because…I was a first
grader in the elementary school, so it was not like it really hit me, but I felt though it
melted down the whole society. I felt that but it didn’t affect me because my dad was a
dentist and people need to go to the dentist no matter what [laughing] They can’t cut it
down. But the interesting thing is that when I ask my friends about their childhood, I
think eight out of ten of my friends told me that their families went bankrupt because of
the 97 incident.

Her parents expected a stream of life in which she attends a good college and then gets the most
prestigious job in the country.

Yu-Jin: I thought I would be one of the people who work for big companies in Korea like
Samsung, Hyundai like that because I didn't know many different things about jobs.
That’s what I have heard about all the time, so I didn’t think...
Yuki: So at the time, did your parents say anything about your career?

Yu-Jin: In high school? Yeah, she even told...she had a very high expectation for me because my high school score was good, so she thought I would be a government officer, a doctor, some kind of like...what they think high social class stuff.

Yuki: Does your father too?

Yu-jin: Yes, my father is actually a dentist, so he wanted me to be a dentist as well. My older sister is a dentist, so that has been an expectation for us.

She did not prepare for the civil-service exam but eventually applied to one big corporation.

My first application to that one big company failed and then I was looking at my Facebook account and the hiring notice came up. And then I thought just like I would just try to work at this, and they liked me so I got into it. I think it’s pretty much what changed who I am now because without that I would have never considered working for this job.

That was how she started as a brand manager of an indie music label.

There are a lot of fights with my parents about this because they wanted me to be one of the big company workers because they think it’s stable and pay you well. They want to blab to neighbors my daughter went to Samsung something like that. But especially in [a local city where she grew up], people don’t really understand what the music industry is doing so my parents cannot really explain what I do [laughing]. Every time I see my parents, like every time, they ask me ‘what do you do?’ ‘what do you do?’ So there has been quite a bit of fight with my mum, but I don’t want to bend, and I didn’t.

When I asked her about the most stressful time in her life, the first thing that came to her mind was “the career struggle with my parents.”

I really like trying out new things. [To know] How it fits for me. But they think I am not doing very well and say...they kind of worry about me, which I don’t really appreciate. Hahahhaa. Because I think I am doing great, I’m searching for my life. It’s needed now. But especially my mom thinks when you graduate from college you have to get a job soon. You gotta go to Samsung, Hyundai. It’s been like a stream of life. But she thinks I am wandering around.
Soon she noticed that the indie music market is too small. Looking for something stimulating, she moved to the publishing department of a large music label. However, soon she quit the job to take a break and went to Chiang Mai, Thailand. Upon her return, she started a new career in a publishing company. Seven months later, she quit the job again and spend two months in Chiang Mai. When I interviewed her, she was two months into her new job. Although she works only about six hours daily in the office, sometimes she has to work for 24 hours without sleep to prepare for music events.

Yu-Jin was in the process of seeking a nomadic lifestyle that works for her, and she hopes that the skills she is learning in the current job will help her in Thailand. “In my 40s, hopefully, I will be in Thailand, in Chiang Mai. Buying a house. Maybe creating something like a concert or workshop. And writing.” She recognizes that she is economically less fulfilled compared with her friends, but she does not have any problem and probably it is because of her parents who “will ever be richer than me.”

Yuki: But you don’t have any concern…?

Yu-Jin: No…not really. I don’t think I have that. Because…I think it’s because my parents are kind of wealthy so that even if I don't earn, like, really much money, I don't think it will be a problem. If my parents are not doing okay financially, I would be concerned about it. I have to make money for my home, I have to support my parents, but I don’t think that…so.

Yu-Jin’s easy going lifestyle sets her apart from many young adults I met in Seoul.

The majority of meaning-seekers come from middle or upper-middle class backgrounds based on their parents’ occupation and income. Indeed, their “specs” are not different from that of insiders. Typically, they graduated from top universities and also have experiences of living
abroad. Hyoung-u and Ji-hun, two entrepreneurs among the interviewees, both lived in Japan, and Ji-hun also has a Ph.D. from Korea University. Reo is an alumnus of Keio and attended schools in the US and UK. Hee-yun grew up in France before obtaining degrees from a selective university in Korea. Similarly, Tatsuya who works as a contracted dancer at a theme park while working part-time at an English cram school, come from the family of a landlord wealthy enough to send him to middle and high schools in Australia. He also studied in Germany for two years while at Keio. Kaho, a freelance writer who described herself as the first college graduate in the family, obtained degrees from Waseda and a competitive university in China through their dual degree program.

One reason meaning-seekers were able to choose such employment despite economic instability associated with these positions is that their security net is much thicker than that of many other people in the same generation. When I asked about his economic situation in comparison to his friends during the interview, Reo, a freelance web designer in Tokyo, showed me the record of his income in the last several months. “For now, I am better off (than my friends) in terms of monthly income. In terms of annual income, we are the same or I am less.” It sounded strange to me that he had more monthly income than his friends but similar or less annual income.

Looking at the income record he showed me, I figured out the reason. It was because in recent months he made two to three times as much as the insiders around his age can make, while in other months he had made much less than what outsiders in this study usually make from one job. Some meaning seekers have the potential to earn substantial levels of income, but it is also possible that they do not earn anything at all. Furthermore, their jobs come with no benefits, which is worse than the little benefits outsiders typically receive. Reo said that his
parents “will help me for sure if I were in such a [troubled] situation. But I don’t want to be helped because I have pride. But then they gave me [money] when they thought I had hardship, and I accepted it.”

What is at stake here is not simply the safety that their family can provide. The range of their choices is also determined by their experiences. The vast majority of meaning-seeker interviewees are multilinguals who have experiences of living abroad. Experiences of staying abroad, coupled with relatively privileged environments of upbringing, explain a part of the reason why they appear to be more tolerant of job insecurity. Reo expressed his concern about young people in Japan.

There seem to be many people who do not sit well with, like, their job, their life. And their take of the job is… Work is essential human activity because we exchange value we produced with another value and compensate for what we don’t have to live. But people having such an idea are scarce. Considering occupation, [they would] like to go to a good company, but what is that standard? Rather than to think about the axis of what they want to do for society through what value they produce, and how to contribute to other people, [they first think about] such things as which company to go to, where they can live, and how good a life they can have. But, first of all, what is happiness for you? Many people cannot answer [this question] in their own words. On that note, if you go overseas, there are many people who think about these standards. (…) Especially because Japan is an island country having its unique culture, difficult to go out, and difficult to come into from outside, they cannot relativize the self and Japanese common sense. They internalize the idea told by others, but I think they should know more about themselves.

Reo was born in the US and has dual-citizenship. So he is planning to move to New York City in the next year as he wants to try living in the city. Such an option is not available to many people.

Minji and Mio among my interviewees were even allowed to attend college twice. Minji has been working for a nonprofit organization for the last five years. She studied film in an art college. One dominant pathway to the film industry was to work for large broadcasting companies such as KBS and CBS. The competition to enter these companies was so severe that
she thought that a degree from a college in the US would help, so she studied at a college in New York City for four years, following two years of studying English in Korea and the US. Mio graduated from Waseda and got a job at a large corporation where she suffered from a boss who made unreasonable demands and harassed her. She ruined her health and decided to follow her interest in helping others by becoming a social worker. However, she did not have her own money to go back to college. “I was not really in a situation to save money. But it was a sort of luck that I am the only child in my family and also for my father’s side grandparents. When I said, ‘please let me study again,’ my grandmother gave me money.”

One thing common to Yusuke and Kiyomi, who are following their dreams to become a musician or an actress, is that they grew up in stable families supportive of their pursuit of dreams. Yusuke told his parents that he thought he should quit pursuing his music career, but his parents encouraged him to keep on doing it. Yusuke appreciates his parents and sends a small amount of money regularly to compensate for what they had lent him when he was younger. Kiyomi lives with her parents, and while she wishes to move out before she turns 30, she does not know if she can ever do that. She says that “I have never thought that the economic situation will be worse in the future than now,” and the major reason she is optimistic about her future is the presence of her parents. She started self-questioning her optimism during the interview;

Why don’t I do it? It just came to my mind while we were talking. I don’t do anything (to prepare for the future). I guess I don’t think too much about the future since I became ill. And the family environment. There are parents, and they have income. So maybe I am relying on it. I just thought. I tend to think they are there even if something happens.

Had they not had a family they can go back to at times of trouble, the decision to pursue their dreams would have been more difficult. In sum, a combination of class backgrounds, educational
credentials, and support from their parents allowed them to pursue what they think will make their life meaningful.

Now I turn to the educational trajectories of outsider interviewees.

Outsiders

In a spacious Paris Baguette shop in Gangnam, I met with Yong-jung, a tall guy with short curly hair wearing black framed glasses. Now at the age of 27, he is attending a school to get a national certificate as a computer programmer, aided by a government subsidy to address youth employment problems. He grew up in Jamsil-dong, which is known for a huge entertainment complex owned by Lotte. The neighborhood “is getting richer now but it wasn’t that much when I was a child. We only had Lotte World.” His parents ran a company that produced graduation gowns for university students. His high school was in Gangnam and there he was surrounded by wealthy kids. “There is a river in between and once you cross the river everything changes” as he observes the difference between Gangnam-gu and his native Songpa-gu.

There were too many rich people in high school. I think it was around the second year, about four of my classmates received monthly pocket money of 500,000 Won [about 500 USD]. My pocket money was 50,000 Won [about 50 USD] a month [laughing]. They had ten times more. They changed their cellphone every three months. I always tend to feel hot so I was okay with wearing one sweatshirt throughout the winter, but you know Korean people wear this expensive stuff [pointing to the jacket he is wearing]. I saw my friends wear many of these stuff, like 800,000 Won [about 800 USD] jacket even though they were high school students.

While his parents’ company was affected by the Asian financial crisis, it was the global financial crisis of 2008, which turned his life upside down. At the time he was in his final year of high school and decided to go to Japan to study at a well-known culinary school in Osaka to
become a chef. However, in May of the final year in high school, his parents told him that they will not be able to send him to Japan due to the difficult financial situation. Because he had assumed that he would go to Japan instead of applying for a college in Korea, Yong-jung did not prepare for Seneung (Korean equivalent of SAT), and studied only Japanese. Yong-jung was freaked out. “I was really upset and zoned out. I thought ‘what I should do?’ Well, I am still tied to this past to the present day.” He went to a culinary vocational school in Korea, but the life at this culinary school was different from what he had expected. He took a leave from the school and served in the military for two years.

Like many other interviewees in this study, Yong-jung had a hard time in his first years in the military. He was assigned to the department that monitors the shoreline mostly at night. He recalls the experience as “the ocean was literally black. My heart was black too. Because it looked black, I thought ‘if I dive into it, I might die…’” After military service, he came back to Seoul but, in his first year in the military, his parents’ company finally went bankrupt, so he did not have tuition to return to school. At that point, he still wanted to pursue a degree in this school or another one, so he worked as a non-regular worker to save money. In addition to making ends meet for himself, he had to help his parents pay off the debt they had acquired from the bankruptcy. Eventually, he decided to help his parents’ business, which they started again after the bankruptcy for a year. Working with his parents was emotionally draining.

Then, a person he met in the military told him that “you won’t have the future if you keep doing that,” and asked him to work on a farm his family owned in Chungcheong-do. For a year, he cultivated fields of rice and soybeans. The farm work was hard. He had to work 14 hours a day during summertime and lost 22 kg in a year. Despite long hours of work, farming did not yield much profit. While cultivating the fields, he thought that “I really want to use my
Japanese.” With the small amount he saved in Chungcheong-do and a working holiday visa, he moved to Japan.

He enjoyed his life in Japan greatly. His job finished at 6 p.m. and he had much more income than he used to have in Korea. He also liked teaching Korean to Japanese in his spare time. He wanted to keep living in Japan and his employer who runs a trading business between Japan and Korea was also interested in hiring him as a regular employee. However, it turned out that the Japanese government does not grant working visas to people without a college degree. His lack of college education also hindered him from getting a job upon his return to Seoul. He was referred to a small firm exporting products to Japan, but employees in this workplace work 12 hours every day without overtime pay, and the president did not consider Yong-Jung’s year of working experience enough. So he looked for another job for three months.

I went to interviews at various firms. But as a high school graduate…Korea is an educational credentials society; well Japan too is an educational credential society but [Korea is] a super educational credentials society so you are a human only if you graduate from college.

That is why Yong-jung decided to study programming albeit with some hesitation.

In my current situation, the job I can get is no different from a part-time position. In addition, a part-time job in Korea pays less than that in Japan. If I work as a part-timer, it does not count as experience, so I decided to commit to this. To be honest, in Korea, recently there are many people who cannot find a job before 30 so I decided to try before I turn 30.

His plan is to acquire this certificate and then find a job. While working as a programmer, he also hopes to earn a degree from an online college program and move to Japan.

Yong-jung told me that he “can’t afford to join the protest.”
Really, now we don't know what to be angry about and in what direction. Where to shout at. You can say it’s the government but is it the current president? Of course, he is not the one. He’s been in the position for less than a year. So I think a part of Park Geun-Hye stuff [political scandal] was people’s sense of ‘I finally found it!’ The point, the point to direct at. I think it is a right point but rather than to join it, [I prefer] the buzzword Tal-choson. The idea that ‘isn’t it easier to exit Korea?’ is widespread. To be honest, I think so too. Rather than protest I would go to Japan or other countries.

*Tal-choson* is a buzzword in Korea, which literally means Exit-Korea. Yong-jung sees exiting the game as the most viable option. However, this option also requires various cultural and financial resources in the first place. For example, he has to graduate from a four year college to migrate to Japan, the goal he has been working hard to achieve. Working holidays in countries like Canada, Australia, or Japan require less economic and cultural resources than studying abroad and many Koreans use this visa to exit from Korea at least temporarily, but it cannot be a long-term solution to the problem unless they have certain resources.

Young adults who lack enough educational credentials tend to get outsider jobs. However, the issue of what it means to have enough credentials appears to be more complex than simply whether one has a degree or not. Indeed, many outsider interviewees graduated from college. There is even the extreme instance of Jung-hoon, a man in his 30s who graduated from Seoul National University and has been working at a fast-food restaurant for the last five years as a non-regular worker. According to his observations, small companies prefer to hire someone with working experience in the industry, rather than someone with a good degree, while large corporations require candidates to have experiences of internship or studying abroad. He does not have any of these. After more than five years and more than 50 unsuccessful applications, he gave up and made up his mind to keep working in this workplace. I thought that with his degree,
He should not be working in a small to medium size firm but Jung-hoon responded that “many people think like that but it is not the case.”

However, the difference is more pronounced when it comes to the kind of high schools that insiders/meaning-seekers and outsiders attended, rather than their college experience. Virtually none of the outsider interviewees in this study graduated from special high schools in Seoul and either competitive private or public high schools in Tokyo, which the majority of insiders attended. While the majority of insiders graduated from the top-ranked or SKY universities, outsiders’ degrees tended to come from second or third tier universities.

In Korea, even if they graduated from universities in Seoul, which is the standard of the “good” university, many ended up with non-regular forms of employment, often against their will. Hyun-woo, a 30 years old man, and Ji-soo, a woman in her late 20s, graduated from Kyung-Hee and Chung-Ang universities. Both universities are usually ranked among the ten most selective schools in Korea, and they are now working as contract teachers in cram schools, a highly unstable job in which one’s income depends on the number of students enrolled in a given semester. We can easily imagine that the sense of disappointment is stronger for them and their parents. Similarly, in Japan, for those who did not graduate from what are usually considered the top universities, the entrance to insider jobs is difficult.

Whereas the parents of insiders and meaning-seekers tended to have secure employment such as jobs in big corporations or the public sector, the majority of outsiders’ parents concentrate on non-regular jobs and self-employment. Yong-jung’s parents own a small business selling graduation gowns, though it went bankrupt once before. Jung-hoon’s parents are farmers. Shigeki’s parents run a small business selling hardware in a local city in Japan. The occupations
of outsiders’ parents encompass a wide variety, including owner of a small inn; monk; janitor; photo studio owner; carpenter; restaurant owner; fishmonger.

The outsiders in this research grew up in an economically volatile environment, and many of their life courses were influenced significantly by the financial crises. Unlike the case of insiders, outsiders’ experiences of their economic conditions often differed from one period of their adolescence to another especially in Seoul, where the impact of the Asian Financial Crisis was more far-reaching than in Tokyo. Furthermore, I found that many outsiders grew up in a single-parent family while virtually no insider interviewees did so. It is widely acknowledged that single parent families are more likely to live in poverty than dual parent households in the context where social protection provided by the state is insufficient (e.g. Christopher et al. 2004; Shirahase and Raymo 2014). Hence, it can be inferred that growing up in a single parent family curtailed the opportunities of gaining secure employment to a certain extent. Had he been able to attend a culinary school in Japan as Yong-jung initially planned, his career could have been different, or at least he thinks so. However, outsiders often support their parents rather than being supported by them. Yong-jung, for example, helped his parents pay off their debt after a bankruptcy.

**TALK OF COMPETITION**

When I asked about the most stressful time in their life, the most common answer among my interviewees in Seoul was their high school years. Son-ha, a 27 year old woman who is a graduate of foreign language high school and works for a major bank, recalled that “it was really, really competitive.”
High school years are an unstable time of life, and they were stressful for some interviewees in Tokyo as well. The difference is that the sources of their stress were more diverse in Tokyo. Their narratives are much less centered on college preparation and speak to different topics such as sports and relationships with friends, even for some insiders who aimed at gaining admission to the University of Tokyo such as Akira, a 27 year old man who now works in one of the largest investment banks in Japan.

I did not have a very strong motivation to go Todai (University of Tokyo). I was just walking the path mapped out by someone. I set the same goal as people around me, and I just did it out of rivalry with my friends. But I did not have a vision of what I want to do after, so I did not have much motivation. I did a hard task without a specific vision, and as I recall now, that was why I felt stressed out (…) Also, I got injured while climbing and was hospitalized for a while, and I had to take a year of leave from school. That was sort of stressful.

The fact that Akira was active in a climbing club while he studied to apply to the University of Tokyo might be difficult for many interviewees in Seoul to understand. Interviewees in Seoul are much less likely to have the committed experiences of extracurricular activities compared with their peers in Japan, many of whom devoted their school years to sports or cultural activities.

In response to the growing concerns about negative effects of exam centered education system, overheated competition, and resulting strong pressure to earn high scores in the entrance exam to high school or college, the ministry of education in Japan introduced the policies called relaxed education (Yutori-Kyouiku) in 2002. The volume of the school curricula was reduced and schools became no longer compulsory on Saturdays. Several years later, the decrease in Japanese students’ academic performance in PISA shocked policy makers and observers and eventually this policy was discontinued after the early 2000s. However, many interviewees in Tokyo spent time in school under this relaxed school curriculum.
Insider interviewees in Seoul talked eloquently about their experiences at the special high schools where academic competition was intense, although these are not necessarily remembered as bad memories, as Sang-min recalls.

I studied every day, from morning till 11 or 12 at night. Back then I didn’t go to Hagwon. Have you ever heard of a reading room? I was studying in a reading room. But because I was with friends, we brought CDs and comic books and read together. It was difficult to concentrate at 11 at night. But I had to pretend to be studying (…). I was stressed out, but it was an interesting, fun life. We still talk about that time when I meet and drink with friends from high school.

Even insiders often recalled their sense of failure during high school years or a year after high school graduation in which most of the interviewees studied instead of entering a lower ranked university. Such a choice used to be common in Japan but has been becoming rare. Young-jin who has studied at Yonsei and worked in a law firm at the time of the interview recalls:

Entrance to high school was not hard at all because all of a sudden I just got into high school, so that was not stressful. But the college entrance exam was very stressful because my school was so competitive that they always tell me that ‘you are not good enough.’ Every time, we have to feel that I am not good enough, so we have to do more. So we have a mock test before taking the entrance exam, and the perfect score is five hundred points, and usually students in my high school, they get 480. So that’s high, right? But there are so many students who are getting that kind of score range. My school posted a list showing the ranking of how high you are ranked in our school. So, although I got 480, I was 20th, and then my HR teacher always told me ‘oh you are not good at math,’ but my math score was 92 out of 100. That was a big challenge because I always had to be told that I was not good enough. And students always get stressed out about that. And then, we have to study, study, study, study…more than 12 hours a day, 13 hours a day. And then, we are friends but at the same time competitors, so that was hard to deal with as a teenager. It was stressful. Also, I had to take one more year to get into college because when I took the college entrance exam [the national standard exam for college admission called Suneung] in 2004 Winter, the exam was too easy. [Because of the high average score] It could not differentiate students so nobody was sure where they should apply. That required a strategy and I kind of failed so that I applied to the department which was not...

Your range?
Yeah, so I had to take the test once more. But I never expected me to do that because I was kind of ah…okay. Usually, I was ranked about within 10th in my high school and if you are like that you are guaranteed to enter Seoul National University, but I was not able to. When I had to take the test once more, all my friends said [that they feel] so sorry for me, and I didn’t like that kind of perspective because they were all feeling pity for me and I felt ashamed.

Jeong-ho who now works in one of the Chaebol corporations after graduating from Hongik University and also obtained a degree from a major state university in the US through their double degree programs, shared a similar difficulty.

Getting into high school was also pretty stressful. It was really, really stressful. At the time, I really wanted to enter this privileged high school, foreign language high school but the first time I missed it so I couldn't to do that. So I just studied in just a normal public high school. And then, almost end of the freshman year at the public high school, I had an opportunity to take an exam to transfer to the foreign language high school, so I just took the exam and achieved the opportunity to enroll to the foreign language high school. So I moved to the high school when I was 16. I actually experienced both high schools: one year at a normal high school and two years at a privileged high school. So entering the privileged high school is pretty stressful but after entering the high school, I studied a lot of time, just most of the time I studied. Almost thirteen hours every day. Because I woke up at six o'clock in the morning, and I took the bus from my home to high school because it was pretty far from my place. Then, I started to study from 7:30 in the morning and finished almost 11 o'clock in the evening, ah no, ten at night except for lunch time and dinner time. Except 40 to 50 minutes for meals, I just studied. And I go to another institution, academic institution after ten. I came from the high school to my place in 30 minutes or 40 minutes. So this academic institution starts at 11 o'clock until one o'clock. And then I go to sleep and wake up at six o'clock. It’s every day except for Sunday. Even Saturday I did it. It was really stressful. That was what I did.

Despite studying that long, he also failed in his first attempt to enter the university.

I actually missed going to Seoul National University. You know Seoul National University is the best university in Korea. But I didn’t [get in]. I actually, before going to university, I really wanted to study aesthetics, art history. Seoul University also has an aesthetics major, but I couldn’t do that. I tried to apply for the second time to Hongik University, so I got the opportunity to go to university. So half success, half [failure], I think.
In Seoul, a strong desire for educational credentials is shared widely not only among insiders but also even people from working-class backgrounds. Outsiders tended not to be as excited as insiders when they talked about their high school years, but many of them had studied equally long hours. Hyun-woo who works as a contract Hagwon teacher in Gyeonggi-do explained his experiences to me.

In Korea, all the students who want to go to college probably experience difficulty. If you do not try to go to college, it would not be hard, but anyone who wants to go to college has a hard time. I also had a hard time, but as I look back from now, I was luckier than many of my friends.

Hyun-woo wanted to go to a university in Seoul so “I studied from 8 in the morning, well this is about the third year in high school, to 12 at night. Though it was not that I studied all these hours. I played a bit and took a nap, but I stayed in school for this long.” Ji-soo who also works in a Hagwon shares the similar experience, “back then I thought I have to go to a good university to get a job at a big corporation, so I thought I have to study hard. Usually, I arrived at the school at seven and stayed until 11 in the evening when I was in the third year. Before that until 10.”

More often than not, their commitment was due to strong pressures from their parents. After failed in his first attempt, Sang-min studied “five hours or six hours a day. But my parents were angry as I should have studied more.” Jung-ho, a young man who now works in a convenience store also suffered from the pressure his parents put on him.

When I was young, the first year in high school, there was a concern. Anyway, I was not interested in going to college but my parents wanted to see me in college so I went to study in humanities, but I had to study a lot…
Similar social pressures can be found in Tokyo. However, often I observed there was less intensity involved. Ken, who attended a competitive private school in Japan, failed in his attempt to enter the University of Tokyo and studied for another year. He recalls, “well, it is too much to say it was hard, but I guess I somehow felt pressure from my parents.”

Meanwhile, I found more diverse types of talk about education in Japan. Takuya, who now works in one of the largest accounting firms in Tokyo, attended an elite school in Tokyo, recalled that his experience of educational competition was not a negative one. “When I went from elementary school to middle school, my parents were restless, but I wasn’t that negative because, I sort of liked studying back then and my school record was good. I was sure that I could get in somewhere.” The Japanese insiders’ narratives often focused more on the dilemma within themselves rather than social pressure. Takuya said that his stress came more from the relationship with his parents that got worse in the period of college entrance exam.

My mother went to Waseda and she also wanted me to go to Waseda. I was accepted to the school but refused to go. I became on bad terms with my parents during the period of the college entrance exam. We were not in a very good relationship from the beginning because of my refusal to go to high school regularly, but the college exam was the turning point, and we were completely opposed. I refused to go [to Waseda] and escaped to Canada after graduating from high school.

Eventually, he ran out of money and returned to his home in Tokyo.

Because education-oriented parents in Japan with ample resources often wish to send their children to private schools from very early, unlike in Korea, competitions do not solely focus on the college entrance exam. Keisuke who attended the private school system from middle school to college and got a job in one of the largest investment banks in the country recalls:
Yuki: So you didn’t experience a college entrance exam?

Keisuke: No, I didn’t.

Yuki: You didn’t have a hard time getting into high school either?

Keisuke: No, my life was just smooth since around high school.

Yuki: It should be difficult to get into [the high school he attended].

Keisuke: Really? I don’t think it is that difficult.

Mika, a 28 years old non-career track employee in an insurance company who attended a
Christian private school from kindergarten mentioned, “the most stressful time? The period of
college exam in the third year of high school. I have ridden on an escalator from kindergarten to
high school, so I did not experience any entrance exam. I experienced it for the first time when I
applied to college,” and that is why she felt quite stressed out. Mika’s experience resembles that
of many interviewees in Seoul but was exceptional among interviewees in Tokyo.

Some interviewees in Tokyo did not really intend to go to college in the first place,
although a small minority of interviewees in Seoul also did not have a strong interest in college.
When I asked if it was hard for him to take a high school entrance exam, Hayato who works as a
truck driver in a large transportation company responded with unequivocal “No!”

Because I wasn’t that smart. Yes, there was a limited choice of schools where I could go.
So I was just looking for a public school near my place. And my school was close. I think
it was good for me that I went to that school. That school fitted me. It was not a smart
school, so the atmosphere was not so much about studying. So I was able to commit to
sports. It was good. I could not do it if I went to a better school because I would have
been barely handling my study. I was able to commit myself to sports instead. The school
was close too.
Some others were not even in a situation to think about college. Kenjiro, a guy in his early 30s working as a tiler, grew up in the district adjacent to where Takuya was raised. They also come from more or less similar class backgrounds as both of their parents worked for large companies until they retired. However, unlike Takuya, who moved from a public school system to one of the most highly regarded schools in the country, Kenjiro remained in the public school, and it set their worlds apart. If Takuya’s adolescence was spent to prepare him to enter a good university, Kenjiro’s was spent in an effort to stay away from a local student gang.

Kenjiro: I was young and thoughtless, and there were various things so I could not go to school for a while. The teacher told me not to come because it was dangerous. I couldn’t go to school for a while. I didn’t like it back then. I still remember clearly about it. I was a part of the team, and I told them that I quit, but I couldn’t quit smoothly. So every night I had to fight in the park and was knocked down. I went to school with my face like this [hand gesture to show a swollen face] (…)

Yuki: How about high school?

Kenjiro: Well, to be honest, still there were many of these kinds of troubles.

Thus, whereas Korean young adults tended to narrate similar stories of overheated educational competition, in Japan the comparable narratives convey fewer degrees of intensity, and their experiences were more diverse.

During my fieldwork, I could not help but wonder why many young Koreans, both people I interviewed and those I did not, talked so eloquently about their experiences of competition to enter college. In Seoul, young adults’ narratives about education were in many ways stories of suffering in that they recalled how it was painful to study for more than twelve hours a day, for example. However, they narrated their experiences passionately and in a lively manner. Furthermore, it was also puzzling to me why many of them, including those who do not
come from privileged families, committed themselves to this competition. Many young adults in this study devoted one to several years of their adolescent period to studying when the chance to win the game is so slim. As it will be discussed soon, despite the sacrifices they make, only less than three percent of the candidates who apply to university each year are accepted to SKY universities. So why does it make sense to endure such long hours studying and an excessive amount of stresses when it is more likely they will fail in achieving the goal?

Cultural Anthropologist Clifford Geertz argued that carefully reading culture as a text through ethnography can generate insight into society’s structure and meaning-system. His interpretive approach is clearly manifested in his seminal essay of the Balinese cock fight, in which Geertz took up the concept of deep play from the utilitarian English philosopher Jeremy Bentham’s analysis of gambling. For Bentham, the stakes of play like gambling is “so high that it is, from his utilitarian standpoint, irrational for men to engage in it at all” (Geertz 1977:432). Geertz, however, read the cockfight as a ritual that speaks to the deeper cultural and social structure of the Balinese society. What is at stake is less about money but “it is a symbol of moral import, perceived or imposed” (Geertz 1977:433).

What sets the cockfight apart from the ordinary course of life, lifts it from the realm of everyday practical affairs, and surrounds it with an aura of enlarged importance is not, as functionalist sociology would have it, that it reinforces status discriminations (such reinforcement is hardly necessary in a society where every act proclaims them), but that it provides a metasocial commentary upon the whole matter of assorting human beings into fixed hierarchical ranks and then organizing the major part of collective existence around that assortment. Its function, if you want to call it that, is interpretive: it is a Balinese reading of Balinese experience, a story they tell themselves about themselves (Geertz 1977:448).

If we apply this analytical lens, the narratives about educational competitions are not merely about retrospective accounts of individuals’ adolescent years. Rather, they speak to the broader
experiences of how young adults’ lifeworld is organized in contemporary Korean society. As Geertz would argue, talk about education is a “metasocial commentary” of hierarchization and classification in Korea narrated by its very participants. As much as the cock fight “is a Balinese reading of Balinese experience,” Korea’s college entrance exam can be interpreted as the Korean reading of inequality in society. It is through this ritualistic experience that social order and maintenance of hierarchy is performed. Then, it is totally understandable for them to discuss at length about their experiences of high school or college entrance exams.

Meanwhile, as Bourdieu argues, the role of higher education institutions is central in the making of symbolic power through misrecognition and naturalization not only in Korea but in any contemporary developed society. Both Japan and Korea share similar education systems that heavily focus on exams, and thus it should be expected that it is through exams individuals misrecognize and normalizes the advantages of education simply as individual abilities (e.g. Swartz 2013:40–41). If so, it is puzzling why the narratives of suffering similar to that of interviewees in Korea are heard much less often from their peers in Tokyo.

**CULTURES OF EDUCATION**

The narratives of young adults suggest that young adults and their parents in Seoul are invested more in education. It reflects subtle differences in the two societies’ orientation toward educational credentials. According to the results from ISSP’s 2009 module that is shown in Figure 4.2, more than 60 percent of the Korean respondents under 34 think that “having a good education” is either essential or very important to “get ahead” in society whereas only about 40 percent of the Japanese respondents think so. As shown in Figure 4.3, this trend is consistent when the same question is asked about parents’ education.
Therefore, it comes as little surprise that 82.3 percent of Korean respondents compared with 60.1 percent of Japanese and 35.1 percent of American respondents worry about “not being able to give one's children a good education” as World Values Survey found. When we limit the sample population to those under 34 years old, 81% of Japanese and 85% of Korean
respondents answer that they worry (Inglehart et al. 2014 the data is from 2014). ISSP 2009 also found that Korean respondents are much more likely to think that “only students from the best secondary schools have a good chance to obtain a university education” than their counterparts in Japan or the US (ISSP Research Group 2009). It is puzzling why Korean young adults have such high levels of anxiety when opportunities for higher education are not lacking. Korea is the most well educated society in the world where about 70 percent of people in their 20s to early 30s have completed higher education compared to less than 40 percent of the US population around the same age.

The implication of such a cultural orientation is not negligible. When the Confucian cultural norms that emphasize the importance of family are combined with relatively weak welfare states that rely on the family to make up the limited public spending on public goods such as education and elderly care, it produces burdens for both young adults and their parents. The stronger educational desire motivates parents to invest in their children’s education for long years, based on the expectation that the children will support them in return in the future.

Virtually all young adults who are still looking for jobs in Seoul are supported financially by their parents in one way or another. Compared to Japan, where young adults are generally expected to get a full-time job in their early 20s at the latest, cultural norms in Korea tolerate young adults to be economically dependent on their parents for a longer period. Furthermore, longer years of schooling means that parents may have to support their children even after their retirement. Table 4.1 shows that the gap between the normal age of retirement and actual retirement age is bigger in Korea than Japan or the OECD average. For example, on average, Korean men continue some forms of employment for 7.4 years after their formal retirement compared with 5.6 years for Japanese men and the OECD average of one year. Spending on
education and supporting their children leave many parents unprepared for life after retirement. Thus, they expect their children to take care of them, which in turn places burdens on the shoulder of their children who struggle in the flexible labor market and lack savings, especially because many of them gain their first employment in their late 20s to early 30s.

Table 4.1 Average Age of Retirement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Effective</th>
<th>Normal</th>
<th>Gap</th>
<th>Effective</th>
<th>Normal</th>
<th>Gap</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Korea</td>
<td>72.9</td>
<td>65.5</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>73.1</td>
<td>65.5</td>
<td>7.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>70.6</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>69.3</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>9.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OECD</td>
<td>65.3</td>
<td>64.3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>63.6</td>
<td>63.5</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The two societies are also widely known as the world’s fastest aging societies. Since the early 2000s in Korea and the late 2000s in Japan, the maximum limit of enrollment allotted to universities has been exceeding the number of students who wish to attend college. It means that virtually every student can enter college if they were willing to attend any college. Thus, there is little question that the aggregate level of competition has been declining. However, indeed it is possible that the competition to enter the top university is more intense in Korea than in Japan.

Table 4.2 shows that the relative proportion of students who can enroll in the top universities among people in the same age is not significantly different in Korea and Japan. This table does not reflect the exact numbers, but it shows the approximate proportion of students who can actually enter these top schools. In 2018, less than 3 to 3.5 % of all the students who took the national standard exams (Suneung in Korea and the Center Exam in Japan), are admitted to the
three top universities in Korea and Japan. Furthermore, if we define the top universities in Japan based on international rankings such as that of the Times Higher Education, the three top schools of Tokyo, Kyoto, and Tohoku universities can offer admission to only about 1.6 percent of all the students who wish to attend college. Hence, levels of completion are similarly intense in both contexts.

Table 4.2 Entrance Selectivity of Top Colleges

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Undergrad Enrollment/Cohort</th>
<th>% among all the candidates</th>
<th>% among all those who were 18 years old</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Japan</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tokyo</td>
<td>3437</td>
<td>0.60%</td>
<td>0.28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keio</td>
<td>7006</td>
<td>1.21%</td>
<td>0.58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waseda</td>
<td>9669</td>
<td>1.68%</td>
<td>0.80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>20112</td>
<td>3.49%</td>
<td>1.66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Korea</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seoul National</td>
<td>4127</td>
<td>0.69%</td>
<td>0.69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yonsei</td>
<td>6082</td>
<td>1.02%</td>
<td>1.01%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korea</td>
<td>6309</td>
<td>1.06%</td>
<td>1.05%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>16518</td>
<td>2.78%</td>
<td>2.75%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: 

- Undergraduate enrollment is based on the latest data available on the website of each university and I divided the total enrollment by four to get the approximate number of entering cohort of students. I subtracted the number of international students from the total number of undergraduate students except for Seoul National University for which I could not find the number of international students.
Thus, unlike the case of the labor market, which appears to be more fluid in Korea than Japan, when it comes to education, we should wonder not whether the competition is fiercer but why it *feels* fiercer in Korea than Japan. Similarly, the important question is not why Korean students are stressed out from college admission in general, but why they are more stressed out by aiming at the few top universities than their counterparts in Japan.

**FIELDS OF EDUCATION COMPARED**

*Organization of Education Systems*

Cultural differences are rooted in the field in which educational competitions take place. Historian Michael Seth observed in his book about Korea’s education fever,

> what is perhaps most fascinating about the Korean experience is the extent to which social demand for schooling has pervaded every sector of society. If South Korea was becoming “yangbanaized,” the process was not confined to a small middle class but permeated the entire society. This phenomenon, in turn, was linked to a contradiction in South Korean society -its emphasis on hierarchy and rank and its equally significant commitment to egalitarianism (Seth 2002:252)

“Yangbanization” means a process through which people make concerted efforts to conform to the behavior of the ruling Yangbang class in the Joseon dynasty in an attempt to distinguish them from members of others classes (Lett 1998:212).

My observations as shown in the earlier sections match with that of Seth. Put simply, despite a smaller number of students who participate in the competition or perhaps because of that, the field of educational competition seems to be less segmented in Korea, and a larger proportion of young adults compete for the same goals under the same logic. Therefore, as Hyun-woo, a Hagwon teacher, talks about both his own experience and that of his students, “in
Korea, all the students who want to go to college probably experience a difficulty.” By contrast, in Japan students start out trying to compete in the same field, but are tracked into competing in different subfields which better fit their actual qualifications, and thus the field of educational competition is segmented into sub-fields. Mamoru Tsukada (1988) described this phenomenon and how cram schools give parents and college applicants some sense of predictability through their mock testing so that students are gradually steered to the subfield in which they can compete successfully.

To some extent, this eases the perception of the fierceness of competitions. In this context, young adults like Hayato can be mostly indifferent to the race over college entrance and thus he “was able to commit to sports” and “it was good” for him.

This is because, historically, institutions of the education market in Korea are modeled in a way that encourages students from different class backgrounds to take part in the same competition. In Korea, private schools called Hagwon offer after-school tutoring services, and their market is said to be the largest in the world (Choi and Choi 2015). However, when it comes to regular day schools, the numbers of non-public funded institutions and students enrolled in these schools are not that large.

At the elementary and middle schools, students receive education free of charge regardless of public or private institutions. At the high school level, in 2016, more than 70 percent of high-school level students were enrolled in the general high school and most of these schools were publicly funded (Mani and Trines 2018). Among the rest of the student population, 16 percent attended vocational schools and about 12 percent attended special high schools such as foreign language schools and autonomous schools (Mani and Trines 2018). This last group of schools is comparable to private high schools in Japan that are supported by tuition income and
donations. As this study’s interviewees expressed, the tuition of these schools is much more expensive, but they have greater autonomy in their curriculum.

Table 4.3 shows the ranking of high schools that sent the largest number of their graduates to Seoul National University in 2019. The rank is dominated by either the special high school or autonomous schools. It appears that students have a better chance at getting into top universities if they attend these special high schools. Because graduates of these schools are overrepresented in the student bodies of SKY universities, they are seen as a symbolic manifestation of inequality, and as a part of its education reform the current Moon administration seeks to abolish these schools and convert them into regular schools (Kim 2017).

Table 4.3 Number of Admissions to Seoul National U. by High School, 2019

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th># of Admission</th>
<th>Private</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Seoul Arts</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>Special</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Hankuk Academy of Foreign Studies</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>A-Private</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Seoul Science High School</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>Special</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Daewon Foreign Language High School</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>Special</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Hana Academy Seoul</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>A-Private</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Gyeonggi Science High School</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>Special</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Daejeon Science High School</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Special</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Daegu Science High School</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>Special</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Sangsan High School</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>A-Private</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Korean Minjok Leadership Academy</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>A-Private</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Incheon Arts and Science Academy</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Special</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Dankook University High School</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Private</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Sejong Science High School</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Special</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Myungduk Foreign Language High School</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Special</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Gwangju Science Academy For the Gifted</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Special</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Sehwa High School</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>A-Private</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Whimoon High School</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>A-Private</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Kyungnam Science High School</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Special</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Daeil Foreign Language High School</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Special</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Pohang Jecheol Technical High School</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>A-Private</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Hanyoung Foreign Language High School</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Special</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: (Kwon 2019)
Students in Seoul do not have an option to attend the sort of elite private schools that their counterparts in Tokyo have from elementary school through high school. This means that the sorting of students happens primarily at two points. The first juncture is the entrance to high school for those who wish to attend non-general high schools. As interviewees told me, the competition to enter prestigious special high schools is intense. The second point of sorting (or the first one for many students who did not apply to special high schools) is the college entrance exam, which basically everybody has to go through as long as they want to attend college. That is why Suneung - the national standard college entrance exam - becomes “the exam for which they have been preparing their entire lives,” and the one which “not only dictates whether the students will go to university, but can affect their job prospects, income, where they will live and even future relationships” as the BBC reports (Hossein 2018).

There are two major forms of college entrance exams in Korea. In Chon-si (meaning all at a time exam), the score a student earns in the national standard exam technically determines admission decision. Susi (meaning all the time admission), is another form of admission closer to the US formula organized by each university and involves submission of various materials such as essays and GPAs, as well as interviewees. It has been not popular because of the stigma associated with it as “the easy exam” (Diamond 2016).

In contrast, the forms of private education are more diverse in Japan. Technically speaking, sorting can happen at every school level. Table 4.4 shows the ranking of high schools based on the percentage of their students that were accepted into the University of Tokyo in 2019. Only one school is a regular public high school and the rest are either private schools or schools affiliated with the national universities. Virtually all these private and national high schools also have their own junior high schools under the same system and some schools also
have elementary schools. Other private school systems such as Keio also have kindergartens. In the path that some of the interviewees in Tokyo followed, rich parents can send their children to private schools from kindergarten to secure their seat in the university owned by the same school system.

Table 4.4 Admission Rates to University of Tokyo by High School, 2019

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Admission %</th>
<th>Private</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Kaisei</td>
<td>43.60%</td>
<td>Private</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Nada</td>
<td>39.40%</td>
<td>Private</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Eikō Gakuin</td>
<td>36.50%</td>
<td>Private</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Seikō Gakuin</td>
<td>33.80%</td>
<td>Private</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Oui</td>
<td>30.10%</td>
<td>Private</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Azabu</td>
<td>29.70%</td>
<td>Private</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Komaba Tōhō</td>
<td>22.70%</td>
<td>Private</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Shibuya Kōōiku Gakuen Makuhari</td>
<td>19.10%</td>
<td>Private</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>La Salle Academy</td>
<td>17.20%</td>
<td>Private</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Musashi</td>
<td>16.90%</td>
<td>Private</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Kurume Dai Fusetsu</td>
<td>16.50%</td>
<td>Private</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Tsukuba Dai Fuzoku</td>
<td>15.10%</td>
<td>National</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Hibiya</td>
<td>14.50%</td>
<td>R-Public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Kaijo</td>
<td>14.50%</td>
<td>Private</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Gakugei Dai Fuzoku</td>
<td>14.30%</td>
<td>National</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Asano</td>
<td>11.80%</td>
<td>Private</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Shibuya Kōōiku Gakuen Shibuya</td>
<td>11.40%</td>
<td>Private</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Tōdaiji Gakuuen</td>
<td>11.30%</td>
<td>Private</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Waseda</td>
<td>11.00%</td>
<td>Private</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Nishi Yamato Gakuen</td>
<td>10.60%</td>
<td>Private</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: (Shimano 2019)

Furthermore, there is a range of types of secondary schools including good, middling, and bad schools both private and public in Japan. When students make the transition from junior high school to high school, students who are not doing well academically are sorted out of academic high schools and into non-academic or vocational tracks.

It means that the competition happens across different levels, and thus the entire sorting process is much more segmented than that of Korea. The segmented fields of competition in
Tokyo can mean greater inequality of opportunities because there are more entrance opportunities to these elite private or national schools for students with enough financial resources. It is simply more likely to increase the chance to get into the top public and private universities if they have money. For example, if parents fail to send their child to a kindergarten that belongs to an elite school system, they can take an entrance exam to elementary school. If the children fail again, then there is a chance to apply to junior high school. In contrast, the conformity appears to be more equal in Korea because regardless of how much money parents spend on education, there are only two opportunities (high school and college entrance) to convert economic capital to educational credentials.

However, paradoxically, inequality is felt more intensely in Korea’s seemingly egalitarian system of competition that allows everyone to take part in the same race. The Korean education institutions leave little room for people to be indifferent to competition over higher education and thus shape a stronger sense of relative deprivation even among those who are otherwise not interested in going to the top few colleges.

Based on the differences described above, not only national but also local governments have helped to shape such institutional differences. Though I cannot embark on reviewing all the major policy changes, let me introduce just one brief example of school district reforms. Back in the 1970s, both Seoul and Tokyo had the same problem of overheated educational competition but made the opposite moves to address this problem. Tokyo metropolitan government abolished the school district system in 1981 and allowed students to enroll in any of Tokyo’s public high schools if they could pass the entrance exam. This reform, in conjunction with the declining academic performance of top public schools, shifted resourceful parents’ attention to the private
education market. To a certain degree, it eased the degree of educational competitions and also separated the realm of the competition from geographical spaces.

In contrast, in Korea where private schools were not developed as much, the government strengthened the school district system to equalize public education. In 1974, they introduced a system in which students are randomly enrolled in schools in their districts (Koo Unpublished manuscript). In Seoul, many parents had rushed to move into Gangnam, where good public schools are concentrated. Thus, interestingly, the existing inequality moderated the competition to some extent in Tokyo, whereas the egalitarian ideal exacerbated the intensity of the race in Seoul.

Although the cultural tendency to prioritize education is a crucial factor in both societies, the organization of the education system in Korea tends to shape the condition in which people from different class backgrounds compete under the same logic. In contrast, the Japanese system starts earlier to track students into more segmented and differentiated arenas where they are not competing for the same goals under the same logic.

*Top School’s Symbolic Power*

No less important is the fact that capital is field-specific. In both Seoul and Tokyo, degrees from top universities have symbolic values, but their values also accord to the specific rules of the field.

Korean young adults often referred to a comparison between Kyoto or Osaka Universities and Pusan National University to discuss the particularity of the education system in Korea. Whereas in Japan, degrees from top national universities in cities other than Tokyo are valued as much as that of the University of Tokyo, especially in the region where these universities are
located such as Kyoto or Osaka, that is not the case in Korea. A long time ago Pusan National was considered the second best school in the country, but nowadays no university located outside of Seoul except for KAIST in Daejeon is comparable to the universities in Seoul, and the three SKY universities in Seoul stand at the very top. In Japan, in contrast, it is entirely possible to get insider jobs with degrees from universities other than the top three schools, and there is not even an agreed upon definition of the top three universities, unlike SKY in Korea.

Table 4.5 shows a ranking of colleges from which CEOs of the 500 largest companies in Korea graduated. Nearly 45 percent of 500 CEOs graduated from the top-three SKY universities. Similarly, table 4.6 shows a ranking of colleges from which the 2018 cohort of top-class civil-servants (classes 1-5) graduated. In this case, 63 percent of this entering cohort consists of the graduates of SKY universities. Furthermore, the order of the top five universities (SKY plus Hanyang and Sungkyunkwan) is consistent in both rankings. It is also the case when we look at a number of similar rankings that identify the colleges from which professionals such as lawyers or politicians graduated.
Table 4.5 Colleges from which CEOs of 500 Largest Companies in Korea Graduated

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>College</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>#</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Seoul National</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>23.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Korea</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>12.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Yonsei</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>9.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Hanyang</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>5.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Sungkyunkwan</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>4.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Busan National</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>3.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Sogang</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>3.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Yeungnam</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Hankuk U. of Foreisng Studies</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Chung-Ang</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Kyung Hee</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Inha</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Kyungpook National</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Chonnam National</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Chungnam National</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: (Son 2018)

Table 4.6 Colleges from which the 2018 Cohort of High-level Civil Servants Graduated in Korea

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>College</th>
<th>#</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Types</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Seoul National</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>31.0%</td>
<td>Seoul</td>
<td>Public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Yonsei</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>16.9%</td>
<td>Seoul</td>
<td>Private</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Korea</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>15.1%</td>
<td>Seoul</td>
<td>Private</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Hanyang</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>8.5%</td>
<td>Seoul</td>
<td>Private</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Sungkyunkwan</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>7.4%</td>
<td>Seoul</td>
<td>Private</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Sogang</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
<td>Seoul</td>
<td>Private</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Ewha Womans</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
<td>Seoul</td>
<td>Private</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>KAIST</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2.1%</td>
<td>Not in Seoul</td>
<td>Public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Seoul City</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
<td>Seoul</td>
<td>Public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Busan National</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
<td>Not in Seoul</td>
<td>Public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Chung-Ang</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
<td>Seoul</td>
<td>Private</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: (Sang-yeon Lee 2018)

Table 4.7 and 4.8 show comparable rankings in Japan, where 28.8 percent of CEOs among 2,095 large corporations graduated from the top three colleges in this table of Keio, Tokyo, and Waseda. When it comes to top-class civil servants, however, the order of the top three schools changes and Tokyo, Kyoto, and Waseda make up about 30 percent of the 2018
cohort of those who passed the class A civil service exam. While we can clearly see the trends in which graduates of certain schools are privileged, the degree of concentration is much less severe in Japan than Korea. Furthermore, in the Japanese case, there seem to be more flexibility in the definition of good degrees. For example, Nihon University, which is ranked fourth in Table 4.6 is the unequivocal top school which produces a larger number of CEOs when smaller firms are included. It is not even considered a top school in other measures such as selectivity, but has a strong and extensive network of alumni as the biggest school system in Japan. When it comes to similar rankings for lawyers, Chuo University has traditionally been ranked in the top three despite not being a typical top school.

Table 4.7 Colleges from which CEOs of the Companies Listed on Tokyo Stock Exchange Market Graduated

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>College</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>#</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Keio</td>
<td>Tokyo</td>
<td>260</td>
<td>12.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Tokyo</td>
<td>Tokyo</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>8.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Waseda</td>
<td>Tokyo</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>8.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Nihon</td>
<td>Tokyo</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>3.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Kyoto</td>
<td>Not in Tokyo</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Meiji</td>
<td>Tokyo</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>3.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Chuo</td>
<td>Tokyo</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Doushisha</td>
<td>Not in Tokyo</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Hitotsubashi</td>
<td>Tokyo</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Osaka</td>
<td>Not in Tokyo</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 Kwansei Gakuin</td>
<td>Not in Tokyo</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>2.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 Aoyama Gakuin</td>
<td>Tokyo</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 Kansai</td>
<td>Not in Tokyo</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 Rikkyo</td>
<td>Tokyo</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 Hosei</td>
<td>Tokyo</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: (Teikoku Databank 2018)
Table 4.8 Colleges from which 2018 Cohort of High-level Civil Servants (Class 1) Graduated in Japan

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>College</th>
<th>#</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Types</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Tokyo</td>
<td>194</td>
<td>16.8%</td>
<td>Tokyo</td>
<td>Public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Kyoto</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>6.8%</td>
<td>Not in Tokyo</td>
<td>Public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Waseda</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
<td>Tokyo</td>
<td>Private</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Tohoku</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>4.7%</td>
<td>Not in Tokyo</td>
<td>Public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Keio</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>4.7%</td>
<td>Tokyo</td>
<td>Private</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Okayama</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>3.5%</td>
<td>Not in Tokyo</td>
<td>Public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Hokkaido</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
<td>Not in Tokyo</td>
<td>Public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Osaka</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
<td>Not in Tokyo</td>
<td>Public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Kobe</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
<td>Not in Tokyo</td>
<td>Public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Meiji</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
<td>Tokyo</td>
<td>Private</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: (Kudo 2018)
Note: *The number excludes the graduates of graduate or professional schools

Furthermore, as many interviewees in Seoul pointed out, virtually all the top universities are located in Seoul whereas there is a more regional diversity in Japan. Table 4.9 shows the ranking of colleges from which CEOs of companies located in the metropolitan area around Osaka graduated. Only four among the top fifteen colleges are located in the greater Tokyo region. Thus, in the field of higher education in Korea, symbolic power is concentrated much more heavily on the top three schools than is the case in Japan. This, in turn, is likely to lead to the overconcentration of desire. That is why the race is felt to be fiercer in Seoul, and consequently, young adults tend to feel more inequality. In sum, in addition to the cultural context in which people from different class backgrounds are likely to share the same educational aspiration, the character of the field tends to facilitate the same desire.
Table 4.9 Colleges from which CEOs of the Companies Listed on Tokyo Stock Exchange Market in Osaka Metropolitan Area Graduated

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>College</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>#</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Doshisha</td>
<td>Kansai</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Keio</td>
<td>Tokyo</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Kwansei Gakuin</td>
<td>Kansai</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Kōnan</td>
<td>Kansai</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Kyoto</td>
<td>Kansai</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Tokyo</td>
<td>Tokyo</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Osaka</td>
<td>Kansai</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Kansai</td>
<td>Kansai</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Waseda</td>
<td>Tokyo</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Kobe</td>
<td>Kansai</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 Ritsumeikan</td>
<td>Kansai</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 Kinki</td>
<td>Kansai</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 Chuo</td>
<td>Tokyo</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 Momoyama Gakuin</td>
<td>Kansai</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colleges Overseas</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: (Teikoku Databank 2018)

One of the reasons why educational competition is perceived to be more intense in Seoul is because Korea’s field of education is more vertically structured and less autonomous than that of Tokyo. While major fields such as politics, businesses, and education have their relative autonomy from the field of power, the degree of autonomy is dependent on the result of struggles between different fields that take place within the field of power (Bourdieu 1996:264–72). The more a field is vertically structured, the more economic and political capital matter rather than autonomous principles in the field. It means that in Korea the autonomy of the field of higher education tends to be repressed by economic or political capital. While Japan also shares a similar system along with countries such as France in that elite bureaucrats are directly recruited from a few elite colleges, as the above numbers have shown, the three top universities exert
much more influence not only within the education field but also in business and bureaucratic fields.

The relative proximity of fields of the politics, economy, and education means that, on the one hand, the education field itself is more prone to influences from business and politics in Korea. For example, elite universities in Seoul today have many contemporary buildings endowed by and named after Chaebol corporations. To name a few examples, Seoul National University has a gigantic sports complex named after POSCO, the largest steel-maker in the country; Yonsei University’s seven-story new library is called Samsung library; Korea University’s business school has a hyper-modern Hyundai Motors building. While Japanese universities also appear to be increasingly open to endowment from outside, for example, the University of Tokyo opened its first building named after an individual donor in 2003, naming facilities with the name of private corporations is rare.

On the other hand, and perhaps more importantly from the perspective of young people in Korea, this means that capital in the education field is tightly linked to capital in other fields. If one does not possess a certain form of capital in the education field in the beginning, the objective chance of success in the other field is slim even compared to Japan, which has long been known as an “educational credential society” (Kariya and Burtscher 2013). Furthermore, in both countries, much of one’s career choice is determined by initial employment after the end of schooling. In this context everything rests on the first job, which is quite different from the situation in the US or even European countries, which have more open employment markets for later on in one’s career. Hence, even though the objective degree of educational competition does not vary greatly between the two contexts, cultural and institutional arrangements shape the environment in Seoul where more is at stake in the college entrance exam. When considering this
context, we can see why many young people anxiously commit to the race to enter a prestigious school and suffer from their commitment.

In short, generally speaking, Korean young adults tend to value educational credentials more highly than their counterparts in Tokyo. Both my interview data and representative surveys indicate similar trends. Furthermore, the organization of educational field in Korea, in which access to the elite high schools is limited, and the sorting of students happens fewer times than in Japan, forces young adults from different social locations to take part in the same struggle. It is in this sense that the field of educational competition is bigger, less segmented, and more monolithic in Seoul than Tokyo. Furthermore, the nature of the symbolic value of the top universities is different in the two fields, leading to different strategies that actors employ in the competition. The perception of over-competition produces a sense of relative deprivation and perceived inequality.

CONCLUSION

My aim in this chapter was to look at young adults’ perception of inequality and insecurity as they have been shaped by their experiences of education. Though the two countries share various features of institutions and cultures of education, I found that young adults’ experiences of educational competition show marked differences according to their family backgrounds and geographical locations.

The first part of the chapter explored the educational trajectories of three groups of young people identified in the previous chapter. It also showed parents’ involvement in these processes. Then, the focus shifted to their narratives about educational competition. Whereas insiders and meaning-seekers experienced harsh academic competition typically during their high school
years in Seoul, not many interviewees in Tokyo narrated their frustrations and stresses about the college exam. Rather they tended to recall stresses from diverse dimensions of life including but not limited to family relationships, friends, extracurricular activities, and bullying. Furthermore, while many outsiders in Korea also recounted their experiences of long hours of studying, virtually no outsiders in Tokyo shared comparable experiences.

Finally, the chapter explored the reasons why young adults and their parents in Seoul tend to commit themselves more intensely to educational competition and are stressed out from their commitments. Rather than explaining the observed difference by Confucian tradition, which Japan and Korea share, I employed Bourdieu’s concepts to analyze such dimensions as the organization of fields (private schools and sorting systems), and the nature of symbolic value ascribed to a particular form of capital (value of the top universities) in both fields. The doxa, or common belief in the field of education in Korea is characterized by stronger belief in education, the prevalence of educational desire, and the hegemonic power of top schools, compared to Japan. The perception of the scarcity of goods that many people aspire to achieve motivates young adults to participate in the competition and also makes them feel stressed out from the commitment and its consequences.

While the education systems of both societies have historically been characterized as “examination mania” or “examination hell” by outside observers and the participants themselves, my comparative analysis sketched more subtle differences in the ways young adults today experienced the pains and dilemmas (or lack of them) in the two cities, as they are shaped by cultural and institutional contexts. Furthermore, unlike earlier studies that focused on young adults’ experiences of inequality and insecurity primarily in the world of work, this chapter showed how their insecurities are already preconditioned at the stage of education which
prepared them for the labor market. Without taking account of this temporality, we cannot fully understand why, for example, secure jobs appear to be too precious to lose for insiders, or insecure jobs are unbearable to the extent they are for college-educated young adults.

The next chapter focuses on marriage as another source of uncertainty among young adults.
CHAPTER 5  MARRIAGE

INTRODUCTION

Traditional East Asian families are characterized by strong ties and clear gender division of labor within the family. Furthermore, the patriarchal family system remains relatively intact despite rapid social and demographic changes. For instance, the association between marriage and childrearing are relatively strong as indicated by the very small amount of nonmarital childbearing. In 2014, only 1.9 % of all the birth in Korea and 2.3 % of births in Japan occurred outside of marriage compared with, for example, 40.2 % in the US and 54.6% in Sweden (OECD 2019a). One result is the ongoing trends toward late and less marriage as well as less childbearing, because the tension between social norms and reality makes it less attractive for educated women and more difficult for men with little education to play a provider role (Raymo et al. 2015).

Furthermore, a bad prospect for secure employment for young adults means that marriage becomes ever more important as a potential source of security for some people. Thus, marriage came to be a significant source of anxiety for many young adults. The media and businesses tend to amplify these anxieties. For example, in 2018, S Cawaii!, a popular fashion magazine for young women in Japan, even featured a 40 page special issue that describe ways to marry early, which sold out (Nishimura 2018). In both Seoul and Tokyo, dating apps have become a fast-growing industry by provoking the anxieties of young adults and providing a seeming solution to it at the same time (Murai 2018; Statista 2019a, 2019b).

Beneath the surface of this tension, little is known about the lived experience of the very people who are caught up in the discrepancy between hope and reality. Against this background,
this chapter has two aims. First, it describes conflicted views of and dilemmas about marriage that young adults share. While both Korea and Japan are considered to share similar context as Confucian China’s “cultural offshoots,” once in the field, I found that the interviewees in Seoul were more worried and stressed out from expectations imposed on them particularly about home ownership. By focusing on this difference, the second aim of this chapter is to explain how cultures and institutions of marriage and housing markets shape young people’s anxiety as they come of age.

**MARRIAGE IN EAST ASIA**

In their “compressed” or “semi-compressed” pathways to modernity (Chang, 1999 Ochiai 2014), both Korea and Japan have gone through dramatic social and economic changes such as women’s advancement into higher education and labor markets. Table 5.1 summarizes the indicators of such changes. What is surprising is the pace of changes especially in Korea. In a mere four decades, Korea went from a society where virtually no woman attained higher education to one in which the majority receives it. Women in Korea are today more educated and likely to have jobs than in the 1970s. Marriage became less common. In 1970, on average women in Korea gave birth to 4.5 children while today the fertility rate is far below the replacement level of 2.1. In Japan, the process of change was much more gradual. For example, 20% of all women in Japan already attended college in 1980. However, the overall trend is consistent in that the social and economic conditions surrounding women changed drastically in the last few decades.
### Table 5.1 Measures of Demographic Changes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Year</th>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>N/A</td>
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<td>1.5</td>
<td>1.2</td>
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</table>

<table>
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<th>Year</th>
<th>Japan</th>
<th>Korea</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
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<td>1975</td>
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<tr>
<td>1980</td>
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<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>31.1</td>
<td>32.6</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>29.4</td>
<td>30.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: I added the data for 2015. Gross enrollment ratio can exceed 100 % because it is the number of students enrolled in a given level of education regardless of age to the actual population of that age group (See UNESCO 2019). It means that the number can also include overaged or underaged individuals.

Source: Based on (Raymo et al. 2015:474)

c[http://kosis.kr/statisticsList/statisticsListIndex.do?menuId=M_01_01&vwd=MT_ZTITLE&parmTabId=M_01_01?menuId=M_01_01&vwd=MT_ZTITLE&parmTabId=M_01_01&parentId=A](http://kosis.kr/statisticsList/statisticsListIndex.do?menuId=M_01_01&vwd=MT_ZTITLE&parmTabId=M_01_01?menuId=M_01_01&vwd=MT_ZTITLE&parmTabId=M_01_01&parentId=A)
One consequence is that the speed at which people’s attitudes and social norms change did not catch up. The type of family in which men play the sole-provider role and women become homemakers and mothers is still taken for granted. Figure 5.1 summarizes the percentage of people who agreed to the statement “a job is alright, but what most women really want is home and children” from the World Values Survey in 2014. The proportion of respondents in Korea who do agree with these conservative statements shows a closer resemblance to Asian societies such as China than to other societies known for their lesser degree of gender inequality, for example, Sweden.

Figure 5.1 Attitudes on Women’s Role in Society

Source: World Values Survey (Inglehart et al. 2014)
Young people are still expected to marry. Figure 5.2 shows the result of a large scale online survey conducted in 2016 in Japan, which asked parents about their expectations regarding their children’s marriage. A majority of fathers and mothers expect their son or daughter to marry in their late 20s or early 30s. Less than 15 percent of mothers and 10 percent of fathers consider that whether their children marry or not is a matter of their own choice. Furthermore, the study also finds that nearly 50% of approximately 10,000 surveyed parents wish to be actively involved in their children’s search for marriage partners search (Meiji Yasuda Institute of Life and Wellness 2016:19).

Figure 5.2 Parents’ Expectations on Marriage

![Bar chart showing parents' expectations on marriage](image)

Source: (Meiji Yasuda Institute of Life and Wellness 2016)

After the 1980s, labor market flexibility grew significantly in both societies. Young men’s decreasing ability to play the provider role destabilized the East Asian breadwinner-home maker family model. Thus, the emerging tensions have shaped trends toward less marriage and childbearing by “increasing the opportunity costs of marriage for women (especially for women with higher levels of education), decreasing the ability of men to fulfill the provider role
(especially for men with lower levels of education), and exacerbating marriage market mismatches” (Raymo et al. 2015:8.3).

Indeed, 91.3 % of people in their 20s in Korea and 79.7 % in Japan remain unmarried in 2018 (Kim 2018). As shown in Table 5.1, between 1970 and 2015, the average age of marriage has increased from 27.1 to 32.6 years old for Korean men. While the data for Korean women is available from only a shorter period, in the twenty years from 1995 to 2015, the average age of marriage has increased from 26.5 to 30 years old. Similarly, in 1970, 26.9 years old for men and 25.6 years old for women were the average age of marriage in Japan but today the numbers have increased to 31.1 and 29.4 years old. Thus, marriage is still considered a norm but increasingly difficult to attain or less attractive.

One outcome of late and less marriage is declining fertility rates that are already far lower than replacement level. Demographic studies have found that the trend toward fewer children is more salient among men who hold non-regular employment or have no job in Japan (Nagase and Brinton 2017; Piotrowski et al. 2018; Piotrowski, Kalleberg, and Rindfuss 2015; Raymo and Shibata 2017). In Korea, marriage migration of women from South East Asian countries has become popular (Lee 2009:371–372). In Japan, scholars documented the international migration of Pilipino women who came to Japan as hostesses and subsequently married Japanese men in both rural and urban areas (e.g. Faier 2009; Parreñas 2011:Chapter 6). Not surprisingly, both Seoul and Tokyo have seen a remarkable rise of single-person households in the last few decades (Ronald 2017; Ronald, Druta, and Godzik 2018).

Chang Kyung-sup (2014; 2010) argues that in East Asian societies, the family has become a risk, especially for women. As much as the family was the driver of South Korea’s compressed pathway to modernity, its consequences put the burden on women. When states,
corporations, and other institutions failed to safeguard basic conditions of material livelihood, the family became functionally overloaded and appeared as a risk. Thus, there emerged what he calls risk-aversive individualization, which “is a social tendency whereby individuals try to minimize family-associated risks of modern life (or modernity) by extending or returning to individualized stages of life” (Chang and Song 2010:542). Though his argument is based on the case of Korea, he also made the case that this tendency applies to other East Asian societies, citing the examples of Japan and Taiwan (also see Ochiai 2014).

Several recent works focus on migrants and young men in rural Korea (Freeman 2011; Kim 2013, 2018; Kwon 2015; Lee 2014). Also, there have been a few studies on the lives of the two groups of people who have difficulties today: educated women and little-educated men. In Japan, Emma Cook explores the lives of irregularly employed men whose basis of masculinity is in question (Cook 2013, 2014). Yoshida Akiko (2016) explored the narratives of unmarried women in Japan. In Korea, Jesook Song (2014) explored young single women’s pursuit of spatial autonomy in Korea. There have also been a few studies on the lives of urban singles (Jung 2017; Ronald et al. 2018; Yoshida 2016). Yet, beneath the surface of this tension, which has been documented by a number of studies (Nakano 2014; Roberts 2016), not too much is known about the lived experience of the very people who are caught up in the discrepancy between hope and reality.

How do young adults come to terms with the dilemma they face about marriage? In the US, superb interview-based studies have reported the changes made by neoliberalism’s advance into the realm of intimacy (Gerson 2009; Pugh 2015), which renders love as risky especially for working-class young adults who lack material resources (Silva 2013). This chapter joins these recent works and explores the cultures and institutions of marriage as one of the mechanisms that
amplify or moderate perceptions of economic insecurity and inequality as young adults come of age.

Table 5.2 shows that only 13 among 43 interviewees in Tokyo and 7 out of 55 interviewees in Seoul are married. Among those who are married, about 33% of insiders or meaning-seekers (11 of 33 individuals), 19% (5 of 26) of meaning-seekers, and only 10% of outsiders/job-seekers (4 of 39) are married. All the 12 individuals who have one or more children are either insiders or meaning-seekers (6 insiders and 6 meaning-seekers). This is consistent with the findings from the existing demographic research that people without college degrees and stable jobs are more likely to find it difficult to find a partner and have a child (e.g. Raymo and Shibata 2017).

Table 5.2 Number of Married Interviewees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Marriage (N=98)</th>
<th>Unmarried</th>
<th>Married</th>
<th>Divorced</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td>30</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seoul (N=55)</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Children (N=98)</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>≥1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tokyo (N=43)</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seoul (N=55)</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**TORN BETWEEN THE TWO WORLDS**

Many women I interviewed both in Seoul and Tokyo were torn between the two worlds of work and family. Their devotion in one realm (making a family or pursuing a career) can have a negative effect on the other side. Young-jin is one of the people who are caught up in the discrepancy between two worlds.
One evening in the summer of 2017, I was at a spacious café in Gwanghwamun, a district jammed with business people and tourists, with Young-Jin, a woman in her early 30s who works in a nearby building. She was born in Japan while her father was pursuing his doctoral degree there. The family moved back to Busan when she was six months old, and her father has been teaching in a university in Korea since then. Growing up, she wanted to work for an international organization like UNICEF while her mother wanted her to become a diplomat. A graduate of a foreign language high school and Yonsei University with a year of study abroad experience at a prestigious university in the US, Young-jin speaks English much more fluently than I do.

To pursue her dream, she applied and was accepted to an internship position at UNESCO’s headquarters in Paris. However, upon her arrival, UNESCO announced a mass layoff of its staff members. Seeing so much drama inside the office, she recounted that “my dream was ruined.” She returned to Korea in disappointment and started looking for a different job.

Surprisingly, I easily got into one of big companies in Korea as an educator but that time…the corporate culture was so male oriented, so I really had a hard time adapting into that culture. I quit there after six months and then I was like ‘I will just do my doctors degree.’ So I got a part-time job at a national research center, but then my parents were like, ‘oh we don’t want you to go to study. Think about your marriage, and those kind of issues. So they were very against my decision. So I had to search for jobs again but because I quit that job in less than a year, that was not a good career [trajectory] for me. So when I looked for a job that became a problem. And also, I was 29 years old back then. In Korea when a woman is quite old, when I say old it means more than 26 years old, then age becomes a barrier. Yeah… that time I was 29. They, employers, kept asking me ‘when are you marrying?’ because that’s the big deal for them. Because I might quit or leave. That time I really struggled to get a job and I ended up being a translator here.
Thus, at the time of the interview, she was working in the translation department of one of the largest law firms in the country. Her job is demanding. Sometimes she has to work a full 8 hours without any break and cannot even go to the bathroom. In recent months, she worked about 200 hours a month on average. She thinks that her current employment provides her with some security, but it also allows her employer too many opportunities for exploitation. She has to translate a 20 to 30 page document to earn the wage freelancers can earn by translating a 2 to 3 page document. Though the job is still much more enjoyable than the previous ones, she feels like what she does (translation) does not contribute to the greater good. Furthermore, she does not see her future in this job.

As I told you, because of the technology, I feel like I have to do something. If I work without being aware of changes or being unable to equip myself to adapt to the change, I might be replaced and lose my job and fall behind so these days I keep on thinking what I should do, and I kind of came to the conclusion that maybe doing a Ph.D. would be better for me. Yeah, but still thinking.

Thus, the biggest sources of anxiety for her are about marriage and her future career. However, Young-jin thinks pursuing a Ph.D. does not help her to solve her anxiety over marriage in the end.

And marriage. I think it would be similar in Japan but in Korea, strong norms about…if you are a certain age, you have to do this. If you are a female, they always talk about marriage. In my parents or grandparents’ mind, I am too old now. Yeah, they think I should’ve been married a few years ago. So they are always telling me about this but…yeah, it’s a big deal, but if I have to get married just because I have to, that would be a disaster so…I don’t want to get married until I can live well with the person. There is a big pressure within my family, and there is also social pressure because they always tell people when women get old it’s difficult to find your partner. That kind of makes me anxious although I don’t feel like I have to get married, but I am still afraid ‘yeah I’m just getting older like when I really want to marry someone, I am too old, so I cannot meet someone. Then, what should I do?’ That kind of thought makes me very anxious.

Young-jin is also outraged about the prejudice she experienced.
I think, in Korea, people are not that gender-sensitive, and there are so many pressures put on females especially. There are pressures also on males, but still, there are a lot of prejudices and barriers put on women. Usually, many times that’s related to age. Also, your educational background. There is a kind of statement that I don’t really like to listen to. It’s that women are annoying if they are educated more. That’s a prevalent discourse in Korea. Even my college friends tend to end up marrying people from another university usually Ewha, which is ranked lower than Yonsei. And many of my friends tell me that ‘I’m smart, but I don’t want to marry people as smart as me or smarter than me because they are annoying.’ I don’t like that discourse, but I felt a lot of pressure about that because I did my masters whereas some people did not. In [Young-jin’s first employment] I felt that also. Whenever I meet people, if they are from a lower-ranked university than Yonsei, then they always get anxious about me graduating from Yonsei. So if I want to go out with someone and he is from another university that makes him anxious. And lots of people often tell me that if you do a Ph.D. then maybe it would be really, really difficult for you to find a partner because people will think you are toooooooo educated. And they never tell that to a male. And I think that is why I am getting stressed out from marriage.

Several months later, on a shivering cold day in Seoul, we talked again in a cozy café near her apartment. At this point, Young-jin was almost determined to study in a Ph.D. program in the US. When I asked if she is still interested in marriage, she responded, “I don’t know… but I think I got sick of it (laughing).” After the first interview, Young-jin tried several blind dates which did not work well.

My friends from Yonsei who I met during my masters, they told me like “I would like to introduce you to other people so if he’s worth, (you will) give up a Ph.D,” hahahaha. So I met several people, but I just got frustrated because talking with them, I feel like now I know what is expected to be a woman in Korea, and sometimes I feel like I don’t fit into that category. So some people wanted a girl who is much much prettier than me. So they commented a lot about my appearances, so they told me like ‘you are old’ and ‘if you want to meet a good person you have to try to be prettier.’ I was like what? And then another person was a doctor, and he told me like ‘so meeting a doctor in Korea means that you have to be very wealthy so that you can help him come out from a university hospital to private practice and it requires a lot of money, right?’ To pay the rent. So he is like ‘if you want to marry a doctor, you have to be wealthy enough to support me.’ I’m like, no. I studied a lot. I earned a lot of money, and I am proud of myself but why do I have to feel like I am trading [myself]…like… So I asked him, ‘is being a doctor a big deal?’ and he got angry hahahahaha. It was like that, and there was another guy, I think
he matched well, but he doesn’t want me to go to study. So I kept asking myself, ‘is it worth giving up a Ph.D.? ’ and I thought maybe I would not be happy if I just gave up just to get married. Maybe afterward that might hurt my relationship with my family because if something that is not very satisfactory to me happens, ‘so I chose you to give up [a university from which she received an admission offer] and you are doing that to me like that?’ Maybe if I think like that, it won’t be a happy life maybe so I thought I should just go and see how it goes. Yeah. I feel like, in Korea, there is a pressure for women to either be a good mother or good housekeeper but now it’s really hard to live without working. So we also work hard and earn a lot of money at the same time to be a good mother or good housekeeper, and you have to be pretty, you have to be skinny, all those things. And I think I am very sick of it because I don’t think I am that ugly that I have to get comments from others like ‘you have to be pretty.’ And I don’t think I am that fat, but every time I meet people, they told me you have to lose weight.

Young-jin is the kind of person who cannot get any thinner.

Young-jin: I was like what? How can you say that in front of others? But I was surprised to hear that lots of people in my age experience these. So I feel like ‘ha… ’[sigh]. It’s not a market, we are not a product, but sometimes I feel like that. I told my brother yesterday that maybe I should refuse to be a product and just choose to be a person so that I can just become a person who lives the life that is up to my expectation so I should just give up being a female in Korean society and he is like ‘hahahhh…[deep sigh]’ He just told me ‘oh you are crazy’. I think if I just try to get married, try to fit into the stereotype, I feel like I won’t be happy.

Yuki: Do your parents still pressure you to get married? Did they quit doing that?

Young-jin: Oh…they pressure a lot…but I think my father, I thought he gave up. He is like ‘okay we respect your decision’ but now I kind of realize why he did that because I told him that I got admission from [a university in Boston] he was so happy because it was in Boston. He said ‘yeah you have to go to Ph.D. in the region where you have a good engineering program, hahahaha, so he thought in Boston there is Harvard, MIT so there would be a lot of males. He is always telling me that ‘maybe you can meet a guy there.’ So when I told him ‘but [a university in Boston] I don’t know that [would be a good idea]. Living expenses are too high in Boston’, and also, yesterday I was really shocked because the potential adviser I was assigned was (…) a person who nobody wants to work with so I was like ‘I might not go to [a university in Boston],’ and my father told me that ‘unless you get into Harvard, you just go to [a university in Boston] because…’ [laughing] ‘Boston is a good place with good resources at the time you have to think about marriage.’ So I was like hahhhh [deep sigh]. So he didn’t give up [laughing]. I think, they wanted me to meet with a person working in Korea with a good amount of salary and position, but now I think they switched it to a Ph.D. student from a good school.
Yuki: Do they basically support you going to a Ph.D. program?

Young-jin: I wanted to go to a Ph.D. program when I was much much younger. But did I tell you that my father didn’t want me to apply? (...) Now seeing after five years, I am still not married. And I am suffering a lot from work, and my father kind of realized that, he told me, I think you do not fit into the Korean corporate culture. You have too many thoughts. He told me you are too smart to work in a company. He is not telling me I am so intelligent, but I think a lot about power structure. How bad people are treated by the company, so he thinks you see too many things that other people don’t see so he is like ‘ahhh just study then.’ So now they support me but still they have a lot of concerns.

Thus, feeling constrained, Young-jin’s response was to move to the US to pursue her Ph.D. where she can escape from the constant pressure. The last time I contacted her, she was almost determined to accept an offer from a well-reputed research university other than the one in Boston.

“I Don’t Want a Family at All Right Now”

In Seoul and Tokyo where governmental support for child rearing does not appear to be satisfactory for many women to keep working after the first child is born, insider interviewees expect that marriage essentially means to give up their hard-earned job. Young-jin explains:

In Korea, raising a child is very costly, and it’s very hard to raise a child at the same time working because your workload is high and you also have to take care of your child, so usually people end up quitting their job. When you raise your child and get older, and when you want to work again, it’s really hard to get a job because your career has been stopped due to childcare. So I think if I get married maybe my career would be ruined. Or I would not be able to pursue the life I really wanted to have. So nowadays I don’t really want to get married right now. But still, I don’t want to live a lonely life when I get older so I think it would be good for me to have a family but because of those prejudices put on women like age pressure and education pressure. And also like how you look is important. So that kind of pressures always make me worried about the possibilities of getting married because I feel like it’s (the chance of marriage) getting lower and lower as you get older. Is it like that in Japan?
Among the interviewees, insiders like Young-jin are the ones who have been conforming to social norms. That is why they attended good schools and then got a job at big corporations despite enduring a lot of pressure and stress.

By their late 20s or early 30s, the definition of “success” now includes marriage. Compared to the college entrance exam or job applications, it is more difficult to believe that personal efforts can bring them a married life. Furthermore, even if they get married, female interviewees have to worry about their career. On the one hand, marriage and family making is necessary for living up to expectations they are imposed. On the other hand, it can undo all the efforts they made to attain insider status because it might be difficult to find a position comparable to their current one in terms of status and income after they leave the workplace, which they are often expected to do.

In their 20s, they often hold these jobs only for a few years after long years of studying. Because many young adults in the two cities spent a long time in school to get the job they have now, it is little wonder they feel that it is not the right time to quit. Hyun-ah, a woman in her early 30s who works for a small clothes brand in Seoul told me,

Hyun-ah: My friends in Busan got married and had children, but I am working. Our jobs are different too. My friends worked for a while after graduating from college like seven or eight years? So apparently, they do not want to work anymore, but I’ve been working for only three or four years, so I want to work. So we are different.

Yuki: Why are friends in Busan already married?

Hyun-ah: People in local cities marry early, and Busan is a local city too. They marry early. They get a job as soon as graduating from college and marry early. There are many friends in Seoul who do not marry yet.
Many interviewees in Tokyo also shared the similar concern. Ruri, a woman in her late 20s working for a marketing company, is already afraid of lonely death (Kodokushi).

Yuki: Do you have anything that you worry about regarding the future?

Ruri: Can it be anything? Like can it be unrelated to the job? Let’s see... Then, well, about lonely death (laughing). The biggest concern I have now is, I want to have a family, but I don’t want a family at all right now. I really want to have a family in the future. But I by no means want it for now. Everybody started having a family around this age, but I still want to play. I feel like I will die alone.

Ruri had graduated from a university in London with her master’s degree and worked for one year at a multinational marketing firm when her employer decided to close their Tokyo office. She found another employer in the same industry without difficulty, and when we met for the interview it was a few days before she started at the new office.

She is afraid of staying alone for all of her life but at the same time, she enjoys her working life, and thus she does not want to marry someone now.

No, I don’t. I don’t want. It might sound childish, but I want to be by myself, enjoy my job and play with friends, but I want to have a family sometime in the future. That is my anxiety.

It is precisely the sort of feeling that many female interviewees shared.

Yu-jin Lee, a women in her 20s who graduated from Seoul National University and is currently seeking a nomadic lifestyle, has mixed feelings about marriage.

I have an interest in living with somebody. It means that I marry someone. But in Korea, marriage is somewhat different. You know? You need to like, not only be married to your husband but their family. You need to do your duty as a family member. Especially in this [Chuseok] holiday a lot of women suffer from making food, cleaning...things like that. That makes me a little bit like I don’t want to get married in Korea, but I do want to
live with my boyfriend because it’s really good to be around someone you can really talk to so.

They want to marry at some point but not now. Yet, they are afraid that they will not marry in the future unless they marry someone as soon as possible. It makes people anxious because as both Young-jin and Ruri worried, it might be “too late” because they foresee their value in the marriage market gets “lower and lower as you get older,” in Young-jin’s words.

For female interviewees in Tokyo, there were career tracks in which they expect to leave the workplace after marriage and often they are also expected to do so by their employers. These jobs are called non-career track (Ippanshoku) whereas regular positions with a promotion track are called career track (Sōgōshoku). Mika, a non-career truck employee in one of the largest insurance company in the country, hopes to marry in ten years from now even though she enjoys her current job.

I want to see myself getting married and having a family. My ideal is to quit the company. I want to quit once a child is born. I will take maternity leave and perhaps not come back to work. Because my mother was a housewife when I grew up, I also want to focus on child rearing.

She earned a certificate as a sports instructor as a preparation for the future because Mika thinks it will be useful to gain part-time employment after giving birth. Expecting the exit from the current workplace, some female interviewees study to earn certificates like Mika’s.

However, even for Mika, the pressure from her parents feels overwhelming.

I worry about the possibility that I cannot marry. My parents told me a lot that I should marry. I do not have a strong desire for marriage. I do not like my parents telling me that, and that’s a part of the reason why I left my parents’ place. My mother is a straightforward person, and she has always been telling me to go to this and that university and get a job at this and that company. I do not like myself who cannot meet
these expectations, so I ran away. But I know I cannot be single for my entire life, so I want to marry at some point. That’s my biggest concern.

Mika is currently dispatched to a semi-governmental foundation because her home company provides financial and human resource assistance to this foundation. She enjoys the job greatly, but her parents do not like her coming home late. To escape from the constant pressure and involvement from her parents, she just started living in an apartment, which is only 10 minutes away by foot from her parents’ place. Some female interviewees like Mika also foresee that their economic security in the future will be dependent on whether they marry someone with a decent income or not. “I’ve never worried about money. But well, right, if I think about it seriously, if I were single, keep working in the current company, and living alone, I might become concerned. If I were single for my entire life I would be in trouble.”

Marriage can also be a source of economic security. Kaho is now married to a person who has enough income and owns a condominium in Tokyo, which gave her economic security. She described her economic situation to be better than the average of her generation. “I guess it is also because I have a husband, but I think it is better. I can use money when I want to because I have a husband.”

Two Worlds of Classification Struggles

On the one hand, Chang Kyung-Sup’s risk-aversive individualization thesis seems to capture the reality well. In the context where the family has been the key driver of the transition to modernity, at the time when both the state and business are failing to provide security to citizens and workers, individuals have to turn to their family members for help. In this process, “families end up overburdening themselves, and, as a result, family relations ultimately convert from a
social resource to a source of individual risks” (Chang and Song 2010:548). On the other hand, I found that young women do not simply turn their back on marriage as Chang’s thesis would predict. Rather, they still do want to marry and that is precisely what makes marriage a source of anxiety.

Though not everybody can put their discontents into perspective the way Young-jin did, many female interviewees shared the similar anxiety or anger. Young women with degrees from prestigious colleges like Young-jin often find themselves on the horns of a dilemma. Up until graduation from college, both men and women are exposed to similar expectations: to get a good degree and then a good job. However, in their mid to late 20s, women often feel the pressure to marry and have children. Thus, as Young-jin lamented, “I earned a lot of money, and I am proud of myself but why do I have to feel like I am trading [myself]?” The definition of being a “successful person” in society diverges at this point.

The dilemmas akin to that of my interviewees have been studied by Sociologist Mary Blair-Roy among two groups of women that had both been successful in the workplace and then chose to commit themselves more to either career or family. She proposed the notions of work devotion schema and family devotion schema to characterize these women’s responses (Blair-Loy 2003). Bourdieu’s notion of classification struggle also captures the situation they are in. The symbolic is the power of representation, and thus symbolic struggle is the politics of naming.

In short, what individuals and groups invest in the particular meaning they give to common classificatory systems by the use they make of them is infinitely more than their 'interest' in the usual sense of the term; it is their whole social being, everything which defines their own idea of themselves, the primordial, tacit contract whereby they define 'us' as opposed to 'them', 'other people', and which is the basis of the exclusions ('not for
the likes of us' ) and inclusions they perform among the characteristics produced by the common classificatory system (Bourdieu 1984:478).

To put in this way, we can see the above narratives as emanating from the politics of what it means to be a “successful” woman in today’s Seoul and Tokyo and what it means to be a “loser” in this game.

The problem is that they are engaging with two different systems of classification struggles and they appear to be a zero-sum game. One the one hand, you have to have a successful career to be a successful woman. On the other hand, you also have to have your family. However, in societies where the traditional breadwinner-homemaker model persists, it is likely that they can have either their career or family. Individuals with various resources like Young-jin can leave the game altogether by going overseas to study, but many others cannot. Many women are trapped in the space between two worlds of classification struggles.

**HOUSING ANXIETY**

The majority of male interviewees assumed that they will marry someone in the future and are interested in child-rearing. Even Reo who enjoys a nomadic life of traveling from one place to another sees having a family as a goal of his life. “For now, I live for myself completely, but I am sure I will be bored. I will be bored with that phase. Then I am sure I will want to live for someone like my family, wife, children, brothers, and friends. I am sure I will be able to get satisfaction from it, and I should be.” Thus, unlike female interviewees, the question about marriage for men is not so much about whether they can marry or not. It takes a different form for men, especially in Seoul.
Jeong-ho

Jeong-ho is a tall guy who has two degrees from universities in Korea and the US that he earned through their double degree program. After graduating from college, he worked as an intern in both Seoul and Washington DC before he obtained employment at a Chaebol corporation. Having obtained stable employment, now Jeong-ho’s biggest concerns are about marriage and housing.

Jeong-ho: I really want to stay now with my parents. I want to marry someone. I am not sure who she is, and I want to buy an apartment or a house. I know it is pretty expensive so I want to contribute my own money and my future wife’s money or I also ask my parents’ funding or my wife’s parents’ funding. And then I want to pay back after years. I think I will probably stay with my parents one year more. Well, one or two years more.

Yuki: And you are probably going to get married.

Jeong-ho: I am just expecting to get married.

Yuki: Within one or two years?

Jeong-ho: Within..yeah, one or two years.

Yuki: With your current girlfriend?

Jeong-ho: No, I don’t…actually I had a girlfriend but just broke up. I am looking for a future girlfriend. [Laughing]

Yuki: Why are you interested in getting married that much?

Jeong-ho: I feel alone. I think I will feel alone. I really hate loneliness. Marriage I think can make a better normal life. That is why I want to marry. I was born in 1989 so I am 29 in Korean age.

Yuki: So you are turning 30.

Jeong-ho: It’s a time to marry in just…normal people’s mind. Just my perspective.

Yuki: Do you have any concern in terms of…

Jeong-ho: Concern? My monetary [stuff] is always a concern. Housing is a concern.
Yuki: Because…?


Yuki: Mok-dong [where his parents own an apartment in which he lives now] is also one of the…

Jeong-ho: Yeah Mok-dong is one of the places. Hannam-dong, or Yeoi-do are also good places. I want to stay in these kinds of places, but these kinds of places are absolutely expensive. I am still saving money for the future apartment but it is still lower than my expectation. So this is my concern.

Jeong-ho’s candid narrative gets straight to the point. Marriage can “make a better normal life,” and that is why it is important. At the same time, as Allison Pugh reminded us based on her research in the US, the expectations imposed on young men are not so different today from what they used to be. “In actuality women simply have more honorable options for how they might live their lives than their mothers and grandmothers did, even as those options are constrained by available resources. Men’s lives, and what counts as masculinity, have not changed nearly as much” (2015:104–5).

The problem for young men in Seoul is that they are exposed to the same old expectations but in the context of growing job insecurity and an overheated housing market. Many interviewees in Seoul try to meet an expectation that a groom has to prepare a place to live if they want to marry someone. In an overheated housing market, fulfilling that expectation is a challenge even for better off interviewees.

In the popular neighborhoods Jeong-ho mentioned, the chance to find affordable housing is virtually nonexistent. Partly because of speculative activities in the housing market, in popular areas like Gangnam, housing prices have been skyrocketing (Yang 2018:Chapter 2). The average
price of apartments in 11 districts south of the Han River including Gangnam was 867 million Won (approximately 860,000 USD) in 2018, 42% more expensive than in 2014 (M. Lee 2018).

**Burden of Home Ownership**

Yet, Jeong-ho is among the most privileged interviewees who have access to Seoul’s overheated housing market. He is one of the few people among the interviewee who can rely on a special rate mortgage because of his employment at a Chaebol corporation. Young-jin also benefits from her younger brother’s employment at a Chaebol firm. She used to live in a small apartment with her younger brother and “every day after I left my office I just stayed in the café until they closed and go home and sleep and come out because I didn’t like my house. But nowadays I never leave my house.” This was possible only because he was able to buy an apartment with the special interest loan from his employer and their parents who were wealthy enough to become guarantors.

He works in Hyundai, so it’s a big company. If you want to borrow money, they give you extra credit based on wage and the organization you work for so my little brother kind of got a loan, so he bought a house, and my parents helped him. They wrote an agreement, notarized it. He pays for the loan, and I pay for the utilities.

Jae-yong is a cheerful man who speaks Osaka-dialect Japanese as if he is from Osaka. He just started working in the Seoul office of a Zaibatsu affiliated large Japanese corporation at the time of the interview. At first, it looked as if nothing worries him in this life, which turned out not to be the case.

Yuki: Don’t you have any concern about housing in the future?
Jae-yong: No. I do. Well, I have a girlfriend, but she told me that she’s not going to marry me unless I have a house. Like ‘you are a man, so you take care of the house.’ It doesn’t make any sense. On top of that she is the one who wants to marry, and I do not want to marry at all. So, I said I can borrow money from the company so...

Yuki: Ah…can you borrow money from the company?

Jae-yong: Yes, and I can also borrow from the bank after I borrow from the company. So I said that perhaps I can figure it out by borrowing money. But she said, you can’t borrow money, and I was like what the… But, certainly, in Korea, there is still this kind of [culture] that men have to prepare the house though I think it is declining. As probably you know, the house is pretty expensive. Also, oh…I forgot the Korean term… well monthly payment is not welcomed. Ah, yes [it’s called] Wolse, Wolse, Wolse. I will not have trouble if it were only for me. But I think I will marry someone though I don’t know when. At the time if I have money to buy a house…if not what should I do… Well, it also depends on the partner. But I have that [anxiety] about housing for sure. That’s perhaps the only concern.

As Jae-yong pointed out, for many men in Seoul, marriage is a point at which they become responsible for providing housing for themselves and their family. It is more significant in Seoul because most interviewees live with their parents unless they come from local cities, whereas young adults in Tokyo tend to leave their parents’ home before marriage. Japan is also considered a context in which parents are tolerant of their adult children staying in their home or sometimes even allow them to withdraw from social life by providing financial support, the problem known as *Hikikomori*. Yet, to some extent young adults living with parents are despised in Japanese society and seen as a problem. As Chang Kyung-sup (2011) rightly pointed out, the popularity of the surprisingly pejorative Japanese concept of “parasite single,” which denotes young adults who live with their parents, signifies such a situation. There is no comparable term in Korea because “parasite single” is the norm and in many instances, parents expect children to live with them until marriage.
Furthermore, in Seoul, a combination of home ownership or the unique housing rent system called Chonse have been the dominant housing options until recently, as opposed to the regular monthly rental called Wolse to which Jae-yong alluded. Chonse is a fixed term contract under which a renter deposits a large sum of money with the landlord. The landlord, in turn invests that money to yield profits and returns the principal to the tenant in full when the contract period is over. This system is said to have emerged from the conditions of “high inflation, financial repression and housing shortage” (Ronald and Kyung 2013:472). Until recently, and to some extent even today, housing options have been limited.

When combined with other features of Seoul’s housing market, both Chonse and Wolse are felt to be unfair from the perspective of the tenant. In this context, the problem seems to be more intractable for men without a stable job. During the interview with Ho-jin, a man in his 30s who works for a non-profit organization in Seoul, he drew two curves with simple lines. One of them showed a very steep rise and the other was more gradual. Accordingly, the steep curve is the housing price in Seoul, and the gradual one is his salary. So, although his salary will go up gradually, it does not catch up with the rising housing prices in Seoul. To save money, he commutes from his parents’ home in a Seoul commuter town to Hongdae in central Seoul, where his office is. It takes one and a half hours each way.

I want to move to somewhere close, but any house in Hongdae is expensive. I can pay for rent, but I don’t want to waste money. The commuting cost from my house to my company is cheaper than the rent. If I rent a house maybe I have to pay 400,000 [approximately 400 USD] Won a month but commuting costs only 150,000 Won [approximately 150 USD] a month.

However, when he thinks about marrying his girlfriend, the housing problem becomes more serious for him.
For a long time, it was not that I worried a lot about housing, but I have a girlfriend, and in the future, I will marry her. Then I have to find a house for two people, and we also have to live in a safe place, which makes me worry. If I live by myself, a concern about housing is not that big. My life slogan is ‘content your life’ so usually I am satisfied with what I have but if I have someone to live with... My future life with my girlfriend with my sons or daughters...and I have many books, about 3,000 books.

For an outside observer like me, it seemed to make more sense to rent a house than to buy one if he does not have enough savings. Ho-jin explained to me why it is not the case from his point of view.

Ho-jin: Do you know why many Korean people move every two years? Do you know why many Korean people move from this house to that house to that house every two years?

Yuki: I don’t know. Because?

Ho-jin: The cost is...the house owner wants to get [more]. If it were not my house I have to pay Chonse or Wolse and affording the cost is difficult so that’s why many people move a lot. Really many. This is a concern.

At the time of that interview I knew nothing about it, but I came across similar narratives over and over again as I interviewed more young adults in Seoul. Ho-jin sees that the source of this problem is the speculative nature of the housing market.

Ho-jin: In Korea, many people don’t have enough money to buy the house and they borrow big money from the bank or someone and try to buy a house because

Yuki: It pays off?

Ho-jin: Two years later or five years later. I think it is abnormal. That’s a very big problem in Korea. The last president or the last government, government before, and the government before the last-last government tried solving this problem but any administration in the last thirty years could not solve it.
Indeed, even well-resourced interviewees like Young-jin have a similar problem although she escaped from such a situation thanks to her younger brother’s special rate mortgage.

Until last year, I lived with my little brother and rented a small studio. We had to pay monthly rent, so it was really stressful if we had to find another place to stay because usually lease agreement is a two-year basis, and they usually raise the rent. Sometimes if a landlord is not a good person, they take us for everything, so that was stressful. My parents always want us to live in good housing because they thought we always live in so tiny rooms and they did not have good air conditioning. Whenever they visit us, they were so sad about us.

Here, interviewees in Seoul see a simple problem of wealth domination, in which the ones who have resources keep increasing their share. Like many young men in Seoul, Hyong-u argues that “the problem of real-estate” is the most important social problem in Korea.

Hyong-u: Real-estate problem is the most important. When I look at other countries too, real-estate is the biggest cause that makes inequality grow. That’s why real-estate.

Yuki: Are they too expensive?

Hyong-u: They are too expensive. Also, those who have it have many of them and those who don't have nothing.

Yuki: Have you had that idea for a long time?

Hyong-u: Yes, I have. Because my family was poor, we have never owned or bought a house. Certainly, I knew the real-estate problem from around the time I was a junior high school student. It is too expensive. Rent is very expensive too in Seoul. Then, those who don't have money (to own a house) have to pay more.

He grew up in one of the fairly expensive neighborhoods in Seoul as a son of owners of a small food stand. In his self-recognition, these experiences drove him to the political activities in which he is active now. Young men’s anxieties about marriage are closely tied to the unavailability of
affordable housing. Yet, even in Seoul, very few female interviewees were worried about their housing prospects.

**ABSENCE OF CONCERNS**

Interestingly enough, I found no comparable narratives in Tokyo. Some interviewees’ responses were characterized by apparent indifference to marriage.

“*Normal Life*” in Tokyo

I asked Tatsuya who works as a performer at a theme park if he has any concern about housing in the future. His answer was that “I think I will be in the environment in which I can do what I want to do. A place of living where I can do what I want to do is important to me, and all the houses so far have been okay in that respect.” While young male interviewees in Seoul worried whether or not they can afford to buy an apartment, which is often considered the prerequisite for marriage, in Tokyo, sometimes interviewees like Tatsuya confused me with abstract talk.

It was only later that I learned this form of narrative is called the therapeutic narrative, which focuses on talk that is inner-directed and preoccupied with emotional and psychic development within the self (Illouz 2008; Silva 2013:19). Even when I asked about his concern in general, Tatsuya’s answer seem to be removed from external forces and focused on the self.

Tatsuya: The thing that makes me worry… To be honest, I am worried if I will ever have a girlfriend.

Yuki: If you can date with someone? You must be very popular.

Tatsuya: Apparently, it is not so much the case.

Yuki: So you don’t have a girlfriend now?

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Tatsuya: No, for a long time. For six years, I guess. (…) When it comes to dating, there are many things that cannot be solved by logics unlike work. And I tend to pretend that I am cool when I am in love and it is lame, so I really hate it. I also tend to think I am making someone unhappy.

When I ask interviewees, “how do you think your life will be changed ten years from now?”
typical answers in Seoul either pertained to their job or family. In contrast, Tatsuya told me that he “will be enjoying that moment.”

Tatsuya: Ten years from now?
Yuki: Yes, it can be either a prediction or hope.

Tatsuya: In both my prediction and hope, I think I will be enjoying that moment. It sounds very abstract, but I think that sense is very important, and that is what I value now, so I think I will also value it ten years from now.

Furthermore, large corporations in Japan often provide affordable housing to their young employees or housing allowance in addition to salary. Munenori who works for a large bank is currently living in an old apartment complex located in central Tokyo and pays only a few hundred dollars a month for a small apartment with two bedrooms. He can live in this or other company-owned apartments until he reaches 50. While Munenori’s situation is exceptionally privileged, it can be said that for many insiders, housing is not really an issue until they reach the level where their income facilitates home buying.

Thus, the concern about marriage and housing is almost unheard of among interviewees in Tokyo. Shuji’s forecast of his future is one typical response among male interviewees in Tokyo. He works for a human staffing agency. “I will have a normal family life. Probably, in 10 years I will marry someone and have a family as normal people do. I will be in the current
company or something and I will have a normal life as a normal Shakaijin.” Like many interviewees in Tokyo, Shuji expects no difficulties in his normal life.

When Marriage is Not an Option

Shinichi, a quiet guy in his early 30s who works as a systems engineer in a middle sized company in Tokyo, was only the person who was openly gay among all the interviewees. He recently married a fledgling classic musician based in Europe. In Japan, same-sex marriage is not allowed, so his marriage is not legally binding. Researchers have documented that they are also exposed to pressures pertaining to heterosexual marriage from others, and their family members in particular (Khor and Kamano 2013; Niki 2014). Mark McLelland pointed out that gay men he had interviewed did not rule out the possibility of marrying women to avoid being labeled as “gay” (McLelland 2000:464–66). Hence, LGBT young adults like Shinichi are not necessarily free from the constraints of social norms about marriage, or what Jeong-ho described as the “normal life.” Nevertheless, due to the current law, they are excluded from one route to economic security. When I asked Shinichi about his biggest concern in life, he responded.

Shinichi: I guess about money.

Yuki: In what sense?

Shinichi: Like a retirement fund.

Yuki: Do you already think about retirement?

Shinichi: Yeah, in the end, we cannot have children. And, eventually, the partnership registration system is not legally binding [some cities in Japan issue same-sex partnership certificates]. Then, what shall we do with the future and life after retirement? I think we have to solve it with money. This seems to be the common recognition among my sexual minority friends. I am 32 years old now, and even though we are in our early 30s,
recently our common topic of interests are about old-age bankruptcy, concern over our funerals, and also a nursing home.

In his early 30s, he is already worried about life after retirement. As the literature predicts, in an economy in which the state and business fall short of providing security to individuals as they once did, individuals have to turn anxiously to their loved ones in search of economic security (Cooper 2014; Pugh 2015). For some interviewees like Shinichi who lack the legal basis to form a family, even this path to security seems to be narrower.

His anxiety seems to be amplified by both his past and current conditions. A few years earlier, his father became liable for about $600,000 debt when the vegetable market for which his father worked as a member of the board of directors went bankrupt. His parents’ home was seized, and his mother called him crying to ask for money. His does not feel security in his current employment arrangement as well. “I worry about the future of my company. It is because our company was acquired by another company last year and many things are changing now.”

His partner’s economic instability also puts the burden on his shoulders. “His job is unstable. He cannot make a living with music now.” Despite being a regular employee, as a systems engineer, he predicts that he will have difficulty to maintain his employment at the current company.

Yuki: Can you work until retirement age unless something big happens?

Shinichi: I think that’s not necessarily the case. Well, as I said earlier, every project has a different customer, and we have to work with those outside of the company. It means, then, if a project leader or manager [in the client company] is a young person, they think older people are difficult to use. Of course, if you are old but have a lot of skills, they think this person is fine, but they avoid mediocre old workers without something outstanding. Also, you become incapable of handling excessive work, and productivity decreases too. So these are the reasons why people say that the programmer’s retirement age is 35 or 40.
When individuals cannot rely on either the institution of work or family, they seem to be left out on their own in the true meaning of the words.

Order of Things

The literature about marriage in East Asia suggests that young men with little education are the ones who tend to have difficulty in getting married. Similarly, Jennifer Silva’s study of working class young adults in the US finds that both men and women from working class backgrounds consider marriage to be risky. For men, it is mostly from economic reasons, as Brandon who works at a women’s clothing store says. “No woman wants to sit on the couch all the time and watch TV and eat at Burger King. I can only take care of myself now. I am missing out on life but making do with what I have” (Silva 2013:61). For women, it is often the fear of losing the self, which is already difficult to construct in the process of emerging adulthood, in the absence of various resources that their middle-class counterparts have.

From that perspective, I expected similar narratives to be told by working class young adults in Seoul and Tokyo. To my surprise, however, I found that they do not talk about marriage or intimate relationships in general. They were consciously indifferent. When asked about marriage, Yong-jung, a young man who was enrolled in a government-aided job training program, responded.

My parents do not say ‘raise a child’ or ‘marry someone’ to me. Rather my mom told me that it would be better not to marry, but in Korea, there is that kind [of pressure] because people care about how others see them too much. Like you have to marry once you reach 30, you have to have a car of this grade, you have to live in your own apartment. People always care about how others see them. It only makes banks profit more, doesn’t it? I was really poor for one year after I finished my military service, and I think there are many people in Korea who are poorer than me back then. And yet Gangnam is as busy as this [we were at a café near Gangnam station]. Is everyone as wealthy as they look? No way!
Yong-jung sees that if he pursues what people expect him to do, it “makes banks profit more.” Outsider interviewees’ concern tended to focus on their employment. Yong-jung’s strategy to deal with uncertainty is to “Exit Korea (Tal Joseon).” He is working hard toward that goal by studying computer programming through the government funded job training program. I asked him what his life will be like ten years from now. He answered, “I imagine the success. Otherwise, I get discouraged. So I put the image of the Tokyo tower in my desktop. I have an image that I am working hard and living in Japan.” Marriage is not a part of that picture. So his primary concern in life is whether he can get a stable job in Japan.

Yuki: What makes you worry in life?

Yong-jung: Well, the most anxious thing, for now, is whether I can keep doing this [systems programming]. I knew it is a hard way, but as I learned more, I started realizing that there is a long way to go. I don’t think about quitting at all because this is the only thing left for me. So this is serious, serious, well I stuttered now [laughing]. This is the most demanded job in Korea for now though I don’t know how long the good economy will continue. In Japan, the job market is doing very good now. That’s why many Koreans and foreigners are getting jobs in Japan. My Chinese friend got a job in Japan too so now it is a good situation for foreigners, but some people say it will be over once Tokyo Olympics finishes [in 2020]. I heard about it from Japanese too. Even if I can keep doing this and graduate from college in four years, it will be 2021. So I am worried that I won’t be able to go [to Japan]. That is another reason I thought I should work in the IT industry. Even if I cannot go to Japan, I can still earn money in Korea. I can go to countries other than Japan too.

On top of that, he expects that he has to provide financial support to his parents in the near future. His parents’ business went bankrupt after the global financial crisis of 2008. Not only did that hinder his dream of studying in a culinary school in Japan but also forced him to help his parents repay their debt. He is foreseeing that a similar event can occur again.
Yuki: Do you think you have to support your parents?

Yong-jung: That is what I started thinking very much lately. I think their business [sales of graduation gowns] is in a bad situation again. A part of the reason is the economy, and due to declining fertility, fewer people will enter the college and schools are economically struggling too. In the past, many people bought gowns but nowadays it’s all rental, so apparently, their income has been declining again. So I think I would be in trouble if I don’t get a job soon.

Yuki: What would you do if something happens now?

Yong-jung: No, I can’t do anything. I haven’t thought about it before, but it is scary if I think of it. I can’t do anything now.

I observed that many outsider interviewees were avoiding talk about marriage. In their view, it does not make sense to even bother about something that is far removed from their reality.

When we think of the absence of talk about marriage among outsider interviewees in East Asia as compared to Silva’s study in the US, it is imperative to see the transition to adulthood as a process and consider the temporal dynamics of young adults’ anxiety. In the traditional pathway to adulthood, young adults seek marriage only after they graduate from school and get a stable job. Whereas insider men and women such as Young-jin and Jeong-ho are past the first two stages and now concerned with marriage and home ownership, many outsider interviewees did not finish the first two steps.

Yet, they do not necessarily expect to continue precarious employment for their entire life. In Yong-jung’s case, he wants to finish an online four year college degree while working full-time as a systems engineer. In the US, there are much higher rates of cohabitation and having children outside of marriage, and this tends to be higher at individuals among low income groups. Thus, marriage itself seems to be more optional, whereas in Seoul and Tokyo it is much more expected and must be done in the right order. Order of things matters. For many young
adults both in Seoul and Tokyo where cohabitation remains rare, marriage is worthwhile to think about if they have the degree and job, and it is for this reason that anxiety about marriage tends to be consciously suppressed within themselves among outsider interviewees.

Can marriage reduce their anxiety? The experiences of married interviewees suggest that it is not necessarily the case.

*After Marriage*

Twenty interviewees in this study were married at the time of interviews. Song-hee, a woman in her mid-30s just married recently. Song-hee graduated from Korea University and became a regular employee in the translation department of a large bank in Seoul after working as a non-regular employee at the translation department of various corporations for many years. She recalled that she was stressed out when she was around 30 years old. “I could not marry and I was getting older. That was the most stressful thing around the time I was 29 and 30.”

Since I was a kid, I always assumed that I would marry someone in my early twenties and have two kids by my current age. So I felt like I lagged behind, and that I was a useless member of society.

Although Song-hee is now freed from the pressures associated with marriage, marriage also created new anxieties for her.

Now my concern is… I think I will have a child in one to two years from now. The company allows us to take maternity leave but nobody in the translation department has ever taken the leave so I am worried if I can come back [after the leave]. Probably because of our age, many of my friends have problems related to infertility so I worry about it too although I might be fine as I tried living healthily. And, as I said earlier, my husband’s parents are not wealthy. They are still working but I worry about my and my husband’s parents because we cannot support them financially.
Like Song-hee, many married interviewees have to worry not only about their own parents but also their spouse’s family.

After marriage, conflicts between work and family, the source of concern for many unmarried interviewees, becomes the reality of everyday life. Kaho, a woman in her 30s who is now a freelance writer in Tokyo, was a regular employee of a company when she gave birth to her son. Soon after, she had to create a sham divorce from her husband and live separately from her husband in a city where she found a spot in preschool for her son to enroll. It was not that her relationship with her husband got worse, but it was almost impossible to find a spot in the preschools in the area of Tokyo where her husband owns his condominium, and the selection process of preschools gives priority to single parents. So, she felt the only choice she had was either a paper divorce or leaving her job. Some years after that, she eventually left the company and became a freelance writer, but at the time quitting the job appeared as too risky option for her.

Once couples have children, problems related to housing gain more importance because the location of their residence determines the environment of their children’s upbringing and the school their children attend. Ji-su, a woman in her 30s who works for a religious publisher in Seoul, wanted to raise her children in a close-knit community, which she found difficult especially when both she and her husband worked in central Seoul.

Children need friends, and we hoped to raise children with people in the community. But we didn’t have enough to start a life in a rural town. Because you need some money even if you go to the rural area. We barely had anything and wondered what we should do.
Consequently, Ji-su moved to a neighborhood in a suburban part of Seoul where her friends already lived but she is not totally satisfied as she told me that “this is not the perfect life I had dreamed of.”

Some male interviewees also share anxieties about the responsibilities to provide for their family after marriage. Yoshihide, in his 30s who works for a large housing company in Tokyo, told me that he sometimes wonders if he can keep providing his family in the future.

I have to support my family. Because my income relies on the sales incentives that I receive when I win a contract, if I cannot win a contract, my salary will decrease. I have to keep winning contracts to support my family.

Yoshihide’s wife stays home and concentrates on raising a child although such division of labor is not tenable for many interviewees in this study. Hayato, a regular employee who works as a truck driver in Tokyo, said that “I think we will be fine as long as I keep working. And I will ask my wife to work more to support the family.”

Studies in the US reported that among married couples, responsibilities to deal with insecurity fall heavily on the shoulder of women (Cooper 2014; Pugh 2015). I found a similar pattern among my interviewees in Seoul and Tokyo. The married male interviewees are much less likely to worry about issues other than their career such as children’s education and housing. Sang-kyu who works for a Chaebol corporation in Seoul worries greatly about the possibility of dismissal and his relationship with his boss. However, when I asked if he has other things to worry about, he responded:

Not at all. Except for my job, I am satisfied with my life [laughing]. My relationship with my wife is good, I have children, and good friends too. Also, I am a Christian and I think my religion has good impacts on my mental health.
It appears to be true that wives are more likely to be expected to deal with insecurities, particularly the ones related to the family life than husbands. Sun-woo, a man in his 30s who works for a non-profit organization affiliated with a Chaebol corporation told me that he does not worry about anything; “I think anxiety is useless. If I have anxiety, I would rather use my time to do what I can do rather than to worry.” Meanwhile, he also admitted that “because I don’t worry too much, my wife has a hard time worrying [laughing].”

In sum, although marriage can reduce one aspect of anxiety in life especially for female interviewees, it can also intensify the anxieties that they already had about housing and their family’s financial situation. Children’s education can also become a new source of headache for many interviewees. Male interviewees are much less likely to share such concerns although some of them worry about the increased burden to provide for their family.

MARRIAGE AS A MECHANISM OF UNCERTAINTY

While both Korea and Japan have been considered to share the similar context as Confucian China’s “cultural offshoots,” once in the field, I found that the interviewees in Seoul were more worried and stressed out from the expectations imposed on them. Table 5.3 and 5.4 summarize the number of interviewees who have either anxiety or desire to get married. The tables are intended to show the general pattern of qualitative findings and not to claim any generalizability of these findings. Both in Seoul and Tokyo, females are more likely to be anxious about marriage than males (52% versus 18% in Seoul and 42% versus 11% in Tokyo), despite the fact that similar proportions of males and females in both cities desire to get married. Furthermore, as discussed earlier, men in Seoul are anxious about their ability to provide housing when they get
married. Table 5.5 indicates that half of male interviewees in Seoul compared to only 9% of interviewees in Tokyo worry about housing.

Table 5.3 Anxiety about Marriage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Anxiety about marriage</th>
<th>Tokyo (N=30)</th>
<th>Seoul (N=47)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No or NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female (N=12)</td>
<td>42% (5)</td>
<td>58% (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male (N=18)</td>
<td>11% (2)</td>
<td>89% (16)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Excluding those who are already married or divorced

Table 5.4 Desire to Marry Someone

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Desire to marry someone</th>
<th>Tokyo (N=43)</th>
<th>Seoul (N=55)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No or NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female (N=12)</td>
<td>75% (9)</td>
<td>25% (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male (N=18)</td>
<td>61% (11)</td>
<td>39% (7)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Excluding those who are already married or divorced

Table 5.5 Anxiety about Housing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Anxiety about housing</th>
<th>Tokyo (N=38)</th>
<th>Seoul (N=55)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No or NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female (N=15)</td>
<td>27% (4)</td>
<td>73% (11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male (N=23)</td>
<td>9% (2)</td>
<td>91% (21)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Excluding those who own housing
Thus, we find an interesting twist. Generally speaking, the desire for marriage is shared more or less evenly by interviewees in two cities regardless of gender. Nevertheless, female interviewees in both cities tend to be more anxious than their male counterparts. Furthermore, male interviewees in Seoul are also more likely to find it burdensome than in Tokyo.

The observed trend is consistent with the representative survey data. Figure 5.3 shows the responses to the question “how do you feel about marriage?” among young people in six countries. The majority of young people in both Korea (67.1 %) and Japan (62.5 %) answered that “one should marry,” which shows a clear contrast to the countries like Sweden (24.3 %) and France (38.9 %). Indeed, 75.5 and 65 % of respondents in Korea and Japan, respectively, expect that they will be married when they are around 40 years old. Similarly, 74.7 % of Korean respondents and 61.7 % of Japanese respondents also think that they will be raising a child. Thus, the majority of young people in Korea and Japan see marriage as a part of their life course, and the data indicate that this expectation is somewhat higher in Korea than Japan.

Figure 5.3 Young People’s Attitudes on Marriage

Source: International Survey of Youth Attitude (2013)
Approximately 300 respondents in both societies answered that “it is better not to marry.” Chart 5.4 shows their reasons. Interestingly, a much larger proportion of respondents in Korea answered that they “can live a financially comfortable life” if they do not marry (57.1 versus 41.1 % in Japan), “having a family is a weighty responsibility” (48.6 % in Korea versus 26.9 % in Japan), and “hear that marriage/giving birth/parenting is tough” (39.2 versus 11.4 %). Hence, the trend indicates that, at least among those who do not want to marry, the reason is that those in Korea expect greater pressure.

Thus, while Chang and Song (2010) argue that risk-averse individualization is an East Asian trend and observable at least in Korea, Japan, and Taiwan, my analysis and survey data suggest that this tendency is stronger among young adults in Seoul than in Tokyo. Why is marriage felt to be riskier in Seoul than in Tokyo? It is because the gap between social norms and the reality of young adults’ lives is greater in Seoul than in Tokyo.

Figure 5.4 Reasons for it is Better Not to Marry

![Chart showing reasons for not marrying in Korea (N=316) and Japan (N=296)](source: International Survey of Youth Attitude (2013))
Increased Opportunities and Persistence of the Familism

We already observed that sources of anxiety are different for men and women. Women were torn between the two worlds of work and family in both cities. They share the same structural condition that marriage can undo the efforts they made to attain their current job. This dilemma seems to be more widespread among women in Seoul because a larger proportion of Korean women receive higher education than Japanese peers. It means that the proportion of women whose opportunity cost is high is greater in Seoul than Tokyo.

Meanwhile, social norms about marriage remain more persistent in Korea than in Japan. Chart 5.5 shows the responses to the statement, “all in all, family life suffers when the woman has a full-time job” among respondents under 34 years old taken from ISSP 2012 module. Fully 44.9% of Korean respondents compared to 28% of their Japanese counterparts agree with this conservative view. As in Chart 5.6, a similar question from World Values Survey shows, 45% of Korean respondents among under 34 years old in contrast to 11% of Japanese respondents think that “when a mother works for pay, the children suffer.” Thus, Korean young adults tend to accept the same old familism more easily than their Japanese peers.
Indeed, many young adults internalize the norm that emphasizes family welfare over individuals’ happiness. As shown in chart 5.7, 88.6 % of Korean respondents and only 57.8 % of
Japanese counterparts agreed with the statement, “one of my main goals in life has been to make my parents proud.” I observe that this subtle difference roughly corresponds to Chang and Ochiai’s characterization of Korea as compressed modernity and Japan as semi-compressed modernity. As the process of social change happened in a shorter period in Korea than as opposed to Japan, it gave less room for social norms to change.

Figure 5.7 Goals in Life: Making Parents Proud

Source: World Values Survey (Inglehart et al. 2014)

Still, more young adults in Seoul accept the idea that “both the man and woman should contribute to the household income” than in Tokyo according to the same ISSP survey (see Figure 5.8). Here, we can see an interesting mix of conservative family value and pragmatic egalitarianism. On the one hand, more young adults in Seoul tend to think that women should stay home and take care of children than in Tokyo. On the other hand, they also think that women should work outside of the home to maintain the material quality of living. It reflects the relative persistence of ideal of the patriarchal family model among young people on the one
hand, and actual difficulty to keep up with the cost of living on the other hand. This double bind confronts many women in Seoul and makes them anxious.

Figure 5.8 Views on Double-Income Family

Source: ISSP 2012 (ISSP Research Group 2012)

**Ideology of Home Ownership and Speculative Housing Market**

The similar dynamic is in play for young men in Seoul. But in their case, the gap exists between the persistent preference for home ownership and the housing market that poses a barrier. Through the analysis of the diversification of home ownership pathways among young adults in Tokyo, Druta and Ronald argue that the system of home ownership is politically and ideologically persistent although “the dominant position of mortgaged homeownership for the male breadwinner family is no longer tenable” (Druta and Ronald 2018:1,105). In Seoul, Minwoo Jung documented this reality in his ethnography of urban inequality. Young adults in Seoul are “straddling the line between a shrunken promise of homeownership and their
precarious lived realities“ (Jung 2017:763). On the surface, Seoul and Tokyo seem to share the same conditions: the resilient ideology of home ownership and the increasing difficulty of young men to be a provider of a place of their own.

Nevertheless, I found that expectations to buy a home is stronger in Seoul than in Tokyo. As Jae-yong lamented, “in Korea, there is still this kind of [culture] that men have to prepare the house,” an ideology of home ownership seems to be persistent in Korea. 40 % of interviewees in Seoul are anxious about the prospect of home ownership, which is considered a prerequisite for marriage compared to 14 % of informants in Tokyo.

Furthermore, the difference in housing rental systems provided more rationale for young adults in Seoul to purchase their housing. In Seoul, either homeownership or Chonse has been the dominant way to access housing. Minwoo Jung explains that the housing ideology of the developmental period assumed the progression from “a parental house to a monthly rental, then from a monthly rental to a yearly lease (chŏnse), and finally, from a yearly lease to outright homeownership” (Jung 2017:753). In this context, Chonse was considered a stepping stone to home ownership.

As it was explained earlier, in the Chonse system, the renter transfers a large sum of money to the landlord, who then invests that money. In the period of rapid economic development, the landlord was able to expect high returns by simply saving the deposit in his bank account. With the limited supply of Chonse apartments and a growing amount of deposit, it is increasingly difficult to enter this sector. The source of this shift is that young adults’ capacity to accumulate capital for a large Chonse payment has been declining, and even if they have money, many in the younger generation prefer to invest in something else (Ronald 2017:34). Nevertheless, as Jae-yong explained, in some instances, Wolse is still “not welcomed.”
The regular monthly contract Wolse system, has been associated with poorer households (Ronald 2017:36) and thus to some extent despised. Chonse is gradually giving its way to Chon-wolse (monthly rent with deposit) system, a mixture of the two systems due to changing preferences among young people and declining financial benefits for the landlord as a result of decreasing interest rates on savings. Chon-wolse system expanded from 10.7 to 18.2 % from 2000 to 2012 (KNSO 2013 cited in Ronald 2017:36). Among households in which the head is under 30 years old, Chonse rates decreased from 49 % in 2000 to 26.7 % in 2010 (Ronald 2017:37). Under this system, the price of monthly rent differs according to the amount of deposit the renter pays in the first place. The more deposit you pay, the less rent you have to pay in total because deposit will be returned in the end.

It means that, in either Chonse or Chon-wolse, the more cash you have in hand, the less you pay in total. Unless their parents can provide them with money, young adults have to borrow money from somewhere even to rent a room. This shapes a different context from Tokyo where the rental system is simpler, and deposit and key money are usually limited to one to three months amount of the monthly rent. Furthermore, with ever-growing housing prices, many landlords often try to raise either the amount of deposit or rent at the contract renewal, which usually comes every two years. It provides incentives for young adults to borrow a greater sum of money and buy a place of their own. They need to have the cash anyway, and once they have the mortgage they can be free from the fear that the landlord might raise the price at the next contract renewal.

Young adults, if they do not have enough cash in hand, live in monthly rental units. Ronald pointed out that whereas a Chonse unit is 31.3 m² on average, an average monthly rental unit is only 8.2 m² in 2014 (Ronald 2017:37). Jung also pointed out that nearly a quarter of
young adults who live with monthly rent in Seoul live in sub-standard housing such as Kosiwŏn, which does not even meet the government housing standards (Jung 2017:751). Kosiwŏn is a tiny rental room in business districts and college towns, which was originally provided for students who prepare for various exams such as high-level civil service exam. But more recently, it has been transforming to a cheap housing option where the demand concentrates. Renters do not need to pay a deposit, and the monthly rent is less than $400. Yet the room is suffocating and oftentimes does not even have a window.

At the same time, the price of monthly rent has been growing too. From 2006 to 2014, the rent-to-income ratio for monthly renters under 30 years old in Seoul changed from 16.8% of income to 30.9% (Ronald 2017:39). It reflects both the rise of housing prices and the decline of young adults’ economic capacity. Thus, in both its realistic and symbolic terms, living with monthly rent does not appear as an attractive option in the long run.

The context of all these developments is the astonishing financialization of Seoul’s housing market. Myungji Yang (2018) argues that both corporations and individuals’ investment activities in the housing market and lack of state regulation led to sky-rocketing prices of housing in Seoul, which in turn shape the landscape of inequality in the Korean society. Average land prices in Seoul grew by astonishing 1,176 times in the period between 1963 and 2007 (Yang 2018:23). When Seoul’s average apartment purchase price in 2013 is used as the base (100%), the average price was only 22.6% in January 1986 (Yang 2018:112).

In the early 1980s, Uhn Cho Moon’s study of income generating schemes among married women in Seoul documented the strategies of women who were buying apartments as a form of investment and security (Moon 1982). For example, Ms. Im and her husband, an employee of a large insurance company employee bought a small government project apartment by monthly
installment. Some years later, they found that most people already moved out to bigger apartments.

Having lived in the same apartment for seven years, her family is one of the oldest residents in the complex. Others who are quick and clever in economic matters have moved to newly opening apartments. Some of her friends and old neighbors who previously lived in similar size apartments now have apartments two or three times larger than hers, mostly because they were very quick to change their apartment at the right time. She did not do it partly because she did not have enough capital to mobilize for changing her apartment (Moon 1982:153).

It is this sort of investment activities that provided a strategy for upward mobility among emerging middle-class citizens in Seoul, but it also turned the housing market into a field of overheated competition. In this context, the symbolic power also concentrates on specific popular neighborhoods such as the three administrative districts in Gangnam: Gangnam-gu, Seocho-gu, and Songpa-gu- where many people aspire to live.

In Seoul’s housing market where the average price of housing has been continuously rising, individuals expect that if you do not buy now the price of the same apartment will be higher a few years later. It appears as a risky prediction to make, but it also functions as a source of housing anxiety. Hence, despite greater social pressure to own a house, Seoul’s young adults confront even more difficulty than their counterparts in Tokyo to become homeowners. The gap between what young adults think they ought to be and what they are likely to end up with is greater in Seoul. That is the source of anxiety for young men in Seoul.

**CONCLUSION**

In East Asia under neoliberalism, various risks of employment are transferred from government and corporations to the shoulders of individuals. In this context, many individuals have little
choice other than to turn to their family in search of security. Nevertheless, along with rapid social changes in the last few decades, family-making became a significant source of anxiety for young adults. Against this background, this chapter has sought to conduct both exploratory and comparative analysis of anxiety about marriage among young adults. First, it described gender and class-specific forms of anxiety that young adults share in Seoul and Tokyo. Second, by focusing on the different perceptions of uncertainty about marriage in the two cities, I examined why marriage feels more risk-ridden for young women and men in Seoul than in Tokyo.

I have identified three forms of anxiety. In both cities, college-educated women with relatively secure employment were torn between the two realms of symbolic politics over what it means to be a successful woman. While they and their parents have invested considerable financial and emotional costs to attain their current status, marriage involves a risk of undoing these cumulative efforts. Young men in Seoul, in contrast, are caught by expectations about home ownership and increasing difficulty to own a place of their own. The gender difference was less salient when it comes to the third response, which I called “consciously indifferent.” In both cities, men and women without stable jobs avoided talking about marriage. It shows that young people tended to see their pathway to adulthood as a process: they cannot think of marriage before they have a stable job. I also found that, among married interviewees, wives are more likely to be expected to deal with insecurities, particularly the ones related to the family life than their husbands.

The study also found that young adults in Seoul tend to be more overwhelmed by burdens associated with marriage than their peers in Tokyo. I argued that this difference stems, essentially, from the depth of the discrepancy between social expectations and reality. Considering the gap in college enrollment rates, women in Seoul are more likely to have a
college degree than women in Tokyo. However, they also confront the wide-spread ideal of the breadwinner-homemaker family model. Hence, while many women have greater opportunity costs to quit their job, they are more likely to be exposed to the pressure to marry than in Tokyo. Similarly, young men are often expected to be the provider of housing in Seoul but in the context of a more volatile housing market. Consequently, marriage appears as more risk-ridden for young adults in Seoul.

When it comes to marriage and family making, East Asian societies are often considered to share the similar context of the highly gendered family structure and ideology of familism, in particular (Raymo et al., 2015). Chang and Song argues that what they call individualization without individualism is “an East Asian trend” (Chang and Song, 2010, p. 560). My analysis pushed this thesis further by showing how young adults in Seoul and Tokyo have both similar but subtly different anxieties and pointed to the social norms and housing market as the source of such divergence.

Taken together, through the case of anxiety about marriage, this chapter makes the case that seemingly homogenizing changes at the macro level produce different outcomes at the subjective level, through the mediation of institutional and cultural backgrounds at both national and local levels as much as individual and collective dispositions. East Asian societies share the same social changes such as women’s rapid advancement into society, growing job insecurity, and persistent gender norms, which rendered marriage as risks for young adults.

However, its effects on the “feel for the game,” to borrow from Bourdieu, is different in the two cities because they are embedded in different fields governed by different common-sense understandings, here I mean the fields of marriage competition and housing markets. The meanings of the individual and collective dispositions that Bourdieu calls capital and habitus are
also field-specific. Thus, despite going through seemingly the same changes, young adults’ experiences of them are context-specific. Different experiences, in turn, shape diversities in strategies and practices to cope with insecurity and inequality.
CHAPTER 6 SUBJECTIVE INEQUALITY

INTRODUCTION

Marxist economist Kawakami Hajime’s 1917 bestseller *Tale of Poverty (Bimbō Monogatari)* begins with his observation that “what is surprising is poverty of the many in today’s civilized countries,” and he saw the rich abstaining from consumption of luxury goods as a solution to eliminate poverty (Kawakami 2008). A century away from Tale of Poverty, today such books as *Contemporary Tale of Poverty* (Hashimoto 2016) or *New Tale of Poverty* (Chūnichi Shinbun Shakaibu. 2017) become an interest of the public in Japan. Similarly, “Hell Joseon,” a recent buzzword in South Korea (hereafter Korea) compares the degree of today’s inequality with that of Joseon Korea in the 19th and early 20th century (Y. Kim 2018a), where it had “one of the most entrenched landed aristocracies in the world” (Eckert 1990).

In a few decades following WWI and WWII, the gap between the haves and have-nots decreased in many countries including Korea and Japan as income at all groups grew more or less at a similar pace (Piketty 2014). History was reversed after the 1980s. The extraordinary concentration of income and wealth on top earners was identified as the source of rising inequality most notably in the US and UK but also in other societies. In Korea and Japan, the compressed nature of economic development resulted in weak social protections provided by the state. Under the influence of neoliberalism, the very system that had supported the rapid economic development fired back after the financial crises of 1997. The main driver of rising inequality in Japan and Korea has been the polarization of the labor market, particularly due to the gap between regular and non-regular jobs. We came from the creation of relatively
egalitarian, “middle class” societies during the periods of miraculous economic development to highly unequal societies.

As the growth of inequality attracted the attention of the public, a growing number of scholars documented the trend in income and wealth inequality and its consequences. One area of research that deserves attention is how people feel and think about inequality, opportunities, and redistribution. These perceptions mediate social structure and social action. Studies in diverse fields from behavioral economics to cultural sociology suggest that individuals’ interpretation of a particular phenomenon often diverges greatly from its objective state. As economists pointed out, “ordinary citizens looking around for themselves can hardly distinguish inequality with the Gini coefficient equaling 0.30 from the inequality with the Gini of 0.40,” (Gimpelson and Monusova 2014:3) which is a quite large gap, indeed. In the era of growing income inequality and economic volatility, it is essential to study how people view inequality in society.

The pairing of Seoul and Tokyo provides an exemplary case for a comparative inquiry. The two societies share similar recent histories of inequality growth. Though it might sound counterintuitive to scholars of South Korea, the level of income inequality in the two societies is more or less the same. Young adults in Korea are increasingly resentful of the concentration of income. Many of them took to the street to impeach their corrupt president in 2016. In contrast, despite a roughly similar level of income inequality as Korea, Japanese young adults appear to be concerned much less with the growth of inequality.

This chapter takes this curious but impressionistic observation seriously and examines whether we can find such a difference through a comparative lens. By doing so, I aim to achieve two goals. First, I will show how young people in Seoul and Tokyo think about inequality in
their society and how they think it ought to be. Second, I try to lay out important factors that shape different perceptions of inequality in the contexts of similar levels of inequality. Following this introduction, I will briefly describe the objective levels of income inequality in the two societies. Then, I will examine how these inequalities are felt by young adults and also look at how they compare with representative survey data. Finally, I attempt to explain the observed differences in ways young adults in the two cities understand inequalities.

INEQUALITY IN CONTEXT

As inequality grows, the number of studies about various dimensions of economic inequality has also expanded. Scholars have long been interested in exploring how people understand the inequality that forms the basis of their social actions and political commitments. Though most classic works took place in the context of pre-inequality growth in the 1970s and 80s (Hochschild 1981; Kluegel and Smith 1986), a growing body of scholarship has examined how people perceive and understand inequality using survey data (Gimpelson and Monusova 2014; Gimpelson and Treisman 2017; Hauser and Norton 2017).

While the results of these studies do not offer a clear-cut consensus, they at least indicate that there are important consequences to whether one sees inequality as the result of individual efforts or failure, or as the result of structural forces that go beyond one’s control. A structural view of inequality sees an unequal outcome as the result of an unequal system. From this perspective, the rich are seen as “undeserving” because they acquire an unreasonable share of the goods in society (Kluegel and Smith 1986; McCall 2013). An individualistic view of inequality, in contrast, sees that the gap in reward is essentially attributable to the individual’s efforts. Thus, the rich are conceived of as “hard workers.”
Because individuals’ view of inequality is affected by the set of beliefs that either conceal or legitimize inequality, meritocracy in particular, recent works show the subtle and complex relationships between individuals’ views of inequality and their beliefs in meritocracy (McCall 2013, 2014; Roex, Huijs, and Sieben 2018).

Scholars have also used various methods to explore the causes and consequences of inequality growth at both individual and collective levels in Korea (Y. Kim 2018b; Shin 2011; Shin and Kong 2014) and Japan (Ishida and Slater 2010a; Moriguchi and Saez 2008; Sato 2010; Satō and Imai 2011; Shirahase 2010, 2014). Far fewer works have investigated people’s understanding of inequality by using ISSP’s 2009 module, which focused on attitudes about inequality (Choi 2013a, 2013b; Hommerich 2017; Kim et al. 2018).

These researchers reported that respondents in Korea tend to have an exceptionally high awareness of economic inequality compared with their counterparts in Japan. Sociologist Jeong Won Choi concluded that Koreans “were largely concerned about the presence of large income differences in the society, the fear of which in fact was unduly overstated for Korea’s relatively equitable income distribution” (Choi 2013b:56). The lack of research in this area is puzzling considering that societies in this region can serve as a good case for comparative inquiries that have the potential to contribute to the understanding of inequality perceptions.

While the survey-based research is insightful in its own way, the nature of survey data does not allow researchers to capture the often conflicted and subtle ways individuals view inequality. Simple forms of inquiries such as the agree-or-disagree type questions cannot document the complexity associated with people’s thoughts about the puzzle of unequal outcomes. As Jennifer Hochschild pointed out in her classic study about distributive justice among Americans, “topics as complex and slippery as beliefs about income, property, justice,
equality, and the role of the government in the economy and vice versa require a research method that permits textured, idiosyncratic responses” (1981:21).

Furthermore, survey based approaches do not let us know why there is a variation in the ways people view inequality. Jonathan Mijs argued in his recent article that “thirty years of scholarship since Kluegel and Smith’s *Beliefs about Inequality* has not produced a comprehensive account that explains the observed patterns of co-variation” (Mijs 2018:64). I follow Mijis and sees that individuals infer inequality in the institutional context in which they are embedded. “People are, on a regular basis, confronted by unequal social outcomes—be it success or failure, wealth or poverty—and must make inferences about the unobserved social processes that underlie these outcomes” (Mijs 2018:64). Like Mijs, I see the context in which they encounter inequality as crucial. People’s views of inequality are mediated by their history, daily interactions with other people, and social spaces.

However, unlike Mijs who assumes that “people implicitly construct a causal model of the social world that includes a vector of variables” (2018:63) in inferring inequality, I assume that the knowledge people use to infer inequality is so conflicted and complex that individuals do not bother to put it into a causal model unless requested to do so by researchers. Rather, it is guided by what Bourdieu calls practical logics, which are “able to organize all thoughts, perceptions and actions by means of a few generative principles, which are closely interrelated and constitute a practically integrated whole” (Bourdieu 1990:86)

**INCOME INEQUALITY IN KOREA AND JAPAN**

In Japan, the notion of “stratified society” gained popularity after the publication of economist Tachibanaki Toshiaki and Sociologist Sato Toshiki’s best-selling books on economic inequality
in the 2000s. In Korea, the impacts of the IMF crisis ignited the debate over the intensification of social inequality. Figure 6.1 and 6.2 show changes in the Gini coefficient. Because the available data about income is limited in Korea, especially regarding before tax income, it is difficult to see a clear historical trend in a long run. Nevertheless, it shows that before tax income inequality increased from 0.293 in 2003 to 0.341 in 2015. After tax income is a better measure of the actual impact of income inequality on people’s lives. In Korea, the Gini for after-tax income inequality increased from 0.277 in 2003 to 0.295 in 2015.

In Japan, a disparity in before-tax income shows a sharp increase from 0.405 in 1987 to 0.57 in 2014. However, post-tax income inequality growth has been moderate in Japan, slightly growing from 0.338 in 1987 to 0.376 in 2014. It appears that the income redistribution system in Japan has been curtailing inequality to a certain extent.

Hence, we can observe that there is growth in both the pre-tax and post-tax income inequalities in Korea and Japan although the pace of changes in the post-tax inequality has been gradual. Furthermore, there is no evidence that suggests that income inequality is greater in Korea than Japan. Rather, there seem to exist a slightly greater discrepancy in Japan than in Korea while the degree of differences appears to be negligible. That said, income inequality has its limitations as a measure of inequality. For example, it is constrained by a narrow scope to capture inequality’s various manifestations although we know that unequal distribution of wealth is the key driver of inequality (Marx 1978; Piketty 2014). However, it is one of the few reliable comparative measures available for both Korea and Japan at this point.
Figure 6.1 Income Inequality in Korea

![Income Inequality in Korea](image1)

Source: (Korea National Statistics Office 2016)

Figure 6.2 Income Inequality in Japan

![Income Inequality in Japan](image2)

Source: (Ministry of Health Labour and Welfare 1999, 2016)
Inequality can grow when the rich are getting richer or the poor are getting poorer. In Korea and Japan, both of these processes have been occurring concurrently. As shown in Figure 6.3, between 1985 and 2010, the share of income held by the top 10% income group grew by 48.8% in Korea and 24.1% in Japan. Not only income but also wealth inequality widened.

According to Capgemini (2016)’s World Wealth Report produced for the financial industry, in the last five years, the number of millionaires in Korea who own a million or more US dollars as an investable asset showed a 52% increase from 126 thousand to 192 thousand. That of Japan grew by 64% from 1.6 to 2.7 million.

Figure 6.3 Top 10 Percent Income Share

![Top 10 % Share of Fiscal Income](image)

Source: (The World Wealth and Income Database 2016)

As more income goes to the hands of the few, the number of people in poverty has also been growing. In 2015, 15.7% of the entire population in Japan and 13.8% in Korea lived under the poverty line, which is defined as half the median household income of the total population.

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These are higher rates than the average of OECD countries. In Japan, 12% of the entire population had lived under poverty line in 1988. The official data is available for only a shorter period in Korea, which starts from 2006 and Korea’s poverty rate was 14.3%, which was already higher than in 2015 (Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training 2018a:190).

Since the economic crises, the demise of the middle class has become a popular theme among popular media outlets. Such newspaper headlines as “middle class is being destroyed” (Wiseman and Nishiwaki 2006) and all middle class households “risk falling into poverty” (The Chosun Ilbo 2013) are not uncommon. Former president Park Geun-hye even proposed a slogan to “rebuild the middle class” aiming at making 70% of Korean citizens middle class again in her 2012 presidential election campaign (Cho 2012).
Measuring the size of the middle class is not an easy task. One measure is to count the number of people who identify themselves as members of the middle class. Figure 6.4 and 6.5 show that the self-recognized upper or lower middle classes decreased by 7 percentage points in Korea (from 79.2 to 72.3 %) and 9 percentage points in Japan (from 66.9 to 57.8 %) from 1995 to 2010. These respondents were absorbed into the working and lower classes. However, the crises did not affect all the members of the middle class uniformly. On the one hand, there is a group of people who have status anxiety and fear of falling to the working class. On the other hand, the upper segment of the middle class has enough resources to advance their economic interests under globalization especially in the realms of education and consumption (Koo 2016; Yang 2018). What we are observing might best be characterized as internal polarization of the middle class.

Figure 6.5 Subjective Social Class, Korea

Source: World Values Survey (Inglehart et al. 2014)
Hence, we observed that economic inequality has been growing in both societies. Income tends to concentrate more heavily on some people than it used to, and the middle class has been shrinking. Furthermore, the levels of income inequality in the two societies remain at more or less similar levels. How do young adults think about the unequal distribution of income and wealth indicated by these measures?

The existing studies suggest that one’s views of inequality are influenced by such factors as one’s education and income, and cross-country studies also found different patterns of inequality perceptions across different national contexts (Hochschild 1981; Kluegel and Smith 1986; Mijs 2018). Hence, it should be intuitive to pay particular attention to differences in how young adults from different class backgrounds in different cities understand inequality.
INSIDERS’ VIEWS ON INEQUALITY

Only a very few of my interviewees come from exceptionally rich families. Yet, most insider interviewees grew up in at least materially comfortable environments. Nevertheless, they often expressed a sense of inferiority compared with their peers. They recounted that the families of their high-school or middle school friends were better off than theirs. Typically, only after going to college did they encounter people from more diverse socio-economic backgrounds and recognize their privilege. The parents of Mika, a non-career track female employee of an insurance company in Tokyo, have a house in a relatively better-off neighborhood in Tokyo and they travel to Hawai’i for a few weeks every year, but she has never felt that her parents were well off compared to her classmates in the private school she attended. Her classmates were daughters of CEOs and doctors, and she was surprised by the scale of their houses.

This does not mean, however, that they see themselves at the bottom of the ladder. They recognize they are more privileged than other people in the same generation. But they also think that they are less privileged than the people around them. It is this sort of complexity that surveys cannot capture. Young-jin, a graduate of Yonsei who now works in the translation department of a law firm, compares her environment of upbringing with that of her friends whose “parents are doctors, lawyers, or professors” though her father is also a professor.

Statistically speaking, I think I am in a wealthy family, but I never felt that I am wealthy enough. I think my family is just at a normal level. I think that’s because most of my friends are much much wealthier than me. They all came from families that have backgrounds... for example usually, they live in Gangnam. They all graduated from special high schools and also [attended] good universities. I’m from Busan, and in Busan, I thought I was at a similar level compared to others, but when I came to Seoul, I felt ‘wow…there are so many wealthy families’ in Seoul compared to Busan. When I entered college, I kind of felt intimidated because, like, the way of spending money was very different and also, housing cost is very expensive in Seoul compared to Busan. So everything...compared to my friends from Seoul...compared to them I felt that I am not
wealthy, but when I read news articles and see statistics, I realize that ‘well...still, I should not complain.’

Thus, she is “in a wealthy family” but at the same time not “wealthy enough.” Furthermore, their views of inequality are inherently complex as, unlike statistical analysis, people usually conceive the total sum of multiple dimensions of inequality without distinguishing one aspect from another, guided by practical logics. In about one minute, Young-jin touched on issues of education, housing prices, consumption styles, and the difference between the capitol and local cities. Young-jin’s experiences and that of other insider interviewees show how it is entirely possible for wealthier young adults to feel more inequality than their less well-off peers because of the environments that surround them.

Yet, I was quite surprised when Ju-won told me that his economic level is below the average of young people in Korea. When I met him in a fashionable high-rise commercial building in the south side of Han River, he brought a very fashionable Givenchy leather tote bag and wore a brand-new sweater from a Japanese designer brand. I noted in my fieldnotes that this sweater alone would cost more than the sum of all the clothes I wore that day. He even gave me a large aroma candle from a French brand as a gift.

Now in his early 30s, Ju-won was born in Paris and grew up there before moving to New York City. He came to Seoul when he was a middle school student. He is currently working in a company owned by his relatives and lives in a house in central Seoul owned by his parents as his father lives in the US and his mother is still in Paris. I thought he was perhaps one of the wealthiest among all interviewees, but he denied that several times. He explained to me that “I think I am very much the same with my friends. Very very similar.” When I asked him about the biggest problem of Korean society, he answered that it is inequality.
If society is a bundle like this, there are well off people and less well-off people, people with financial leeway and not. So I think we need a system to close the gap. The one that collects money from those who have and distributes to those who don't have. We need to create equality by distributing money to people who have difficulty. Such a system is needed, I think. But when I see the Korean system now, it is not like that.

Thus, patterns of narratives about inequality and one’s social locations are not related in a straightforward manner. Rather, I found a much clearer difference between interviewees in Seoul and Tokyo.

When I started interviews in Tokyo after six months of research in Seoul, I was surprised by interviewees’ apparent indifference to economic inequality. Toward the end of each interview, I asked the interviewee if their society appears to be unequal to them. This is the part where I usually expected enthusiastic and lengthy answers from my respondents in Seoul. In Tokyo, however, “I don’t know” was the most frequent answer. Hayato, a truck driver in Tokyo whose employment is relatively stable, told me, “umm, inequality. I don’t know. I don’t know well.” Shuji, a regular employee of a temp agency in Tokyo, appeared to be confused when I asked the question.

Inequality… To be honest, I don’t have a good understanding of things around me. But I don’t have any complaint about the current situation. It’s not that I’m saying it is very fair, but I guess I just don’t know. So, I don’t feel it.

Hikari, a woman in her late 20s, had studied educational inequality in the college and took up her current job as an administrative staff at a large private university to achieve her life time goal of improving education systems. Nevertheless, she does not think that Japan is an unequal society.

I might not be clear about the distinction between fairness and equality, but, for example, there is no occupation that a particular person cannot get in the Japanese society.
Education is mandatory until middle school, and even if someone has economic hardship to go to a high school, there are scholarships. Same goes for the college. So everyone has an opportunity to receive an education. Whether they want to improve their social standing using these measures is another problem.

Many interviewees made comparisons and often concluded that Japan is more equal than other societies. Tadashi who works at a large investment bank, gave Syria as an example.

Basically, we have a chance to recover if we make efforts. But, although I have never grown up in such a situation, let’s say if you were born in Syria then you don’t have any chance to recover, right? If I compare in this way, Japan is much better.

He then added the comparison with other young people in Japan.

However, when I think of it, for example, the fact that my parents were serious about education put me in a privileged situation. If I were born in a different environment, I would have thought that it is unequal. In that sense there might be inequality. Because I think I grew up in a privileged environment.

Here, comparisons are drawn from more unequal societies. There are also some interviewees in Seoul like Jae-yong who draw a similar comparison. He does not like people’s complaints about inequalities in Korea when there are more unequal societies. “I always want to ask them if they have ever been to other countries. I have lived only in Japan and China but here [Korea] is much easier to live in than China. Much fairer.”

Another pattern of narratives is the one in which interviewees claim that they do not feel inequality out of the lack of comparisons with others. Interviewees recognize that subjective inequality derives from comparisons and point to its absence. Mika told me,

Mika: Hah…is the Japanese society unequal? Is it…? Inequality. I have not thought that it is unequal before. Maybe it is unequal though.
Yuki: Looking back at your experiences, do you think the efforts you have made were recognized or valued justly?

Mika: Yes, I think so. [But] I did not have an experience of the environment where I compare myself with others. Well, there was a bit of it in the final year of high school, but I do not have many experiences of competing with someone and winning the race. I did not compare myself with others when getting a job. I was on my own, so it was solitary, but I had no interest in [knowing] who gets accepted from where. I don't compare myself with others much. It’s like I feel okay when I think it is okay.

Mika’s perspective shows a contrast to that of many interviewees in Seoul. In the course of my research, I met many Japanese and Korean young people who know well about both societies. One of the most frequently discussed topics among us over coffee, beer or soju was the difference people attach to status in both societies. Min-a is a Zainichi Korean who grew up in Japan but attended a college in Seoul and was looking for a job at the time of interview. Thus, she is not exactly an “insider” at the point of the interview, but her explication helps to understand the difference I observed.

Min-a: I think there really is a lot of subjectively felt inequality [in Korea]. [People] compare [themselves] really a lot with others. Is it because of [national] character? They compare really a lot. From my perspective, they have enough though. I think like, you don't have this, but you have something else that this girl doesn’t have. They [her friends] talk a lot about other girls. Like, “my cousin has this, went to a good…”, like really…how to say…it’s, not envy but [they say] “that person has that much, and I only have this much. My environment is only this much.” I really feel that.

Yuki: What do they compare? Like housing?

Min-a: Yes, housing. And one of my very close friends always says that her uncle is really wealthy. So she is always angry for her own environment of upbringing, which lacks many things from her perspective. But, from my point of view, she too (is affluent). Her father works for LG, and her mother works for a hospital. So they are affluent enough. The family has only two kids. They can go to schools (college) and receive pocket money (from parents). But it seems they see themselves at the bottom because there are wealthier people. Accordingly, her cousin married a guy from a really wealthy family. (Her friend said) “at a point of marriage he already had three or four buildings even though he did not make any efforts by himself, he always has money coming in
even though he doesn’t work so that it is really annoying. (…) As I hear these words, I feel there are many people who think that it (society) is unequal at the subjective level.

Yuki: Have you not noticed it in Japan?

Min-a: No, I haven’t. When I was in Japan, both I and girls around me, when we saw people having more money, were better-looking, or having connections were just like “ah I see.” Like, we don’t know what other people do, but we have our own rules. In the end, we can’t do anything about it, right? We were born into the family in which we were born. We were only like [saying jokingly] “I see, I envy you” but here [in Korea] people have the real sense of unfairness.

While emphasizing such a difference runs the risk of oversimplification and misrepresentation, I heard narratives akin to Mina’s many times in Korea. Young-jin, the woman working in a law firm in Seoul, also told me about her theory of the ways young people in Korea see inequality.

It’s just my opinion, but Korea is too small. As you know, one-third of the population lives in near Seoul, right? So we are so centered on, like, certain regions. Also, a lot of people have similar dreams or similar goals [but] they have limited seats available. Those people want to get in, but so many people are running for that. I think, one reason is that, as I told you [about] the narrow scope of the standard, they just internalized it. When we were young, we weren’t allowed to question it, and we just ran to the colleges. That’s why…we were not exposed to a lot of options. Compared to Korea, in Japan, family business, doing your family business is also good and appreciated. I think in Korea it’s not like that unless your family business is doing very well. If it is a lucrative one, maybe that’s a good option, but usually, it’s not like that. Everything is centered on big companies. And also, there is a proverb in Korea saying that ‘your cousin buys a piece of land and you get a stomachache’10. I think that’s a good proverb that shows the ethos of Koreans. I think we were just born to compare [laughing]. Sometimes I feel like, in Korea, justice or equality means to be the same, but at the same time, I have to be better than others. This kind of idea is embedded. So lots of people talk about inequality but not many people are actually working to make society more equal, but they are just striving for more resources so that they can be more competitive. Maybe many people are complaining about inequality because they feel that ‘I didn’t get enough resources.’

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10 The original proverb is “사촌이 땅을 사면 배가 아프다.”
The observed intolerance of diverse lifestyles is often considered the source of the sense of relative deprivation in Seoul. I asked Ju-won, a Paris bred man who works in the company his relatives own, if he thinks young people in Korea are more stressed out than their counterparts in Japan.

Ju-won: Well…I don’t know how much I know about the Japanese people. Most Japanese I met was only my mother side family and cousins, but I think in Japan there seems to be an atmosphere which allows more diverse values of people than Korea. It seems like it is okay not to go to this university in this period, get a job at this point, marry at this point. But in Korea, you have to go to college at this point, marry at this point, get a job at this point…these kinds of things. It is not [a matter of] individual preferences but a social law.

Yuki: Do you feel that sort of pressure from your family?

Ju-won: Certainly. Before I got a job, I was told to work. After I got a job, I was told to marry because I got old. ‘My brother got married and has a child and what are you doing?’ A lot of that sort of talk.

Sang-min, a regular employee of a large telecommunication company in Seoul, also told me that “yes, unequal,” and he explained that “opportunities” are severely limited in Korea.

I think diversity is lacking. In a society where people do not care too much about other people and where taxi drivers can get respect and people have varieties of values, people would be happier. But it is not that sort of structure (in Korea). Many people make various efforts to be at big corporations, (or become) doctors, lawyers, these special class occupations, like civil servants. It is good if they make it. But there are no other opportunities if they do not make it. I wish there would be more opportunities. It is diversity too. It would be good if I try this and there were other opportunities even if I fail. In this society, that is too limited, and that is the biggest problem.

As much as I was surprised by interviewees’ apparent indifference to inequality in Tokyo, I was surprised by how interviewees in Seoul express their attitudes on inequality articulately.
Regardless of their stance toward inequality, and the politics of redistribution more specifically, young adults in Seoul more often had something to say about it, which marks a difference from the “I don't know” answers I encountered in Tokyo. This observed difference, however, should be explained in light of the gap between expectations imposed on them and constraints posed by institutions of work, education, and housing, and subtle differences in both societies rather than to be solely attributed to naïve conceptualizations of culture or national character.

MEANING-SEEKERS’ VIEWS ON INEQUALITY

Virtually all meaning-seekers in Tokyo do not think that society is unequal. When I asked if he thinks Japanese society is unequal, Yusuke responded, “no, I don’t think so. Those who make so much also sacrifice the present too.” As a non-regular worker in his 30s who wishes to be a professional musician, he is afraid of the possibility of becoming homeless. Yet, he thinks that he deserves the treatment that he has been given from his employer. I replied by asking if he thinks his efforts have been evaluated justly so far. Yusuke replied, “yes, I think so. Of course, I sometimes think it would be better if something would have been different. But we have to work to make that happen.” When I asked him if he wishes he should have done something in the past, Yusuke told me “I think a lot about it. For example, had I attended a college, not a vocational school, I might have had a different life.”

Yusuke also brought in “foreigners” as a subject of comparison.

There are many foreigners at [his second workplace]. When I talk to them, their life is really hard. But still, they are among wealthy groups of people, like rich ones. Those who come here are the rich of their own country, but when I hear from them, they tell me that among their friends there are ones who have hardship.
In the end, he enjoys his current life. Yusuke is happy with his life because he has enough level of material comfort. As it is evident in Yusuke’s view of inequality, meaning seekers in Tokyo also tend to accept the promise of meritocracy. When I asked the same question about inequality to Kiyomi who works at a hamburger restaurant and a hostess bar to support herself while trying to pursue her career as an actress, her response was, “I don’t really think so. Umm, because people who want to start a business start it and some of them make a lot of money. So isn’t it efforts by each and every one?”

Interviewees in Tokyo often saw equality as a part of the defining character of the Japanese society. Tatsuya, a graduate of Keio University and avid dancer who now works as a performer in a theme park, explained the reason why he thinks Japanese society is fair.

Perhaps the reason why I think it is relatively fair is, not to mention the Japanese system but culture too. I think the element [equality] is rooted. Meanwhile, perhaps there are not extraordinarily talents in Japan because of these ideas. Put that aside, I think Japan is fair. Elementary and middle schools are mandatory, and one can choose high school and college based on what they want to do.

It is the reasoning akin to the response Hikari raised, in which the compulsory education system is considered a manifestation of equality in Japanese society.

To be fair, however, it also has to be noted that there were a small number of exceptions like the case of Mio, a woman in her early 30s, who believes that inequality is the major problem and articulated her idea clearly. “Especially recently, I think that the place where one is born and the environment of upbringing has a direct influence on the child’s life. I think there is huge inequality because in the child’s life there are things that their efforts cannot change.”
Considering Mio is working hard to become a social worker after she quit her first job due to excessive stress, her articulate answer about inequality should not come as a surprise.

The view akin to Mio’s was the dominant response in Seoul. When I asked about the biggest problem in Korea, a typical answer among interviewees in Seoul is related to inequality of various sorts. In my interview with Minji, a woman in her 30s who works in a non-profit organization after studying film both in Korea and the US, she said that youth employment problem is the most serious problem that Korean society confronts.

When I see what young people aim for, they graduate from the college that they can attend, and then they have to find the workplace, but there is really no place they can go. Also, even if you graduate from a good college, it costs money to go to a good college, and it is difficult to find a workplace that pays you back its costs.

Minji discusses what scholars call the opportunity trap (Brown 2003). The increased opportunities of higher education make educational credentials difficult to convert to other forms of capital. While it is a problem common to many young people in Seoul, she later pointed out that the chance of success itself is stratified.

If parents are doing well, their children might do well. I have friends who already had a billion won house in Gangnam when they were ten years old. If one’s parents are extremely poor, there are a lot of difficulties to get there starting from paying tuition by themselves. When I see these things, I [cannot help but] wondering if our society is an equal society.

In contrast, Hyong-u, an entrepreneur in Seoul who works in the world of politics, sees that poverty among elders is a more pressing issue than that of the young generation.

The current grandmother and grandfather’s generation experienced the war, and they are the people [who lived] before independence, so it was hard. I think their lives were the hardest. I think my generation is better than theirs, but the generation before the IMF
crisis was better than mine. So I think our generation is normal. For example, those who
were born in the 1970s spent their youth like their time in college after authoritarianism
and when the Korean economy was good. So I think their generation was the best (…)
Do you go to Hongdae [a mecca of youth subculture in Seoul] sometimes? If you go to
Hongdae, everyone, at least our generation, looks happy but the elderly. Now the poverty
rate among them is high, and if you go to Hongdae, you see elders collecting cardboard
boxes and selling them. I think young people [’s situation] is better than theirs.

The source of inequality lies in the real-estate market in Hyong-u’s view.

Hyong-u: I think the problem of real-estate [is the biggest]. Real-estate and tax. Real-
estate problem is the most important. When I look at other countries too, real-estate is the
biggest cause that makes inequality grow. That’s why real-estate is the problem.

Yuki: Are they too expensive?

Hyong-u: They are too expensive. Also, the haves have many of them, and the have-nots
own nothing.

Yuki: Have you had that idea for a long time?

Hyong-u: Yes, I have. Because my family was poor, we have never owned or bought a
house. Certainly, I knew the real-estate problem from around the time I was a junior high
school student. It is too expensive. Rent is very expensive too in Seoul. Those who don’t
have money (to own a house) have to afford it.

While Minji and Hyong-u disagree over what is the most urgent inequality issue to be addressed,
y they are certain that there is inequality in society. Eun-bi, a woman in her 30s and a junior
analyst at a labor related research institute whom I met in one of the events of a labor union, like
many others in her generation, sees that the middle-class life has become out of reach.

Eun-bi: Yes, it is totally unfair.

Yuki: Like how?

Eun-bi: Inequality is everywhere in all aspects. Not only about economically, but there is
also a class aspect, and I think this tendency is strong in Korea. Therefore, inequality
becomes inevitable. This system is getting more rigid and becoming harder to overcome.
In the past, if you were born in a poor family and parents don’t have enough [resources], if one makes efforts you were still able to make it to the middle class, but now it is almost impossible.

Young adults in Seoul from all sorts of class backgrounds tended to stress that efforts cannot buy success in the current political economy of Korea. Hae-young, a committed union activist in her 20s also argues,

I think the parents’ influence weighs large. For example, about a big corporation, in the case of Lee Jae-young [de fact head of Samsung group\textsuperscript{11}], it is largely due to his parents that he rose to this position and earned as much money as he did. When I think not only about distant others but also of people around me, the choices they have depend largely on the standard of one’s family. If the family supports you, you can study and take a rest, but if not, you have to work part-time or have other jobs. It is not about one’s ability but parents’ economic standard that makes a difference. In that sense, I think it (Korean society) is very unequal.

Despite their recognition of inequality in society, many of them consent to work for low wages for the pursuit of what they think is meaningful in life.

\textbf{OUTSIDERS’ VIEWS ON INEQUALITY}

How do outsiders see inequality in society? Where do they locate themselves on the ladder?

Most of my outsider interviewees recognize that society is unequal to a certain extent, in Tokyo as well as Seoul. It is interesting considering the majority of insiders and meaning seekers in Tokyo tended not to see inequality in the first place.

Shinichi who works as a systems engineer in Tokyo thinks that “there is no equality of opportunity.”

\textsuperscript{11} Lee was arrested and sentenced to five years in jail for bribery and other charges related to former president Park Geun-hye’s political scandal.
How should I put this…, for example, the condition of job hunting differs depending on the generation you belong to. Also, the life course changes depending on where you were born. Of course, gender and sexuality alter the choices you have greatly. So I think it is unequal because we do not give equal opportunities to make a choice.

Currently in his early 30s, Shinichi observed the difficulty of students who graduated from the school a few years earlier than him, when the Japanese job market was so bleak that they were called the “Ice Age generation.”

Hyun-Woo, a male cram school instructor in Gyeonggi province on the outskirts of Seoul, is not shy about his anger, “really unequal. The system is made to cater to the rich family and rest of the people are out. It is very unequal.” In both Japan and Korea, outsider interviewees emphasized that both opportunity and outcome are unequal. Ji-soo who also teaches in a cram school in Gyeonggi province, contrasts her experience and that of her current students.

Yeah, I think it is unequal. Because educational opportunities are the case. And in the area where I am now when I see the standards of education students receive, so you know I am not too different from my students regarding our age, but there are a lot of differences. Then, economically, there is a big difference between those who were born into a family with capital and those who weren’t. So I think it is unequal.

Perhaps it is not very surprising to know that outsiders are keenly aware of inequalities in society because they are often exposed to various forms of discrimination due to the inadequacy of their resumes. For some interviewees who did not graduate from college, discrimination based on the perceived lack of credentials is a serious challenge. Yong-jung, who wished to but could not attend a culinary school in Japan due to his parents’ financial problems incurred by the global financial crises, elaborated this point.
Yong-jung: I think it is unequal. Well, I think it goes like, is there any country in the world that is equal? The real problem is how we see equality. I think it is truly unequal when you have the same talent, make the same amount of efforts, and did your best but there is still a disparity. And that is terrible in Korea. It is also an unequal society because we start from different places. Well, but I also feel that among the people who always complain, many of them do not make much efforts.

Yuki: Do you think Korea is more unequal than other societies?

Yong-jung: I think so. Of course not as much as China. We have China and North Korea next to us, and they are not comparable [to Korea]. But more unequal than Japan. Because it might be easier to live in Japan as a foreigner than to live in Korea as a Korean. I think it is such a big [indication of] inequality. There is discrimination [in Japan] for sure, but I don’t even feel discrimination as discrimination. Yes, it is big.

While Yong-jung is angry about the unequal opportunities available to young adults like him, he is also critical of people who “do not make much efforts.”

Based on his experience of staying in Japan for a year, Yong-jung recognizes that there is various discrimination that non-Japanese citizens encounter. However, he also thinks he is less discriminated against in Japan than in his native Korea. Perhaps the fact that Yong-jung attended a high school in Gangnam before his parents’ company went bankrupt explains a part of his views on inequality. These experiences allowed him to see groups of people from diverse socio-economic backgrounds.

Yong-jung: To be honest, I don’t keep in touch with friends from the vocational school. I think they have hands full with just getting by. There are people among my friends from high school who I feel are very different from me. Because it was a school with many rich kids, they are many people who are different. (…)

Yuki: Is there anybody who is similar to you?

Yong-jung: Certainly. There were other households that went bankrupt in the same period. What is interesting is, I can tell the difference from whether they still live in Gangnam or Jamsil, or went to somewhere else in Seoul. I think it is very curious. People like me they generally went to downtown and people who remain in the south (of the Han river) still live affluently. Though there aren’t too many people who got a job anyway.
Yuki: So are they seeking jobs?

Yong-jung: They are not even in that stage. Many people waited for like three years until they got admission from college. Especially there were many of them because of overpopulation. My generation has the largest number of population as we are the kids of baby boomers.

Even though he recognizes inequality in society, in the end he is left to change the situation by his own efforts.

To be honest, I am not satisfied. Between one to five, (my level of satisfaction) is two. No maybe three. It increased a bit after I finished the military service. Even though society is unequal, I think still there are things in my life that I can change by myself.

Though they are a minority among outsider interviewees, some young adults I met in Tokyo believe in the equality of opportunity strongly, even though their experiences seem to contradict that very idea. Shigeki who is working as a day laborer says, “ummm, I don’t think it (Japan) is unequal.”

This is only my personal thoughts, but basically Japan is not a class society when compared to other countries. Well, maybe there is, but there is no obvious class system. So far there is not a system like that of overseas like commoners cannot enter the sphere of the nobility. In Japan, if you have money, if you have money and dress rightly you can go anywhere. Also, there is freedom to choose the occupation. Well, of course, life is hard, and kids who were born into rich families have fewer barriers. But among my friends back home, there is one guy who did not receive any financial support from his parents. He studied and worked from morning to night and even dated a girl. He found a job after graduation too. So, though I am not saying one’s effort is everything, I observed people who were not in privileged environments but overcame the barriers by their efforts. Of course, I understand that there were people who did not make it, but when you see the strength of people who overcame the difficulty, you cannot attribute everything to the environment [of upbringing].
Thus, some interviewees underscore self-responsibility. He is also afraid of such a remark being taken as too optimistic because of his privileged background. “Well I have said many things so far, but I personally think I am on the privileged side. So, for those who are not privileged, what I have just said would sound like too optimistic.”

It may well be true that he is more privileged than many of his colleagues in his current workplaces, considering his parents have a house in the central part of a big local city and he has a college degree. However, when Ju-won’s sweater is nearly as expensive as the monthly rent of Shigeki’s apartment in suburban Tokyo, I cannot help but feeling that Shigeki’s privilege is nowhere near that of many insider interviewees in this study. It tells the relative nature of inequality perceptions. An outside observer like me can easily count the fact that Shigeki came across an overly exploitative employer upon graduation from college and ruined his health before moving to Tokyo and is now hopping from one job to another every day as another evidence of inequality in society. Yet, that is not exactly the way Shigeki recognizes inequality.

Kyoichi, in his 20s, was in the process of recovering from the trauma of being deemed as a useless employee in a tech company in Tokyo where he worked as a systems engineer after graduating from college. Yet, he also argued that the society is meritocratic.

I think it [Japan] is meritocratic. It has been said the network is also a part of your ability. Some people survive because of their networks. Let’s say if one graduates from a good college and does it guarantee you a good job? No. Regardless of how good university one graduates, you also need other abilities that go beyond your test score like the ways you behave in interviews.

If he believes in the idea that Japan is a meritocratic society, and that inequality derives from one’s lack of efforts, then Kyoichi might have to blame himself for his lack of either ability or
efforts to explain the reasons he could not keep up with his first job. It should be painful to deny oneself in such a way. However, such a dynamic seems not to be uncommon. Kazuto who works as a non-regular employee of a large parcel delivery service company has a belief in equality of the Japanese society. Yet, it contradicts the reality that he did not graduate from college.

Basically, I think opportunities are equal. My older brother is a graduate of the University of Tokyo. Ours is a single-mother family, and our parent does not have education credentials, but if you grow your ability properly, you can go to college. Once you see society as unequal, you keep losing. It just sounds like an excuse. So, the fact that I only graduated from high school is because of my lack of effort. So whatever I say about it would sound like an excuse.

Whereas insiders and meaning-seekers in Tokyo tended not to recognize the existence of inequality in their society, many outsiders in both cities were aware of the uneven distribution of income and opportunities. Nonetheless, they also tended to believe in the values of meritocracy, especially in Tokyo.

DIFFERENCES IN PERCEPTIONS OF INEQUALITY

So far this chapter has presented various forms of narratives about inequality told by young adults in Seoul and Tokyo. Interviewees often talked about comparisons (or sometimes lack of comparisons) in inferring the degree of inequality in society. Furthermore, their narratives often point to different dimensions of inequality such as work, education, and housing. For example, many interviewees in Tokyo pointed out that Japan is an equal society because of its education system. Rather than simply talking about the gaps in income, they talk about inequality through manifestations that are more visible in their daily lives.
Though I had expected that attitudes on inequality are influenced by one’s class background and current economic conditions, the difference among the three groups of young adults’ views of inequality is nowhere near as clear as the difference between that of interviewees in Seoul and Tokyo. To simplify the difference, first, interviewees in Tokyo are much less likely to think that their society is unequal. Some young adults in Tokyo even considered equality as the fundamental feature of Japanese society. However, precisely because many young adults in Tokyo interpret that equality of opportunities is assured in the Japanese society, they then have to explain the puzzle of unequal outcomes, though some interviewees also do not see inequality at the level of outcome.

Second, even when interviewees recognize inequality or a discrepancy between equal opportunities and somehow unequal outcomes, they tended to rely on individual rather than structural explanations to solve this puzzle. Unequal outcomes are seen as a result of the accumulated histories of individual efforts (or lack thereof).

Third, as young adults in Seoul tend to see inequality as a consequence of structural forces, they also see that the government’s failure to close the gap lies at the heart of the problem. While scholars point out that greater perceptions of inequality generally lead to greater support for redistributive justice, more myopic observations such as mine suggest that the reality is more complicated because the perceived inequality can be simply attributed to individuals’ lack of efforts in the context where belief in meritocracy is hegemonic.

The results from the representative survey data support my findings. Figure 6.7 and 6.8 represent the types of society that respondents under 34 years old in Korea and Japan think they are living in. The greater proportion of respondents in Korea think that they live in an unequal society (type A, B, and C). It shows that young adults in Korea are more likely to think that they
live in an unequal society. Figure 6.9 uses the same scheme to indicate type of society that respondents think theirs ought to be. More respondents in Korea to want to live in an equal one than their counterparts in Japan.

Figure 6.7 Types of Society

![Types of Society Diagram]

Source: ISSP 2009 (ISSP Research Group 2009)
Note: I adapted this figure from (Murata and Aramaki 2013:8)

Figure 6.8 In What Type of Society Do you Live?

![Bar Chart]

Source: ISSP 2009 (ISSP Research Group 2009)
Figure 6.9 What Type of Society You Want Your Society to be?

Source: ISSP 2009 (ISSP Research Group 2009)

From the same survey, Figure 6.10 shows that more than 90% of Korean and 74% of Japanese young adults, respectively, think that income inequality is too large in their own society. Furthermore, as in Figure 6.11, more Korean young adults think that there are conflicts between rich and poor people. Figure 6.12 shows three comparable questions about young adults’ view of economic inequality. These numbers show the consistency in the trend that young Koreans are more aware of inequalities and yet they think their society ought to be more equal.
Figure 6.10 Perceptions of Income Inequality

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Differences in income in [Rs country] are too large (Age under 34)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Korea (N=471)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly agree: 40.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree: 51.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither agree nor disagree: 6.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree: 1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly disagree: 1.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: World Values Survey (Inglehart et al. 2014)

Figure 6.11 Views on Conflicts between the Rich and the Poor

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conflicts: between rich people and poor people (Age under 34)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Korea (N=471)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very strong conflicts: 30.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong conflicts: 54.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not very strong conflicts: 13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There are no conflicts: 15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: World Values Survey (Inglehart et al. 2014)
Perceptions of inequality are influenced by the inequality legitimizing myth in a given society. Figure 6.13 shows that nearly 60% of young adults in Korea, compared to only one-quarter in Japan, think that people who occupy a higher status in society are “corrupt.” While only 6% of respondents “strongly disagree” with this statement in Korea, more than 40% do so in Japan. Here, we see how “success” in society is seen as just among Japanese young people. Figure 6.14 shows that 76% of young adults in Korea versus 56% in Japan think that it is the government’s responsibility to reduce income inequality. Thus, Japanese young people are more likely to think than their peers in Korea that inequality are a result of differences in one’s talent and efforts. In contrast, Korean young people are more likely to think that the state is responsible for reducing inequality.
Figure 6.13 Are Successful People Corrupt?

Source: World Values Survey (Inglehart et al. 2014)

Figure 6.14 Attitudes on the Government’s Role in Reducing Inequality

Source: World Values Survey (Inglehart et al. 2014)

Thus, available survey data supports my findings from the interview data. The strength of rich qualitative data is that it hints at why such perceptual and attitudinal differences exist by following the respondents’ reasoning about their perspectives. It also helps to summarize some
of the main findings from the previous chapters. Let me turn to this topic before concluding the chapter.

**CONTEXT OF INEQUALITY PERCEPTIONS**

The aggregate level of income inequality in both societies is not fundamentally different, or Japan appears to be a little bit more unequal than Korea. Nevertheless, young adults in Seoul tended to be much more aware of inequality, and increasingly resentful, especially for the government which they think has been failing to address problems. I argued that the difference stems from different contexts of inequality perceptions.

*Discursive and Ideological Context*

There are several different aspects of context, and all of them are intertwined. First of these is discursive. There is a pattern to narratives about inequality; young adults’ views of inequality are constructed from the repertoires of discourses available to them in a given context. In other words, when asked about their views of inequality, young adults do not construct their own model from scratch but rather modify the discourse on inequality that speaks close to their minds. Their views on and strategies to deal with inequality are shaped by the existing repertoire of discourse.

What follows is that the repertoires of discourse on inequality available to them are different in the two societies. The popular discourses in Korea tend to emphasize the growth of inequality more so than that in Japan, which influences the ways young adults view inequality. Structural explanation of inequality is a more common and dominant repertoire in Korea than Japan, and hence more discursive resources are available for them to construct critical views of
inequality and supporting evidence for them. These discursive differences are shaped by media and political contexts that surround young adults. I do not claim that young people’s views of inequality are manipulated by external forces. Rather, I suggest that they exert their agentic choices in constructing their narratives within the confines of the discursive resources available to them.

A closely related explanation is ideological. Scholars have pointed out that individuals’ views of inequality are influenced by the inequality-legitimizing myth in a given society such as meritocracy. Young adults tended to believe in the ideal of individual efforts more strongly in Japan though there were also a number of comparable narratives among young adults in Seoul.

Interviewees in Tokyo often alluded to the Japanese school system as evidence of equality in society. Probably it has something to do with the view of equality promulgated by the Japanese public school system. Their view is that equality in education means that everyone is treated exactly the same and given exactly the same educational content. That is why at the elementary and junior high levels they have consistently refused tracking and variation in what children are taught. In addition, the overwhelming discourse of education in Japan is that it is not differences in natural talent but rather differences in hard work that determine the outcomes. That strongly motivates students to achieve, but it also leaves those who cannot succeed to blame themselves.

In Korea, beliefs about egalitarianism seem to be shared widely among people from diverse backgrounds. It has also something to do with shared notions of stratification systems in both societies. While both societies shared a similar belief about classes based on Confucianism before the two world wars, one character of the stratification system in Korea, according to Hagen Koo is that a series of historical events (Japan’s colonization, WWII, political turmoil
during the post-liberation period, the division of the country into two, and the Korean war) resulted in “the almost complete destruction of the old class system and its ruling class” (2007:37). When combined with other factors such as the relatively extensive land reform, Korea became “a society with a pervasive egalitarian ethic and strong aspiration for upward social mobility” (Koo 2007:60). It created the context which enables stronger attachment to peoplehood: people are likely to think that you and I are the same kinds of persons, which enables comparisons.

Furthermore, the same series of historical events shaped both strong state and contentious society in Korea, culminated to lead to the mass uprising in 1987. Thus, Koo argues that civil society in South Korea is developed “not simply as an institutional manifestation of a bourgeois society but as a nationalistic political reaction to the nature of state power” (Koo 1993:248) in contrast to the Western European experiences. The byproducts of long years of oppression by the colonial and authoritarian regimes include strong sense of injustice, experiences of collective struggles, and critical consciousness against the state, perpetuated widely in society, that coexist with nationalism (Koo 1993:239). In this respect, Korea’s experience diverges from that of Japan where democracy was not a hard-earned achievement of citizens but rather brought about by the Occupation forces after WWII. The combination of widespread egalitarianism and the strong sense of peoplehood can shape the gap between ideal and reality, which is a source of relative deprivation. Furthermore, critical consciousness helps to directs people’s discontents to the state.

Globalization added another layer to this picture. In particular, the ways in which young people project themselves into the imagined global community seem to be relevant here. Manfred Steger calls such a pre-reflexive framework through which we imagine our place in the world global imaginary. “It offers explanations of how ’we’-the members of the community- fit
together, how things go on between us, the expectations we have of each other, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie those expectations” (Steger 2008:18). Young adults in both Tokyo and Seoul often draw comparisons with other countries. Like Tadashi who compared Japan with Syria, interviewees in Tokyo often underscored the exceptional character of equality in Japanese society. Interviewees in Seoul, in contrast, tended to compare Korea with Japan to prove how unequal Korea is. While interviewees in Tokyo tended to imagine “overseas” as a vaguely more unequal world than Japan, their peers in Seoul tended to draw a more specific comparison and conclude that Korea is unequal. Thus, the ways they pre-reflexively imagine the world alter the subject of comparison about inequality, often leading to different observations about inequality.

Fields of Competition

Discourses and ideologies are not free-floating. Young adults encounter them in the concrete settings of institutional spheres that I describe by relying on the Bourdieusian language of field in this study. Young adults’ experiences in education, labor, and housing markets are the key to understanding their perceptions of inequality. It is evident in the fact that interviewees discussed its specific manifestations through occupations, opportunities, outcomes of education, and housing that generate inequality. Each of these social spaces in Korea is structured in ways that attribute more symbolic power to the higher-ups in the hierarchy, so people in different social locations tend to believe in the same logics of competitions. In contrast, in Japan, competitions happen at many different levels and people tend to be indifferent to the games that are not relevant to their interest. This means that the sense of relative deprivation tends to be provoked more easily in Seoul.
In the labor market, the symbolic power concentrates heavily on Chaebol corporations even though they employ only a small fraction of workers in Korea. Though Chaebol produce a larger share of profit compared to small size enterprises, for example, 41% of the total operating profits in 2018, they represent only 0.2% of companies in Korea (Bang 2019). In Japan, large corporations such as Keiretsu corporations do have strong symbolic leverage over smaller firms even though they represent only about 0.3% of all companies. The level of symbolic power is comparable to that of Korea’s Chaebols. However as I have shown in the chapter about work, approximately half of all workers are employed by large corporations in Japan whereas only 20% of workers are employed by companies with more than 500 employees in Korea.

Similar dynamics are in play in the education market. What are called SKY universities in Korea have unquestioned ascendance over other universities in terms of their reputation in Korea. Yet the number of seats in the three SKY university is severely limited. In Japan, again, the top universities have a symbolic ascendance but what counts as the top universities is not as narrowly defined as in Korea, which limits the concentration of the symbolic power. On top of that, simply speaking, not everybody aspires to go to top universities in Tokyo due to segmented fields of competitions, unlike Seoul where nearly every parent wants to see their children attend SKY universities.

The same is true in the housing market as well. Though the ideology of homeownership appears to be more resilient in Korea than Japan, in the speculative housing market, apartments in popular locations are overpriced, which also raised the standard prices in the market. When combined with the unique rental housing system, the market is structured in ways that selectively reward those who already have economic resources in Seoul.
Thus, beyond the objective level of inequality, I contend that institutions of markets that are central in young adults’ pathways to adulthood shape perceptions of inequality as much as they shape experiences of insecurity. The features of labor, education, and housing markets in Seoul tend to exacerbate the sense of relative deprivation more than the same institutions in Tokyo. By committing to competition in order to attain a sense of dignity in these markets, young adults in Seoul often come up short; they direct their frustration sometimes at the government and other times at themselves. In contrast, young adults in Tokyo often find no one to blame but themselves, because of the prevalence of inequality legitimizing myths of meritocracy.

CONCLUSION

We have known little about how young adults in Seoul and Tokyo understand various inequalities around them, but this chapter has sought to fill this gap through the analysis of in-depth interviews. The rich interview data allowed me to discern several patterns of narratives about inequality encompassing diverse themes. Young adults talked about whether their society is unequal or not. They also see various aspects of inequality pertaining to educational, occupational, and housing inequalities. In doing so, they often compared themselves or their society with other groups or societies. Finally, they forged different types of explanations to account for why there is inequality. In spite of my initial expectation to find diversity in their perceptions according to social class, I observed that the more decisive difference lies between interviewees in Seoul and Tokyo.

“Don’t know” answer stood out among narratives told by interviewees in Tokyo. When they were aware of various forms of inequality, young adults in Tokyo tended to turn to
individualist rather than structuralist explanations of inequality. However, the individualist explanations force them to reflect on their lack of efforts to account for unequal outcomes. Meanwhile, interviewees in Seoul tended to be increasingly angry about inequality. They more often see the structural causes of inequality growth and think that it is the government’s responsibility to reduce the gap. While I summarized the overall patterns I observed for analytical purposes, I do not wish to overemphasize homogeneity of young people in each city. I hope that their narratives speak to both the complexity and heterogeneity of views among young adults in each city.

I argue that the observed differences should be accounted for by the differences in the discursive, ideological, and institutional contexts in which they are embedded. Because individuals construct their perspectives on inequality by learning from and modifying the relevant discourses available to them, the discursive context of their lives is closely tied to their views of inequality.

Furthermore, the relative prevalence of egalitarianism in Korea also helps to explain why inequality appears to be more problematic for young adults in Seoul. Subtle differences in the institutions of education and work and marriage are central mechanisms that diversify perceptions of inequality. Each of these three markets is structured in a way that gives more incentives to the higher-ups in Seoul than in Tokyo. As more people aspire to have the same goods, more people come up short of reaching them. It is this environment that is likely to evoke the sense of relative deprivation.

At a time called “the new gilded age,” there are extensive studies that document causes, processes, and states of economic inequality and insecurity as measured by numbers. By closely analyzing narratives about inequality among young adults in Seoul and Tokyo, this chapter has
argued that the same level of inequality is experienced differently in different contexts; hence it calls for more attention to the texture and feeling of inequality as they are lived by individuals. Only by knowing how individuals see inequality in different settings can we forge a better solution to address them, which also has to take into account the specificity of local cultural-institutional contexts.
CHAPTER 7 CONCLUSION

NOSTALGIC PAST AND UNCERTAIN PRESENT

One interesting development in contemporary Korean and Japanese societies is that many people seem to be so nostalgic about the past, particularly the much dramatized period of successful economic development. The dramatization of the Park Chung-hee era helped his daughter Park Geun-hye to secure her seat in the presidential Blue House in 2012, in one of the most divisive election in history. During his reign as a development-oriented military dictator, Park Chung-hee had established the South Korean middle class, and his daughter proclaimed that she would “rebuild” the middle class. Only a few years later, Park Geun-hye’s career as a politician ended with the massive political corruption scandal in 2016, which resulted in her impeachment. Later she was sentenced to 24 years in prison. Other influential figures including Park’s old friend Choi Soon-sil were also sentenced to serve time in prison.

In a country of 51 million people, candlelight protests against former president Park that were held every week across the country mobilized a total of 16 million people (Chang 2017; Doucette 2017; Dudden 2017; Sangwon Lee 2018). No less surprising was the countermobilization by conservative older citizens who support Park Sung-hee’s legacy of economic planning and were outrageous by his daughter’s impeachment. Myungji Yang, in her article, argues that this was not simply a countermovement to the impeachment of Park Geun-hye but rather stemmed “from a widespread feeling of victimhood and fear among older conservative Koreans, developed during the “lost” decade of the Kim and Roh governments” (Yang n.d.).

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In Japan, Shinzo Abe, the grandson of Nobusuke Kishi who served as the prime minister from 1957 to 1960 has been in the position of power first from 2006 to 2007 and then from 2012 to the present. Under Abe’s leadership, there has been increased public spending to build infrastructure under the banner of the “Building National Resilience” plan which in many ways resembles the LDP’s economic policy during the developmental era. Spending on the 2020 Tokyo Olympics with its budget expanding to nearly twice the initial plan is one such form of nostalgic politics, which reminds people of the 1964 Olympics in Tokyo. Scholars, journalists, and citizens have been critical of spending enormous money and construction workforce on the Olympics when the northern part of Japan is still recovering from the 2011 Tohoku Earthquake, tsunami, and subsequent Fukushima nuclear disaster. More recently, it was announced that the world’s fair will be held in Osaka in 2025, which arouses nostalgic sentiment about the first world’s fair in Japan held in Osaka in 1970. The 1964 Olympics and the 1970 Osaka World’s Fair have remained in the collective memory of older Japanese as symbols of recovery from the second world war.

At times of uncertainty, some people turn to the mythical past searching for something that has been lost, in order to forge a sense of security in their minds. Zygmunt Bauman termed this form of backward search for certainty “retropia.” In our uncertain times people collectively make a u-turn, “from investing public hopes of improvement in the uncertain and ever-too-obviously un-trustworthy future, to re-reinvesting them in the vaguely remembered past, valued for its assumed stability and so trustworthiness” (Bauman 2017:6). We tend to think that such nostalgic thinking is peculiar to a small number of old people who cannot catch up with the progress of our time and have little choice other than to stick to the memory of the nostalgic past. But is it?
For today’s young adults in East Asia, the terrain that leads to adulthood is significantly different from the one that their parents’ generation went through. Their parents and grandparents became adults in a growing economy through which they were able to project their future. They lived in a nostalgic “golden age” of security. In contrast, today’s young adults are reaching adulthood in a risk society. Neoliberalism has transformed the terms of the social contract. As forms of contract-based employment without benefits have become increasingly common, now many young adults are left on their own to deal with the risks of life.

As the unpredictability in the labor market grows, the world of work, education, and love have all become risk-ridden. Such changes are intersected by the growing gap between the haves and have-nots. In the midst of an uncertain time, this dissertation offered a vivid and compelling story of the reality that young adults confront in East Asia. What appeared from in-depth interviews with 98 young adults in both cities are the frustrations and dilemmas of individuals who fell into the crevasse between rapidly changing social structure and the same old expectations imposed on them. The ideological construction of adulthood, with a college degree, a secure job, a family and a house in the suburbs, has not changed as much, even though the chance of obtaining them has been declining. Many young adults have to balance life between the reality of the uncertain present and norms of the romanticized golden age of security.

Now let me turn to summarize some of the main findings of this dissertation.

EDUCATION, WORK, AND LOVE IN UNSETTLING TIMES

Under the impacts of two polarizing economies, the knowledge economy and the service economy, the value of educational credentials is said to have been inflating (Kariya 2011). At the same time, the universalization of higher education makes it difficult to convert degrees to
economic capital. Chapter four found that, in the context of this conflicting reality, many young adults committed themselves to educational competition and were frustrated by their commitment. The ones in Seoul acutely remembered the stresses coming from extremely long hours of studying and constant fear of falling behind. Despite considerable similarities in the education systems, I found that this observed tendency applies to young adults from all walks of life in Korea, whereas in Tokyo some young adults were visibly indifferent. In other words, in Seoul, it appears to be more difficult to be indifferent to the competition over college entrance than in Tokyo.

In Tokyo, the pathway to adulthood is diversified even before the high school entrance exam as in the case of Hayato, who has been working as a truck driver since he was 18 years old. For some outsider interviewees, competitions over education were simply irrelevant. On the other hand, in Seoul, the vast majority of interviewee experienced the college entrance exam. Some people secured their seat in prestigious universities, and the remainder did not. If they were accepted into a good college, it further raises their parents’ expectations on them.

After leaving school, the next step in their pathways to adulthood is to find a job. As shown in Chapter three, at this point, one strategy I observed was to seek security through the small number of well-protected jobs. This choice was often navigated under strong pressures from their parents. Many of them, however, suffered with intense and sometimes pointless jobs. Some, if not many insiders in this study, especially in Tokyo, ruined their health either physically or mentally in their first years of work. Curiously, although interviewees in Tokyo were generally less sensitive to inequality than young adults in Seoul, they also considered it to be unequal that they work as much as or more than older employees in the same company and receive much less salary, due to the nature of the seniority-based wage system.

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Some others were free of pressures from their parents or stopped keeping up with expectations at some point. Rather, they pursue “meaning,” which makes life worthwhile for them. They accept insecurity in exchange for doing what they love. Considering the extent to which insiders are stressed out from their work, we can understand why the pursuit of meaning appears to be an attractive alternative.

Outsiders were often left without many choices in the labor market. Hence, their only feasible responses are either to raise their voices outside of the labor market institutions or to move around from one job to another. Meanwhile, outsiders’ responses in the labor market tended to be oriented toward short-term goals. An interesting consequence of this difference in ways they anticipate their future is that many insiders are even more anxious than outsiders.

Instability and inequality transformed the private lives of young adults as well. Narratives presented in Chapter five suggest that marriage increasingly appeared as risks for young adults, but the meaning of these risks differed depending on their gender and class backgrounds. College-educated women were afraid that their career opportunities would be foreclosed if they marry. At the same time, they also feared spending their entire life alone if they choose a career over private life. Young men in Seoul were expected to buy a house as a prerequisite to marriage, yet it is a difficult thing to afford, even for those with secure employment. The gender difference becomes less conspicuous when it comes to many outsiders’ responses, which seemed to be consciously indifferent. Those who do not have secure jobs tended to avoid talking about marriage.

Their lived experiences of insecurity and inequality are manifested in how young adults see inequality of opportunities, outcomes in terms of education, occupation, and income, and the politics of redistribution in their own society, a topic I discussed in Chapter six. Young adults in
Seoul tended to articulate their views of inequality clearly, and they also see structural factors as the underlying source of inequality. Their counterparts in Tokyo, in contrast, tended to see that inequality results from the difference in the amount of effort individuals make, even when they recognize the inequality in society.

Studies about young people’s coming of age experiences have proliferated since the 2000s in the context of delayed transition to adulthood. Scholars have refined conceptual apparatuses to study adulthood (Settersten Jr. et al. 2005), and showed that the experiences of economic insecurity present different pictures under different circumstances of upbringing (Danziger and Rouse 2007; Kasinitz 2008; Settersten Jr. et al. 2005; Waters 2011). While the structural pressures leading to delayed adulthood such as weakening job prospects for young adults are common in most industrialized economies, East Asia is unique because of relatively rigid social norms pertaining to the male-bread winner model, the rapid pace of labor market flexibilization after the 1990s, and weak welfare states that resulted from the nature of economic development in the 1970s and 80s.

Narratives about their anxieties related to work and marriage introduced in this dissertation indeed echo that of young adults in different places in the US explored by earlier works (DeLuca et al. 2016; Silva 2013; Waters 2011). Meanwhile, there are some important differences. For example, in East Asia’s labor markets where initial employment has crucial importance in their career course, competitions to obtain a degree from a top university, which is necessary to enter the small world of top companies become considerably more intense than in the societies that earlier studies examined. In societies like the US where young adults are more likely to live separately from their parents and cohabitation is more common than in East Asia,
the sort of anxieties about housing that I found among the interviewees in Seoul might be much less prevalent.

By telling a story of how institutions and cultures of labor, education, and marriage shape how the process of transition to adulthood is structured in different settings, this dissertation showed both elements that are specific to the experiences of transition to adulthood in East Asia, and those in common with other contexts. In turn, it offers clues for researchers in the US to figure out what is unique and what is ordinary about becoming an adult in America in an age of insecurity. By doing so, this dissertation has contributions and implications for three different social science literatures.

CONTRIBUTIONS

Relational Approach to Economic Insecurity

Through the comparative relational analysis of the cases of Korea and Japan, this dissertation has examined how subtle differences in the organization of labor, education, and housing markets, along with the state’s social protection systems, produce different feelings of insecurity and inequality.

By now we have a good number of theories about risks (Bauman 2000; Beck 1992; Giddens 1991), precarity (Allison 2012; Bourdieu 2000a; Castel 2016; Lorey 2015), and neoliberal subjects (Brown 2015; Foucault 2008). These theories argue that risks, uncertainty, and government of anxiety based on free-market ideologies are prevalent across many dimensions of our lives. These theories tend to see risks and uncertainty as the defining features of our time.
Meanwhile, the analysis of large scale social surveys found that there is cross-national variation in subjective economic insecurity and such factors as the characteristics of the welfare state and labor market influence it (Mau et al. 2012; Western et al. 2012). Bruce Western and his colleagues argue that, “in sum, the welfare state, the firm, and the household are important institutions for risk regulation that help smooth the incomes and consumption of families” (Western et al. 2012:353). Survey-based research, however, is usually not an ideal method to identify mechanisms through which a particular phenomenon occurs, especially because it is difficult to take into account the temporality involved in the process.

Furthermore, recent exemplary interview-based studies have told the texture of anxiety and hardship among American in different U.S. cities (Blau 2001; Cooper 2014; Gerson 2009; Pugh 2015; Silva 2013). They nicely showed how inequality of various sorts based on race, class, and age and economic insecurity are woven together in contemporary America. However, as the research design based on the single case study only hints at cultural or institutional differences at the municipal level, we do not know how structural, institutional and cultural contexts affect the feelings of and responses to economic insecurity.

To this end, I primarily relied on Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of fields to account for different reactions to an apparently similar social change that I have observed in Seoul and Tokyo. A combination of differences in resources individuals possess and embody as a result of their life trajectories (capital and habitus in Bourdieu’s words), and social spaces in which competitions occur, which also define what counts as valuable resources in the first place (field as well as associated common sense understandings of it) produce divergence in the ways in which young people understand inequality and insecurity and react to it.

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In both cities, there is considerable discrepancy in the volume of capital that interviewees coming from middle or upper middle class families possess, compared to those who come from working-class or self-employed families. Middle and upper-middle class young adults tended to choose the strategies of security-seeking or meaning-seeking. In contrast, outsiders lacked enough educational credentials to seek either security or meaning, and thus learned to adjust in practical ways to insecurity. Many outsiders experienced disturbances in their family due to the economic crises in 1997 or 2008 while insiders and meaning-seekers are much less likely to have experienced such events.

This does not mean that the interviewees I call outsiders are completely powerless in the face of the rigid social structure. Indeed, many interviewees creatively tried to forge security. Yong-jung’s hard work to become a programmer paid off and now he works in an IT firm in Seoul. He is also studying as a sophomore student in an online university. Unfortunately, Yong-jung failed two courses in the last semester due to excessive over hours work imposed by his employer. Although he expects that it will take some more years until he earns a BA degree, he hopes to finish his study and migrate to another country. Embodied capital helps them navigate their responses to inequality and insecurity by enabling some strategies while imposing constraints on others.

Furthermore, as existing studies suggest (Cooper 2014; Pugh 2015; Silva 2013), individual dispositions shape what is even worth worrying about in the first place. Interestingly, insiders in this study tend to be more anxious about their future than meaning-seekers and outsiders even though they were the ones whose employment is much more secure than other young people. In Chapter three, I argued that it is because insiders tend to compare their level of security with that of people coming from similar backgrounds or that of their parents.
Furthermore, because they have invested considerable resources to attain their current level of security, the stakes are simply higher for them than for outsiders.

In Chapter five, I also argued that insecurity takes gender-specific forms. As Beverley Skeggs pointed out, Bourdieu sees family is a central space of naturalization and normalization, and a field in which “normalcy or the ability to constitute oneself as the universal is the capital” (Skeggs 2004:22). Indeed, many female interviewees in both cities are caught up between two different standards of normalcy, and anxious about the possibilities of career-family conflicts that might force them to give up either their career or family life. Male interviewees, in contrast, tend to be more optimistic about their prospect for marriage, but anxious because of the expectations that a husband has to provide housing, especially in Seoul. While not too many individuals in this study are married, my analysis confirmed the insights proposed by earlier studies in the US that among married couples, responsibilities to deal with insecurity fall heavily on the shoulder of women. Married male interviewees are much less likely to have concerns that are not related to their own career such as their children’s education. Thus, gender is another factor which affects the ways they experience insecurity and shapes the availability of possible responses to it.

Furthermore, the fields within which young adults participate in constant competitions for resources are organized differently in the two cities. Whether it is related to work, education or housing, the fields in which competition takes place in Seoul are shaped more vertically than those in Japan. In other words, these are the structures in which more symbolic and material power is attached to corporations, schools, and neighborhoods at the top of the hierarchy. In Seoul, the fields of education, work, and housing, are all less segmented than they are in Tokyo; hence young adults from different class backgrounds are competing under the same rules of the
game and they are absorbed by the game even if not wholeheartedly. Furthermore, in each of the three fields, symbolic capital is more unevenly distributed in Seoul than in Tokyo.

Jiyeoun Song characterized the post-deregulation Korean labor market as “liberalization for all, except for Chaebol workers” (Song 2014:Chapter 5). Only Chaebol corporations, which make up less than 0.2% of all firms in Korea are considered secure even though some of my interviewees who work for Chaebol corporations also worried about the possibility of dismissal. Chaebol corporations and their workers are thus endowed with an enormous level of symbolic power. This shapes the situation in which a desire to enter these corporations is shared widely among young adults, although essentially many of their desires mirror those of their parents. Japan is also a society in which people’s desire tends to concentrate on particular corporations, schools, or neighborhoods compared with more diverse societies like the US. However, the degree of concentration is much more severe in Korea as I discussed in the chapter about work.

To enter a Chaebol corporation requires educational credentials, which is a form of capital by itself, in which young adults in Seoul also confront the problem of concentrated desire. As discussed in Chapter three, due to the particular organization of the higher education field, the three top universities (Seoul National, Korea, and Yonsei) are associated with a level of symbolic capital that exceeds any Japanese university. The criteria for classifications are more diverse in the education market in Tokyo. In a field in which desire heavily concentrates on the top, even if Korean parents and their sons and daughters sacrifice a lot of time, money and emotional resources to enter these universities, the nature of the game is that most people fall short of attaining the goal. It is the source of anxiety and subjective inequality at the same time.

The same goes for marriage and the housing market. In the absence of proper state regulations, Gangnam’s unusual popularity and overheated investment activities changes the
whole dynamics of the housing market in Seoul. Although the ideology of home ownership is still widely embraced and rental housing does not appear as an attractive option for many due to the history of the housing system, affordable housing options are lacking. This is particularly the case in central Seoul, where everyone wants to live.

Thus, the institutions of education, work, and marriage in Seoul have tendencies that promote the perception that the competitions are intense. It is not a coincidence that young adults in Seoul talked about their experiences using the metaphor of competition, whereas their counterparts in Tokyo often lacked the sense that they were competing with someone else. As more people compete in the same struggle, more people fail in achieving their goal. When other people have the goods that one yearned for but came up short of earning, this comes to be the source of perceptions of relative deprivation and injustice. In Seoul’s fields of competitions that are less segmented and thus one logic tends to be dominant, there is less room for flexibility and diversity in terms of strategies to navigate uncertainty. Thus, the organization of fields along with embodied disposition constrain the option to choose alternatives to security-seeking, though in the end many young adults are doomed to fail in gaining security.

A closely related issue is the ideological context in which young adults come of age. Seoul’s young adults share a strong belief in egalitarianism, which, in spite of apparent contradiction, comes together with a strong orientation to seek high status (Koo 2007; Lett 1998). This is not to suggest that young adults in Tokyo do not have an egalitarian orientation; indeed some of them do. However, at least among my interviewees in Tokyo, there existed a clear tendency to accept inequality as something natural. Hence, there is a paradox that because of their strong belief in equality, young adults in Seoul are frustrated by inequality.
A relational approach to economic insecurity proposed in this dissertation complements the theories of risks, precarity, and neoliberal subjects that are not fully equipped to explain variations in perception of insecurity and inequality. While I am not the first one to use Bourdieu in the study of economic insecurity, the existing accounts did not utilize Bourdieu’s concepts in a relational manner because they tended to detach capital and habitus from fields. By applying Bourdieu’s concepts relationally, this dissertation demonstrated how differences in the organizations of fields of business, education, and housing can help account for the differences in ways young people feel, perceive, and respond to growing insecurity. The combination of these structural, institutional, and cultural contexts constitutes a conditional mechanism of subjective economic insecurity that might have the potential to explain cases other than Korea and Japan, although its applicability remains to be examined.

*Inter-Asia Comparative Methodology*

As the first systematic account of economic insecurity and inequality among young people in East Asia, this dissertation has methodological implication for the study of Asia. Although insecurity among young people is a topic that has been attracting the attention of scholars, journalists, and the public, much of the writing on this topic is based on cursory observations and easy labels such as the enlightenment generation (*Satori Sedai*) and the all-give-up generation (*Npo Sedae*). These writings have also tended to dramatize the misery of young adults. Moving away from descriptions that are dismissive of young adults’ agency, this dissertation has offered complex stories of young adults' coming of age experiences in East Asia’s two global cities.

There are seminal studies about young people that applied ethnographic methods to explore their experiences of work (e.g. Brinton 2010; Song 2009:Chapter 4), marriage (e.g. 272
Kendall 1996; White 2002), or consumer culture (White 1994). These studies were conducted in the pre-2008 financial crisis period many of them actually took place even before the financial crises in the 1990s. Hence, this dissertation updates the knowledge produced by earlier studies by describing how young people live in 21st century Japan and Korea.

Furthermore, joining the recent calls for relational modes of thinking within Asia as a method of decentralizing knowledge production (e.g. Chen 2010; Hoang, Cobb, and Lei 2017; Iwabuchi 2014), but also taking comparison as a logic of inquiry seriously, this dissertation demonstrated that the relational comparison of two or more Asian societies can complement and enrich our knowledge about Asian societies. In the studies of Japan and Korea, the dominant modes of knowledge production tend to rely on either implicit or explicit comparisons between Japanese and Anglo-American societies except for works of comparative politics and political economy that explore the same subject in two or more Asian countries, such as democratization and social movements (e.g. Lee 2011; Liu 2015).

In contrast, this dissertation showed that institutions and cultures that have been characterized as uniquely Japanese by earlier studies were also found in Korea. Based on Michael Burawoy (2003)’s theory of ethnographic revisits, I argue that discrepancies between my own and the classic accounts are attributed to differences in: 1) the researcher’s subjectivities, values, and locations in the field, 2) theories we brought to the field, 3) internal changes that occurred in the field, and 4) frames of reference.

Let me discuss two classic works in Japan studies to substantiate this point. Sociologist Mary Brinton, in her Lost in Transition (2010), convincingly showed the decline of the once exceptionally successful school to work transition mechanism in Japan. This system provided “non-educational elites” such as high school graduates relatively secure blue collar jobs and
security. Brinton convincingly showed how this system has become dysfunctional over the years, which led to the economic marginalization of young men. Furthermore, in a society where one’s identity is tightly linked to membership in the institution to which one belongs such as schools and firms, these young men also lost their space (Ba) in society. In this book, Mary Brinton’s frames of references are of two sorts. The first is the American society because it is ultimately the one she knows best as she stated in the preface (Brinton 2010:xvii). The school to work transition system and the importance of Ba is unique in comparison to the US. The second frame of reference is Japan in the past. The school to work transition system and Ba have been declining in comparison to Japan’s past.

A careful examination of young adults’ experiences in Korea, however, suggest that the job prospects for “non-educational elites” are still widely open in Japan compared with Korea. Furthermore, not having membership in a large corporation can be potentially more serious in Korea than in Japan because, in the end, Japan is a relatively more diverse society. That is why young adults from all walks of life in Korea studied 12 to 13 hours a day when they were high school students to enter the top three universities in the country, which is the prerequisite to getting a job at large corporations. My analysis extends the implications of Brinton’s argument and suggests that the importance of social location is not necessarily unique to Japanese society and can be said about other societies that share the system of mass recruiting of new college graduates such as Korea, although there are differences in its specific manifestations.

This dissertation shared the same context of the declining fertility rates and perceived disfunction of the Confucian family model described in *Perfectly Japanese* written by anthropologist Merry White (2002). In this book, White argued that, historically, the realities of family life have been more diverse and flexible than the officially endorsed images. Even in the
Meiji era, Japanese family life already showed marked deviation from the traditional ideal set by the state. White also details the continuing struggle with contradictory expectations placed on women. While the success of the middle-class family is often measured by their children’s educational attainment, to afford the educational expenses, women also have to combine domestic work and wage work.

My study confirmed that not much has changed about expectations regarding marriage since Merry White conducted her research in the 1990s. Meanwhile, the context of this dissertation is to some extent different. In 1990, when she started fieldwork for this book, the proportion of those who never marry (operationalized as those who have never married by the age of 50) were only 5.6% of all males and 4.3% of all females. In 2015, a few years earlier than this research’s fieldwork, 23.4% of all men and 14.1% of all women have never married (National Institute of Population and Social Security Research 2017). In 1990, when most adults still married someone, strong anxieties about whether one can marry or not, would not have been shared as widely as today.

When it comes to marriage and family making, East Asian societies are often considered to share the similar context of the highly gendered family structure and ideology of familism. Meanwhile, young adults in Seoul and Tokyo have both similar but subtly different anxieties and this dissertation pointed to social norms and housing markets as the source of such divergence.

By combining the method of comparison with interview research, this dissertation offers a perspective to capture the diversity among East Asian societies. This dissertation both updates and complements the knowledge about Japan and Korea produced by earlier studies. In this sense, my inquiry helps to shift the attention of analysis from simple similarities versus commonalities to relations and variations within things that are otherwise considered similar.
Global Imaginaries

Finally, by documenting young adults’ lives in East Asia’s two global cities, I was able to go beyond the simple dichotomy between the global and national. Existing studies of economic inequality and insecurity in East Asia focus on globalization as the cause of changes, but I contend that the ways these changes come about is mediated in complex ways by both preexisting ideological and discursive contexts and institutional differences that intertwine at global, national, and local levels.

One of the major interests in the study of globalization is whether globalization is a force of convergence or divergence (Guillen 2001:244–47). When it comes to globalization’s subjective impacts, most studies do not explore diversities in the impacts of globally influential ideologies such as neoliberalism in different settings. Regardless of its geographical, cultural, and institutional contexts, most studies on the subjective impacts of neoliberalism showed that it renders humans as rational, autonomous, self-responsible, and entrepreneurial subjects (Bayart 2007; Cho 2015; Lukács 2010; Muehlebach 2012; Van Oort 2015; Türken et al. 2015). Ulrich Beck (1992) and Giddens (1991) also did not specify the causal mechanism through which perceptions of risks differ from one context to another.

By looking at young people’s perceptions and feelings as the nexus of new configurations of global capital and national with local-level institutions and cultures, this dissertation illustrated how local and national institutions can mediate ways of being in the global world, or what Manfred Steger calls the social imaginary, which is the pre-reflexive framework for our daily routines that are so commonsensical that people rarely question them, which is thus comparable Bourdieu’s term doxa (Bourdieu 1990:64; Steger 2008:18).
In the case of the education, labor, and housing markets in Seoul and Tokyo, the difference owes largely to the nature of the state intervention in the market before neoliberalism arrived. The initial cause of macro changes described in this dissertation is the same in both contexts. It is labor market flexibilization bolstered by the global ideology of neoliberalism. This entered the labor markets in Korea and Japan mainly through two economic crises, a condition also shared by many other societies. However, the specific adaptation of neoliberalism was different in these two contexts because there was mediation by national politics and municipal-level social policies. For example, even when the labor market was deregulated, it did not change the configuration of power and its concentration on Chaebol corporations in Korea, which was shaped by state intervention during the developmental era. Meanwhile, labor market deregulation in Japan has been largely confined to expanding the unprotected parts of the economy, leaving a greater degree of the pre-existing protections intact for regular employees in large corporations. This in turn contributes to the lower sense of anxiety among Japanese young adults than their Korean counterparts.

Rather than singling out impacts on the national from the global, this dissertation offered a relational understanding of the impacts of global forces. While globalization frees power from the state, the national and local are still important domains that mediate the global. In other words, this study offers a concrete example of how globalization’s converging forces interact with state and local cultures and institutions to produce divergent outcomes at the level of social imaginary. As a rare ethnographic inquiry into the lives of people in multiple global cities, this dissertation also adds knowledge to what is peculiar and ordinary about living in global cities today and the hidden emotional costs shaped by the nature of these cities.
FINAL REFLECTIONS: THE COSTS OF INSECURITY

What is illuminated in this study are the very real stresses and feelings that young adults endure in East Asia’s global cities as they come of age. When individuals are left to forge dignity and security by themselves, it has real consequences not only for themselves but also for the society in the long run. Hundreds of researchers have confirmed that subjective economic insecurity, and job insecurity in particular, has negative consequences for the well-being of individuals. Psychological distress created by instability is a significant source of depression and other forms of mental problems (Abeyta et al. 2017; Burgard et al. 2009; Green 2015; László et al. 2010; Reichert and Tauchmann 2017; Wright 2016).

The conflict between reality and social expectations is said to be the cause of late and less marriage in East Asian societies (Raymo et al. 2015). It also is an indirect cause of the declining fertility rate. Furthermore, as many political theorists argue, short-term thinking and the trope of self-responsibility can undermine the foundations of democracy (Brown 2015) and open up possibilities for young adults’ discontent to be mobilized by populist politicians and groups (Standing 2011).

Meanwhile, the security and equality of the much romanticized nostalgic past have been overrated. Despite our inclination to go back to the golden age, such a regressive move cannot be an answer. As the experiences of insiders in this study tell us, the life in which they are tied to old-forms of employment in exchange for security is not what many young adults hope to have.

At this point, there is no clear indication that politics can reverse the growth of economic inequality and insecurity. The good news is that young adults are gradually but increasingly angry. Their frustrations have the potential to turn them into a truly political generation. Many young adults I met in Seoul and Tokyo hope to see more justice in the distribution of income,
wealth, and security although, for now, much of their frustration is not channeled to political action. Young people’s anxiety, if they find a proper outlet, can be a source of change.
APPENDIX: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Childhood, schools, and expectations

IQ (Introductory question):

What kind of work do you do now?
당신은 어떤 종류의 일을 하고 계시나요?
現在、どのような仕事をされていますか？

When you were a student, what kind of work did you want to do? What kind of company or work environment did you imagine being in?
씨가 학생이었을 때 당신은 어떤 종류의 일을 하고 싶었나요? 어떤 종류의 기업 혹은 어떤 종류의 근로환경에 있기를 상상했나요?
あなたが学生だったとき、どんな仕事をしたかったのですか？あなたはどのような会社や職場環境にいると思いましたか？

FQ (Follow up question):

Where did you grow up?
어디에서 자랐나요?
どこで育ちましたか？

What is your educational background? What is the last school you attended?
마지막으로 다닌 학교는 어디인가요?
学歴について伺っても良いですか？最後に卒業された学校はなんですか？

Probes for:
Name of the school
학교 이름
学校の名前
Major
전공
専攻
What kind of high school attended? (Public, private, or special?)
공립, 사립, 혹은 특목고?
高校の種類
What did your parents want you to do?
부모님은 ______씨가 무엇을 하기를 원했나요?
ご両親は、あなたがどういった仕事をするべきだと考えていたか？

What are your parents’ occupation?
부모님의 직업은 무엇인가요?
ご両親の職業は何ですか？

Do you consider your parents were better off than your friends’ parents? Why do you think so?
_______씨는 ______씨 부모님이 다른 친구들의 부모님보다 더 부자라고 생각했나요?
그랬다면 왜 그렇게 생각했나요?
ご両親は、あなたの友人の両親よりも裕福だったと思いますか？どうしてそう思いますか？

Did the economic crisis (IMF/ economic bubble) leave any impacts on your family?
_______씨 가족이 경제 위기의 영향을 받았다고 생각하나요?
経済危機が家族に何らかの影響を残したと思いますか？

What are your parents’ educational background?
부모님이 마지막으로 다니는 학교는 무엇인가요?
ご両親の学歴について伺ってもよいですか？

Do you know your grandparents’ occupation?
조부모(할아버지, 할머니)의 직업은 무엇인가요?
祖父母の職業をご存じですか？

Transitions in life

IQ: Looking back, what was the most stressful time of your life?
되돌아 보았을 때, 인생에서 가장 스트레스가 많은 시간은 언제였나요?
振り返ってみると、あなたの人生の中で最もストレスに満ちた時はいつでしたか？

FQ:
Was it getting into high school, college, employment, or something else?
고등학교, 대학교, 취업 또는 다른 그 밖에?
高校、大学、就職活動、もしくは別の時期ですか？
Probes for:
Whether or not they think their life transitions impacted their life
그들의 생애 이행이 그들의 삶에 영향을 준다고 생각하는지, 혹은 아니지
そうした転換が人生に影響を与えていると考えているかどうか
Reasons why these transitions were significant or not
이러한 이행이 중요한, 혹은 중요하지 않은 이유
そうした転換が重要である, もしくはない理由
How long did they studied a day when they were a high school student
그들이 고등학생이었을 때 그들은 하루에 얼마나 오래 공부했는지
高校生の時に一日何時間勉強していただか
How did you pursue either what your parents wanted or what you wanted?
부모님이 원하시는 것, 혹은 당신이 원하는 것을 어떻게 추구했나요?
あなたの両親が望んでいたもの、またはあなたが望むもののどちらを追求しましたか?
Where did you live at the time of these transitions?
_____씨는 그러한 시기에 어디에서 살았나요?
それらの時期に、どこに住んでいましたか?

Employment

IQ: You work for company X. Could you tell me how you gained employment at company X?
_____씨는 X 회사에서 일합니다. 당신이 X 회사에 어떻게 들어가게 되었는지 말씀해줄 수 있나요?
あなたは X 社に勤めています。あなたはどのようにして X 社に職を得られましたか?

FQ:
How do you like working at company X?
당신은 X 회사에서 일하는 것이 마음에 드시나요?
あなたは X 社で働くのが好きですか?

Tell me about a typical work week.
한 주 동안 직장생활은 어떤지 말씀해주시실 수 있나요?
典型的な一週間の勤務時間について教えてください

What time do you go to work, and how late do you work?
몇 시에 일하러 가시나요? 몇 시에 사무실에서 나오시나요?
何時に仕事に行き、何時まで仕事をしますか？
Do you get any days off?
휴일이 있나요?
休みはどれますか？

Do you have to stay beyond regular work hours?
정규 근무 시간을 넘어서 일해야 하나요?
残業をしなくてはなりませんか？

Do you socialize with your co-workers outside of work?
_____씨는 작업 밖에서 동료들과 사교활동을 하나요?
仕事場の同僚と仲良くしていますか？

Is the work itself satisfying?
일하는 것 자체는 만족스럽나요?
仕事自体は満足ですか？

How do you feel about being known as someone who works at X company?
X 사에서 일하는 사람으로 알려진 것에 대해 어떻게 생각하시나요?
X 社で働いていると言うことを、知人に知られることについてどう思いますか？

Could you tell me whether you have considered quitting?
그만둘 생각을 한 적 있는지 말해줄 수 있나요?
現在の職場からの退職を考えたことがありますか？

What do you like the most and the least about your current work or your work situation?
당신의 현재 근로 혹은 근로 조건에 가장 만족하는 것은 무엇이고、 가장 불만족하는 것은 무엇인가요?
現在の仕事で、一番気に入っていることと、一番気にならないことは何ですか？

Did you have a job before company X? If so, how does your experience compare to that of your current job?
X 회사 이전에 다른 일자리를 가졌던 적이 있나요? 그렇다면 그 일자리 경험을 당신의 현재 일자리 경험과 어떻게 비교할 수 있나요?
今の会社以前に何かの仕事をしていましたか？もしそうでしたら、あなたの現在の仕事と比べてどうでしたか？

Overall, to what extent you are satisfied with your job now? [1 is least satisfied and 10 is most satisfied] 전반적으로 지금 직장에서 어느 정도 만족하시나요? (1 에서 10 까지 점수 매긴다면, 몇 점?)

全体的に、あなたは今あなたの仕事にどれだけ満足していますか？（1 がまったく満足していない、10 が完全に満足している）

**Housing**

IQ: Could you tell me about your current living arrangements?
현재 동거 형태에 대해 말해줄 수 있나요?
あなたの現在の住居について教えてください。

FQ:
Do you live by yourself?
_____ 씨 혼자 살고 있나요?
一人で住んでいますか？

If not, who do you live with?
그렇지 않다면, 누구와 함께 살고 있나요?
そうでなければ、あなたは誰と一緒に住んでいますか？

Probes for: relationship
Parents
Partners (married/ unmarried)
Others (please explain)

Where do you live?
어느 동네에 사시나요?
どこに住んでいますか？

Do you or someone you live with own the place you currently live in? If not, are you currently living in a lease? Or is it a monthly rent?
당신 혹은 당신이 함께 살고 있는 사람이 현재 당신이 살고 있는 공간을 소유하고 있나요? 그렇지 않다면, 당신이 현재 살고 있는 집은 전세인가요, 아니면 월세인가요?
あなた、もしくは同居されている方が、現在の住居を所有していますか？それとも賃貸住宅ですか？

How long have you been living in the current place?
현재 거주지에 얼마나 오래 살고 있는 것인가요?
現在の住居にどのくらいの期間住んでいますか？

Do you have any concern regarding your current living environment?
현재 생활 환경과 관련하여 걱정이 있나요?
現在の生活環境に懸念はありますか？

Class

IQ: Do you think your life is similar to that of your friends? Why do you think so?
당신은 당신의 고등학교나 대학 때의 친구들의 삶과 당신의 삶이 비슷하다고 생각하나요?
그렇게 생각하는 이유는 무엇인가요?
あなたの人生は、高校や大学の友達の人生と似ている、もしくは違うと思いますか？なぜそう思いますか？

Probes for: Difference between workplace, high school and college friends

FQ:
Do you think you are better or worse off than your friends?
당신은 당신의 친구들보다 더 좋은 상황에 있다고 생각하나요, 아니면 더 나쁜 상황에 처해있다고 생각하나요?
あなたの経済状況は、高校や大学の友達よりもいいと思いますか？

Probes for: Friends at high school, college, and/or workplace

Do you think you are better or worse off than people in your generation in general?
_______씨는 당신이 같은 세대の 사람 들보다 더 좋은 상황에 있다고 생각하나요, 아니면 더 나쁜 상황에 처해있다고 생각하나요?
あなたの経済状況は、同じ世代の平均と比べていいと思いますか？
Why do you think that?
왜 그렇게 생각하나요?
なぜそう思いますか?

Can you rely on the financial support from your parents, or do you have to support them?
당신은 부모님의 재정적 지원에 의존 할 수 있으나요, 아니면 부모님을 지원해드려야 하나요?
もし健康などに問題があり、働けない場合、ご両親から経済的支援を受けられると思いますか？もしくは、現在、もしくは将来的に、ご両親を経済的に支援しなければいけませんか？

Senses of insecurity

IQ: Is there anything that worries you in your life?
당신은 당신의 삶에서 걱정거리를 가지고 있으나요?
人生の中で心配なことはありますか？

FQ:
What worries you about [x]?
______씨는 무엇에 대해 걱정하고 있으나요?
何について心配していますか？

What are the measures you have taken to deal with it?
그러한 걱정거리를 다루기 위해 취한 방법은 무엇인가요?
それに対処するために何かしていますか？

Probes for: the kind of coping measures (education, job, investment, religion, hobbies, deviant behaviors, etc...) (학업, 직장, 투자, 종교, 취미, 일탈행위 등)

Did these measures work to reduce your anxiety?
그런 방법들은 당신의 걱정을 줄이는 데 효과가 있나요?
それらは、あなたの不安を軽減するために役に立ちましたか？

Future

IQ: How do you think your life will be in 10 years from now?
앞으로 10 년 후에는 당신의 삶이 어떻게 될 것이라고 생각하시나요?
10年後に、あなたの人生はどのように変化していると思いますか？

FQ:
Better or worse off than your current economic situation?
현재의 경제 상황 보다 좋을 것 같나요, 아니면 나쁠 것 같나요?
いまよりも経済的に豊かに、もしくは貧しくなっていると思いますか？

Why do you think so?
왜 그렇게 생각하나요?
なぜそう思いますか？

Probes for: anxiety related to work, housing, and children’s education (if any) (일, 주거, 자녀교육과 관련된 걱정 등)

Do you think do you have to support your parents in the near future?
당신은 가까운 미래에 당신의 부모님을 지원해드려야만 한다고 생각하나요?
近い将来両親のことをサポートしないといけないと考えますか?

Politics

IQ: What is the biggest problem of your country?
당신 나라의 가장 큰 문제는 무엇인가요?
この国の最大の問題は何ですか？

FQ:
If something could be changed in this country in the future what would you like the most to be changed?
미래에 이 나라에서 어떤 것이 바뀔 수 있다면, 당신은 무엇이 바뀌면 가장 좋을 것으로 생각해?
もし、この国の何かを変えられるとしたら、何を変えたいですか？

Have you always felt that way?
당신은 항상 그런 식으로 느꼈나요?
いつもそのように感じていましたか？

Could you tell me who is on your side in this country and who is against you?
이 나라에서 누가 당신과 같은 편에 있고, 누가 당신과 반대편에 있는지 말해 줄 수 있습니까?

Do you have any opinion about the older generation?

Could you tell me the candidate and party you supported in the last two presidential elections and legislative elections?

Do your parents share similar political views with you?

Have you ever joined or considered joining a union?

If belong: probe for name of union and whether it is part of company employment

Have you participated in any demonstrations or larger scale meetings?

Probes for
Kind of protest activities

When
 언제 참여했나요?
時期
Level of involvement (time spent)
 얼마나 자주, 얼마나 오랜 시간을 참여했나요?
関わり合いの程度、時間

Why have you participated or not participated in those activities?
왜 그 활동에 참여했거나 참여하지 않았나요?
なぜ、これらの活動に参加、もしくは参加しませんでしたか？

Can you place yourself on the left-right scale (1 being the most liberal and 10 being the most conservative)
왼쪽 - 오른쪽 눈금에 자신을 배치 할 수 있나요? (1=진보, 10=보수)
1가もっと도革新、10가もっと도保守だとすると、あなたはどこに位置していますか？

Do you think this society (Korea/ Japan) is unjust? Why do you think so?
한국사회가 불공평하다고 생각하시나요? 왜 그렇게 생각하시나요?
日本社会は不公平だと思いますか？なぜそう思いますか？

Last remark
Overall, how much do you satisfy with your life?
전반적으로, 당신은 당신의 삶에 얼마나 만족하나요?
これまでのところ、自分の人生にどれくらい満足していますか？

Is there anything I didn’t ask you that you want to tell me?
당신이 하고 싶은 말이 있는데, 제가 당신에게 묻지 않은 것이 있나요?
わたしが質問していないことで、話したいことはありますか？

Do you have any question for me regarding this research?
당신은 이 연구에 관해 저에게 하고싶은 질문이 있나요?
この研究に関して、なにか質問はありますか？

Demographics (information not included in the above questions)

Date and place of birth
당신은 언제, 어디에서 태어났나요?
生年と場所
Year of entry in college
 언제 대학에 입학 했나요?
大学入学年

Year of entry in the first job
 언제 당신은 첫 직장을 얻었나요?
最初に仕事を始めた年

Military experience (what year?)
 당신은 군대에 가본 적이 있나요? (있다면, 몇 년도에 입대했나요?)
軍隊経験（ある場合のみ）

Marriage (if any)
 당신은 결혼했나요?
婚姻経験

Siblings, (if any: occupation, education)
 당신은 형제 자매가 있나요? (있다면, 그들의 직업과 그들이 졸업한 학교가 무엇인지 말해주세요)
兄弟・姉妹の有無

Religion
 당신의 종교는 무엇인가요?
信仰の有無
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