

## Fuel for South Korea's “Global Dreams Factory”: The Desires of Parents Whose Children Dream of Becoming K-pop Stars\*

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This paper is an ethnographic account of the desires and struggles of some parents in South Korea who invest — financially and emotionally — in their children's dream of becoming K-pop stars in the

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\* This paper forms a part of a larger research project on the increasing influence of popular culture on intimacy which began in Japan in 2002, and later in South Korea in 2009. It has benefitted invaluabley from many individuals' advice, especially that given by Hyun Mee Kim and David H. Slater. I thank Yeon Ji Hong for being an excellent research assistant and companion. I am grateful to the Korea Foundation for a postdoctoral fellowship to make my fieldwork in South Korea possible, and also to the Center for Korean Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, for giving me the opportunity to present part of this paper at the Hallyu Workshop in February 2012. Most of all, I thank the anonymous reviewers and editors of this journal for their critical comments and suggestions.

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hope of securing a better future for their young, and repositioning themselves more favorably in an extremely restrictive and competitive environment. It is based on personal interviews with 15 mothers and 8 fathers, and participation-observation of young South Koreans' activities in a private academy where they receive "professional training." This study contends that these parents are strategically benchmarking and re-benchmarking their place within a rapidly changing society by following shifting trends of pursuits that have emerged as new measures of success and status, so that they would not be "left behind" by a rapidly globalizing society.

**Key Words:** Family, Gender, Social Mobility, K-pop, The Korean Wave, Popular Culture

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## I. Introduction

Jang Mi Sun<sup>1</sup> re-appeared on the stage to deliver the closing speech after all the 60 students from Z Academy had finished performing their songs and dances at the three-hour graduation concert. Tears welled up in her eyes as the director spoke,

Our children have shown us tonight just how talented they are. I have no doubt they will one day become global K-pop stars, like Girls' Generation, Super Junior and TVXQ. The journey ahead will not be easy, but they will always have our love and support, because we know they will make us proud, as parents, as a nation...

Many parents in the audience were already in tears by the time Jang finished her speech that Friday evening in January 2012 at a community hall in Seoul. It was no ordinary event, but an occasion of celebration and hope for the 60 middle to high school students who each aspire to become a "star" in South Korea's popular music indus-

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1. The name of this person and all others mentioned in this paper are pseudonyms used to protect their identities.

try (K-pop), and an extraordinary moment of joy and pride for their parents. Park Hye Jin's parents were particularly proud to see their only daughter perform like a professional singer that evening, though they were more pleased by the 15-year-old's remarkable transformation from an arrogant and insolent child into a graceful and respectful adolescent. They have become optimistic again about living a luxurious apartment in the prestigious Gangnam district in Seoul, a dream they were forced to postpone in order to meet the exorbitant costs of Hye Jin's training fees. Lim Yoo Seok's parents too have high hopes for their 18-year-old son, who now has a sense of purpose and is no longer irascible, rebellious nor ashamed of his parents' modest restaurant business. Yoo Seok is today humble and caring towards his parents after attending Z Academy, and has even assured them he would make them proud one day when he becomes a K-pop star who is also a *hyododal* ("filial idol"), like many successful K-pop idols who are frequently portrayed in the media as showering their parents with a wide array of expensive gifts such as a round-the-world holiday, an apartment, a sports car, a café, a restaurant and even a farm. As for Kwon Jae Wook's parents, their desire is less about enhancing the family's economic position and social mobility, but more about maintaining its social status and image. They are relieved to know that Jae Wook, who is less academically inclined than his two elder sisters — a pharmacist and a museum curator — has finally abandoned his previous dream of becoming an animator, and is decidedly focused instead on pursuing a career in the popular music industry that is widely recognized in South Korea today as a respectable profession and a symbol of the nation's pride.

These South Koreans are among a growing number of parents across the country who are sending children as young as six years of age to be trained as become professional singers, in the hope of gratifying their own desires of attaining greater social mobility, economic gains or mere respectability. Their demand has led to a proliferation of private schools or academies across South Korea to offer courses on K-pop training that also incorporates *inseong gyoyuk* (personality training) to inculcate in students "desirable" attitudes and behaviors

— such as humility, loyalty and gratitude — that are highly regarded by entertainment agencies, and would hence enhance students' chances of passing an audition to secure a training contract to be groomed as a professional K-pop star. Indeed, much has changed in South Korea since a decade ago, when many parents would frown upon and oppose their children's wish to pursue a singer career, which was regarded as an occupation of "low status" in Korean society. How did South Koreans' attitude towards K-pop transform so radically when popular music was banned by the government for "threatening national security" and being "too depressing and immoral" only two decades ago (Russell, 2009: 143)? Korean television dramas may have become immensely popular across Asia and many parts of the world from the early 2000s, but a similar interest in K-pop did not occur until the late 2000s, when major entertainment agencies began mobilizing the local media's support and invoking nationalistic sentiment in their expansion strategies. This soon led to a "bureaucratic turf war" in 2011, when various government agencies rushed into promoting K-pop globally, and gave the K-pop industry the official endorsement it needed to gain the recognition and respectability it has in South Korea today.

Many parents, however, are aware that the cost of supporting their child's dream of becoming a "global K-pop star" is considerably high while the chances of success extremely slim. Even if a child were to gain "global" fame, it would not necessarily bring fortune since the star training and management system adopted by South Korea's entertainment agencies is structured in such a way that it protects the interest of companies more than that of the singers they manage. Moreover, the state lends its support only to promoting singers and idol groups that have already established themselves, as a means of boosting the country's exports of goods and services. The government neither offers subsidies to training courses for aspiring South Koreans, nor does it monitor the working conditions of trainees and successful idols. The stakes are thus rather high, and many low-income families are undertaking a considerable amount of risk by apportioning a large percentage of the household budget to supporting their children's

dream pursuit and satisfying their own desire for economic wealth and social status. Yet, this does not deter many parents from doing so. In an increasingly competitive environment where opportunities for success are limited and narrowly defined in terms of educational accomplishments, K-pop offers a new, alternative means of mobility and wealth for families with children who are academically disinterested or challenged. Many parents I spoke to say it would cost them a similar amount whether they send their young to private academies to prepare them well to secure a place in a reputable university in the future or for professional training to become a successful K-pop singer. While the probability of success for both pursuits is equally low, they argue — or imagine, really — that the potential gain they could derive from the latter would be far outweigh that from the former, simply because many of these K-pop star hopefuls are not interested in studying and would probably never make it to university, never secure a job in one of South Korea's large and reputable conglomerates such as Samsung, LG and Hyundai, and hence slip anonymously into an ordinary job in the job market. No one would ever know just how much time, money and effort they have invested in their children's education, and neither could they ever gain their self-esteem as parents for having tried hard to secure a good future for their children. If their young were to succeed as a K-pop star, however, there would be fame, fortune and perhaps also public recognition of the sacrifices they have made. That hundreds of thousands of parents in South Korea are placing their bets on their children's success in the popular music industry surely means that the prospects are indeed bright. Even if their own children could never become global stars, the personality training they receive would turn them into filial children and respectable citizens, and hence make them proud as parents.

This paper is an ethnographic study of the desires and struggles of 11 families in South Korea who invest — financially and emotionally — in their children's dream of becoming K-pop stars in the hope of securing a better future for their young, and repositioning themselves more favorably in an extremely restrictive and competitive environment. From the interviews I conducted with 15 mothers and 8 fathers

of young South Koreans aged 14 to 21 years who are attending a private academy to be trained as a K-pop singer, I gather that these parents are constantly benchmarking and re-benchmarking their place within a rapidly changing society by following shifting trends of pursuits that have emerged as new measures of success and status. While economic wealth and material rewards constitute the common goals of these parents, their narratives reveal a stronger desire for a greater self-esteem as “good parents,” especially among mothers whose sense of self-worth is more closely tied to their children’s educational and career success, while fathers view their children’s accomplishments as reflecting their economic abilities and public image. These parents are strategically devoting their resources to grooming their children as K-pop stars only because a professional singing career is today endorsed by the state and widely regarded by the broader Korean society as a respectable, and hence “safe,” pursuit. However, their sense of “safety” is a precarious one, because the global expansion of South Korea’s popular music industry is ultimately a commercially engineered and ideologically driven project — as several industry participants and government officials have indicated — that mobilizes discourses on cultural supremacy and nationalism, as well as the local media’s representations of its “global success.” Many parents exude a high degree of insecurity about the potential benefits they could derive from investing in their children’s future success, since the sacrifices they are making are considerably high, and the probability of success infinitely low. The more insecure they are, the more some parents feel compelled to over-extend themselves financially to provide their children with the “necessary education” (*pilyo han gyoyuk*) needed to attain the success and security they desire. Ironically, this further exacerbates their sense of insecurity and anxiety, hence generating more fear and frustrations over their ability to be socially recognized as “good parents.” Many, however, seek to alleviate their stress and concerns by seeking immaterial “signs” such as an improvement in their children’s behavior from the *inseong gyoyuk* provided by private academies to justify their action, while some turn to re-defining the “social status” they seek based on the efforts and

sacrifices they have made to support their children's dream. This study is thus about the stories these South Korean parents — to borrow Clifford Geertz's (1973: 225) words — "tell themselves about themselves," particularly about their ways of justifying their endeavors and of giving meaning to their pursuits of attaining a better life.

The struggles of families in South Korea have also been well documented, especially their ways of coping with the growing sense of insecurity generated by widening discrepancies in income and social status, after the country accepted a bailout of US\$ 55 billion from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and implemented a series of neoliberal economic policies to restructure the economy (Hart, 1993; Yi, 1998; Lett, 2002; Abelmann, 2003; Kim, 2007; 2011). Many scholars have also examined how South Korean parents are actively and intimately involved in securing their children's academic success, which is still viewed as a measure of family status, they have focused mostly on mothers' preoccupation with their children's educational pursuits including after-school studying of English and non-academic subjects (Kendall, 2002; Abelmann, 2003; Cho, 2004; Park, 2004). South Korean parents' support of their children's dreams of K-pop stardom as an alternative form of education for gaining success and social status is a recent phenomenon that has yet to receive much scholarly attention.

By studying how some parents in South Korea are diversifying their strategies for mobility and economic betterment by turning to popular culture, this paper offers new insights into understanding how some families manage their aspirations and anxieties at a socio-historical juncture when success is increasingly being based on the consumption of commercialized education, while the purpose in life, social status and sense of self-worth measured on the competitive values of the market. Following Park So Jin and Nancy Abelmann (2004), I interpret these parents' aspirations for their child to become a "global K-pop star" as "cosmopolitan strivings," that is, they are desires for participation in a "globalized world." To my informants, K-pop has both a practical and symbolic value, but its meaning and significance lie ultimately in the local context, as many parents accu-

mulate a range of “global symbols” to aggrandize their position and status within Korean society because they want others to see that they have not been “left behind” by processes of globalization, but have actually navigated adeptly through the rapids of social transformations and secured a deserving place within South Korea’s globalizing economy and society.

Rita Felski (1995: 19) once commented that modernization is a gendered process in which men rather than women are able to access the emerging opportunities relating to work, consumption and leisure. However, the South Korean parents’ utilization of popular culture as a source of mobility indicates that modernization is also a “classed” process that has either caused some categories of a population to be “left behind,” lagging or struggling to maintain their social standing. However, this paper is about social struggles and not a study of “class.” Class debates have been extensively focused on the stratification of individuals and social groups based on differences in occupation, property ownership and marital alliances (Giddens, 1973), while the notion of class in South Korea is more about shifting perceptions of difference based on processes of consumption and the accumulation of wealth that are constantly being constructed and reconstructed (Kim, 2011). It is thus, to borrow Nancy Abelmann’s (2003: 285) words, “hard to pin down.” This study is more appropriately about some families’ struggles for upward mobility and their fear of what Emma Jackson (2012) terms as being “fixed in mobility” at the lower rungs of society.

## II. Constructing K-pop’s “Global Success”

Many of my informants’ children attended *hagwons* when they were very young, but mostly to learn English and other academic subjects to help them perform better in school. While several parents sent their children to *hagwons* for lessons on singing and dancing, these were part of the extra-curricula activities comprising also lessons on taekwondo, art, swimming and baseball. It was not until

the late-2000s when a few parents either actively searched for a *hagwon* such as Z Academy that offers “professional training programs” for their children, or were urged by their children for permission to attend one. Even then, most of them were initially neither enthusiastic nor optimistic about their children pursuing a professional career in singing, but had acquiesced only because it was also a form of education that could be useful to their children’s future. Their perceptions were gradually changed by a proliferation of media reports and broadcast programs on K-pop concerts by singers and idol groups such as *BoA*, *Big Bang*, *Girls’ Generation*, *Rain*, *Super Junior*, *TVXQ* and *Wonder Girls* in China, Japan, many parts of Asia and the United States. By mid-2011, not only were all my informants — except three fathers and one mother — convinced they had not made the wrong decision about their children’s choice of career, but they had also joined in the nationwide euphoria over K-pop’s “global success.”

There is indeed a widespread interest in a large number of South Korean singers and idol groups, though the extent of their “global popularity” has been strategically orchestrated by several entertainment agencies, especially SM Entertainment, the largest company formed in 1995 by former singer Lee Soo Man and the first entertainment agency in South Korea to operate the current integrated system of recruiting and training “talents,” producing music labels and managing a portfolio of artists. Two other major players are YG Entertainment, which was established in 1996 by Yang Hyun Seok, a member of a formerly popular singing and dance group *Seo Taiji & Boys*, and JYP Entertainment, which was formed in 1997 by Park Jin Young, also a singer and dancer who is still an active performer today.

The integrated system of recruiting, training and managing “talents” was explained to me by the staff members of several music companies as one that accepts trainees (*yeonseupsaeng*) from as young as 12 years of age — through auditions held at various locations across the country, and recently also through live auditions broadcast by several television stations — who are housed together in corporate-owned accommodations where their daily dawn-to-dusk schedules are tightly filled with lessons on singing, dancing, mock commercials,

personal grooming,<sup>2</sup> body weight (and shape) management, foreign language lessons<sup>3</sup> and at times even cosmetic surgery. Trainees are to sign a legal contract that binds them to the agency for 10 to 15 years, during which time the agency would provide them with a monthly allowance and cover all the training costs necessary to prepare them for a debut. The agency also controls how trainees are grouped and groomed, and subjects all trainees to a comprehensive *inseong gyoyuk* that teaches trainees to inculcate and practice values such as humility, obedience, loyalty and gratitude. The focus of *inseong gyoyuk* is on family values, the purpose of which was explained to me by several corporate trainers as threefold: to assure parents that their young are being educated properly to develop “proper values,” to teach trainees to display behaviors that are highly regarded as by the wider Korean society and, more importantly, to subordinate trainees to the authority of their respective agencies as dependents are expected to do so to authoritative figures in the family.

Since it could take as long as five years to prepare a trainee for a successful debut, after which the agency still continues to bear all the costs of promoting and grooming the artist, successful artists typically receive a monthly remuneration that is higher than their allowance as trainees, though the amount is said to vary widely, depending on the degree of their popularity and the level of revenues they generate. Meanwhile, the agency exercises the right to decide on and manage the artist’s schedules, and retain the revenues generated by an artist’s performances, public appearances, product endorsements and community work. This system has been criticized for being unfair to artists (Jang, 2011: 168; Lee, 2011: 211), but executives of entertainment agencies justify these on the grounds that companies incur a considerable amount of investments and risk in grooming artists, many of

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- 2. The employees of two entertainment agencies explain this as involving physical exercise and requiring trainees to improve their complexion, maintain a certain body weight and have various parts of their body measured and shaped to what are perceived as “desirable” by “experts.”
  - 3. Trainees typically learn Japanese or Chinese to prepare them for tapping the profitable markets in Japan and China.

whom may never make it to a debut while some who do may not be popular long enough for an agency to recoup all the investments it has made.

Granted, running a music company is no easy task, especially in today's environment where sales of compact discs are declining due to the ease of cheap or free music downloads. This could seriously threaten to stall the companies' plan to become "global players" in the popular music industry, which became apparent in April 2011 when SM Entertainment, JYP Entertainment and YG Entertainment formed a collaborative agency known as United Asset Management together with three other South Korean music companies (*The Korea Times*, April 8, 2011). To actualize their global ambitions, South Korea's music companies set out to significantly increase the number of new idol groups at a faster pace, which means they need to raise a considerable amount of funds to organize more auditions, hire a larger number of instructors and groom a bigger pool of trainees. A new strategy corporate branding thus began, by utilizing the family metaphor and rhetoric of nationalism to portray themselves not only as "caring and compassionate" towards their artists, but also as "patriots" whose ambitions serve their own personal interest as well as that of the nation.

This new strategy was quickly set in motion in 2011, as several major music companies launched "world tours" for the most popular among the artists under their management, partly to promote the company's brand name, but more significantly to create a semblance of "global success." SM Entertainment, for example, led the trend in June 2011 when it packaged its five most popular idol groups — *f(x)*, *Girls' Generation*, *Shinee*, *Super Junior* and *TVXQ* — and have them perform together under the label collective *SM Town* at concerts in various locations, including Paris, New York and Tokyo. JYP Entertainment adopted a similar approach in July, and packaged all its artists — including *2AM*, *2PM*, *Wonder Girls* and the founder Park himself, though without *Rain* — together on concert tours across the globe under the umbrella name *JYP Nation*.

These events, especially the concerts in Paris, instantly stirred a

huge media sensation in South Korea, and soon turned into a national euphoria over K-pop's "global success" that persists even today. Despite performing only two concerts to a total crowd of 14,000 people, the entourage in Paris was heralded by the local print media as "South Korea's magnificent warriors" who had "conquered Europe" (*Dong-A Ilbo*, June 13, 2011), and caused a "whirlwind that had swallowed Europe" (*Hankyoreh Shinmun*, June 12, 2011). The broadcast media repeatedly reported in news programs for days on end, and K-pop quickly became the main topic of countless talk shows and documentaries. Since then, more than 15 new television programs<sup>4</sup> have appeared on terrestrial and satellite channels, either as mock or real auditions aimed at "discovering future global stars." The most popular is the weekly *K-pop Star* launched by SBS on 4 December 2011, which is still being aired today as a series of real auditions for the country's three major agencies to recruit the "best talents." This program not only raises the degree of transparency of the companies by having Park of JYP Entertainment, Yang of YG Entertainment and BoA of SM Entertainment appear on the series as judges, but it also casts them as caring, sympathetic and compassionate towards young contestants, who proudly compliment those who qualify for subsequent rounds, and who readily shed tears for those whom they have disqualified.

K-pop soon became one of the most, if not the most, talked about topics among South Koreans young and old, and of varying occupations. Regardless of whether they are people with a professional career, manual laborers, housewives, cleaners or students, the several hundred South Koreans I spoke to were not only able to name a long list of K-pop singers, but they also spoke highly of the three companies and their founders. There has also been an increase in investor interest in the companies' shares listed on the KOSDAQ stock exchange<sup>5</sup>

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4. Among these programs are *Voice Korea* launched by the satellite channel Mnet on 10 February 2012, and *Global Super Idol* by the government-owned KBS on 23 March 2012.

5. SM Entertainment's shares (which are traded on KOSDAQ under the stock code 041510), rose from 16,116 Korean won (US\$ 14.3) on 1 June 2011, to 46,850

which have more than tripled between mid-2011 and mid-2012, giving them the improved credence needed to raise further capital for expansion and their prospects of becoming global players in the popular music industry.

More importantly, the media sensation has drawn the South Korean government's attention. Once focused mostly on globalizing Korean television dramas and skeptical about K-pop's ability to be a key driver of the country's exports, the state did an about-turn after the media sensation over SM Town's concerts in Paris and readily rushed into supporting K-pop as though it was the most important engine driving South Korea's exports. One South Korean diplomat based in North America describes K-pop as the country's "greatest gift to the world," and reveals the government's intention to uncover and promote the "enormous talents and hidden gems" in the country. Another government official in South Korea says the state must do all it can to seize this opportunity to regain the country's national pride, which has been bruised by 35 years of colonization by Japan (1910-1945), the ideological division of the country into a communist North and republic in the South following three years of civil war (1950-3), and the "national humiliation" inflicted on South Korea for having to accept the IMF bailout in 1997. He cites this as the main reason why the government tripled the amount spent on sponsoring K-pop activities outside South Korea to 500 million won (approximately US\$ 442,087)<sup>6</sup> in 2011 from 2010, and has earmarked a significantly bigger budget in the coming years to "globalize K-pop."

A "bureaucratic turf war" soon broke out, as a tripling in the country's cultural exports from US\$ 268 million in 2005 to US\$ 794

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won (US\$ 41.4) on 4 April 2012. They trade at an all-time high of 53,515 won (US\$ 47.3) on 22 November 2011. The share price movement was provided by Bloomberg, which can be found at the URL: (<http://www.bloomberg.com/quote/041510:KS>). The share prices of JYP Entertainment and YG Entertainment have also tripled from their initial public offerings on the KOSDAQ.

6. The exchange rate used throughout this paper is US\$ one to 1,131 Korean won, as reported by Bloomberg on 27 April 2012. All mentions of "dollar" in the paper refers to "US\$."

million in 2011 led many government divisions to compete with the cultural divisions — namely the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism (MCST), the Ministry of Culture and Information (KOCIS), Korea Creative Content Agency (KOCCA) and the Korea Foundation for International Cultural Exchange (KOFICE) — for a slice of the national budget and a say in influencing policies on promoting K-pop (*The Korea Herald*, February 6, 2012). Today, the nation's project of globalizing K-pop is also participated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade; the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology; the Ministry for Food, Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries; the Ministry of Education; the Presidential Committee on Nation Branding; and several smaller government agencies (*The Korea Times*, March 12, 2012).

The lack of a coherent national policy on how K-pop is to be promoted by the various government agencies, whose programs often overlap and even contradict with one another, led commentators to criticize the state for wasting precious public funds which should have been spent on much needed areas such as social welfare, education and health programs, and also for exacerbating the unequal labor conditions that already exist in an industry notorious for imposing slave contracts on young artists (BBC, June 14, 2011; *Hankyoreh Shinmun*, June 18, 2011). However, it is difficult for dissenting voices to be audible in the current state of euphoria, especially when a growing number of young South Koreans and their parents are also participating in the rush to expand this "global dreams factory." Many of my informants interpret the "bureaucratic turf war" as signifying the growing importance of K-pop, which makes them want to be a part of the current state of elation and optimism in South Korea, and benefit from their nation's dream of enhancing its global image through furthering K-pop's success. Many parents explain that there has not been such a nationwide jubilation and excitement about having a new possibility for attaining fortune, global recognition and even national pride as K-pop has generated since the IMF bailout. The opportunity must therefore not be missed, especially in an environment where educational and career accomplishments are becoming increasingly competitive and difficult to attain.

### **III. Bearing the Cost of the Nation's "Global Dreams Factory"**

The euphoria certainly bodes well for entertainment agencies, as they now have the nation's support and the legitimization to build what a marketing manager calls the "global dreams factory," which they are doing at breakneck speed. Auditions are being held across South Korea as often as once a week, while overseas ones — termed as "global auditions" — are being held across Southeast Asia, Europe and the Americas. Given the current enthusiasm and excitement, these agencies are also demanding new trainees to be "almost ready" for a debut: that they are fairly skilled or "talented" in singing, and also adequately trained in *inseong gyoyuk* prior to attending an audition. This in turn led to a surge in the demand for private academies to provide "professional training programs" for "global K-pop stars of the future." More than 1,100 new *hagwons* have registered with the Ministry of Education in the past four years offering "professional training" in singing and dancing, creating a total commercial market that generates annual revenues of US\$ 9.7 million (*Money Today*, March 2, 2011). Program fees vary widely, ranging from US\$ 530 to US\$ 1,760 (500,000 to 2 million Korean won) for three-months. Z Academy charges US\$ 1,700 per semester for its core program that runs for three semesters. Besides offering lessons on singing, dancing, music composition, stage management, recording techniques, audition preparations and image management, Z Academy promises to provide the same kind of "love and care to each individual student as those of a mother's."

More importantly, it also offers *inseong gyoyuk*, which is taught through all the courses it offers. The academy's director Jang describes this as aimed at inculcating the same values that entertainment agencies demand in their trainees: politeness, respect, humility, gratitude, filial piety, kindness, compassion, selflessness and self-sacrifice. Many parents speak favorably of the positive impact of *inseong gyoyuk* on their children, but it has a large price tag. A quick calculation shows that it costs at least US\$ 12,000 for a student to

complete the 12-month core program with 100 hours of additional individual lessons. Since no student has ever completed the program without repeating a semester or more, and most students take two to three years to “graduate,” it could therefore cost more than US\$ 20,000 for a family to send a child to Z Academy for professional training. This excludes the money needed for personal grooming, clothing, special diet, attendance at a regular middle or high school, and private tuition for passing regular school examinations.

Families in South Korea are not unaccustomed to spending a large proportion of the household budget on their children’s education. In 2011, approximately 72 percent of all elementary, middle and high school students attended private academies, costing their families a total of US\$ 17.8 billion, of which 20 percent was spent on developing “artistic skills” (Statistics Korea, 2012). Given that the average monthly household income in South Korea that year was US\$ 3,271 (KOSIS, 2011), the cost of developing a child’s non-academic education accounted for 16 percent of a household’s total income. However, it costs the families I interviewed for this paper between a quarter and more than a third of their monthly household income to support a child’s professional training at Z Academy. In reality, many families have more than one child and devote as much as two-thirds of the monthly household income to their children’s education. Supporting a child’s K-pop dream is clearly not feasible for lower income families. Yet, these families — as well as those with a higher monthly household income than the national average — have taken up loans to meet the cost of their children’s education, academic and otherwise. It is not uncommon for families to borrow heavily — thrice the total household income or more — to invest in their children’s education in the hope of securing a better future for their young, and also for the family to maintain or attain a middle-class lifestyle and status (Kim, 2011).

Nearly two-thirds of the families I interviewed have incurred debts for similar reasons. Some have tightened the household budget considerably, and even reduced their current living standards, all because they believe that supporting their children’s K-pop dreams is worth the sacrifices and compromises they are making. This invari-

ably leads many parents to raise their expectations of their children and exert greater pressure on their young to succeed, but their persistent support also fuel their children's dreams and ambitions, giving hope to the latter that they could indeed achieve "happiness," lead "a better life" and gain the respect of others when they have succeeded. In fact, many parents base their hopes on material gains, namely money. They interpret economic gains as the most important symbol of success, happiness and status. Yet, the material gains they desire also point to a significant immaterial gain they need, and that is to affirm through the future success of their young their sense of self-worth as, and recognition by the wider Korean society that they are, "good parents."

#### **IV. Discourses on Parents' Dreams of Having a Filial Superstar Child**

What it means to be a "good parent" varies rather widely among my informants, and depends mainly on the gender of the parent, as well as that of the child. As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, Park Hye Jin's parents are comforted to see a remarkable improvement in their only child's character after attending Z Academy, which assures them Hye Jin is likely to succeed as a professional singer and would help them realize their own unfulfilled dreams of pursuing a professional career in music: Mr. Park had wanted to be a professional opera singer while Mrs. Park a concert pianist. They had in the past sent Hye Jin to various other academies to be trained as a professional pianist and also as an opera singer after realizing their daughter has "musical talents" but poor abilities in academic studies. However, Hye Jin could never persist long enough in any of her past pursuits. This frustrated her parents immensely, as they did not wish their only child to grow up to be a mediocre individual or worse, a failure. However, Mr. Park was hesitant about sending Hye Jin to Z Academy to be trained as a K-pop singer even though this time it was his daughter who had decided for herself what she wanted to do. He had

feared this would be yet another fleeting pursuit, but acquiesced after his wife persuaded him that Hye Jin seemed “very serious” this time about becoming a K-pop singer. When Hye Jin gradually changed into a “different person” after attending Z Academy for less than two years, her parents became convinced that she had finally found a purpose in life and decided to support her latest pursuit.

However, Mr. Park does not earn enough from his job as a junior manager in a small trading company to save enough for the down-payment required to purchase a dream home for the family in Seoul’s prestigious Gangnam district, even though he is the family’s sole breadwinner. When he decided to postpone this plan in order to give his daughter all the necessary training she needs to become a professional singer, the family had to move to a smaller and cheaper rented apartment in Gyeonggi province from their previous place of residence in a Seoul suburb, so that Hye Jin could attend Z Academy and a private high school that specializes in the performing arts, as well as undergo various plastic surgeries she needs in the near future. Mr. Park describes the sacrifices they are making as “temporary,” as he is optimistic Hye Jin would become successful and able to afford a bigger and more luxurious apartment for her parents than the one they were planning to purchase. As he says to me,

I have only one daughter. Of course I feel good as a father to be able to support her dream. Now that she has become a good girl, she has also made me proud. Actually, even if she does not become a K-pop superstar, I am happy just knowing that I have done everything I can to help my daughter pursue her dream. I hope she would not forget the promise she has made to us to buy us our dream home in Gangnam when she becomes rich and famous (*laughs*)...

While Mrs. Park also shares her husband’s views, her desires and expectations, and the satisfaction she derives from Hye Jin’s improved behavior, are rather different. As a full-time housewife, Mrs. Park sees it as her main responsibility to attend to all her daughter’s non-financial needs, though she also contributes economically today after having taken up a part-time job to help pay for a

diversity of plastic surgeries that she is planning for her daughter. While both Hye Jin's parents were concerned about her poor academic performance in the past, and at times embarrassed to tell others about it, Mrs. Park saw it as reflecting poorly on her own abilities as a mother. Despite being the first to rise in the morning and the last to go to sleep after midnight everyday, toiling all day and night at household chores, looking after her mother-in-law and attending to her daughter's schoolwork, Mrs. Park simply could not get Hye Jin to be interested in her studies in the past, let alone perform well in school. Despite also spending all of Hye Jin's after school hours with her and teaching her to develop good habits and behavior, Mrs. Park also made little progress on improving her daughter's character. Her husband and mother-in-law have all doted on the only child but Mrs. Park was blamed the most for Hye Jin's poor academic records and bad behavior because she is the "mother." She had also blamed herself for not being a "good mother" and had felt frustrated and even depressed. Unlike her husband, who could derive satisfaction from his job and feel proud of his ability to provide economically for his family, Mrs. Park says she derives pride mainly from her daughter's behavior and accomplishments, and evaluates her self-worth based on her role as "mother."

Mrs. Park is relieved to note radical improvements in Hye Jin's attitudes and mannerism, and performance in both the high school of the performing arts and at Z Academy. While she attributes these changes to Z Academy's training program, Mrs. Park also takes credit for Hye Jin's progress. She had discovered her daughter's "talents" and convinced her husband that Hye Jin has vocal cords that are as powerful as Whitney Houston's. She was also the one who had persuaded her husband to send Hye Jin to Z Academy and an unconventional high school. More importantly, Mrs. Park has devoted herself to managing Hye Jin's diet and skincare, which consequently turned her daughter into a "beauty," and gained her praises from friends, relatives and even her husband. Getting herself involved in her future career, health matters and beauty management has given Mrs. Park a renewed sense of purpose in life. She would not have been this

exhausting had Hye Jin been male. But since hers is a daughter and not a son, Mrs. Park feels she is under greater pressure to ensure that Hye Jin is regarded as attractive, and hence an eligible for marriage. Mrs. Park desires for her daughter to succeed as a K-pop star as much as for the latter to marry well. With her talents and beauty, Hye Jin's prospects of marrying a good-looking and successful man look bright, Mrs. Park says. When I last met Mrs. Park in May 2012, she had prepared a list of surgeries that could enhance her daughter's appearance, including "corrections" to the teenager's eyebrows, eyelids, lips, jaw, breasts, hips and legs. She laughed at herself for being excited and overly concerned about her daughter's looks, but quickly explained that the surgeries were essential. Mrs. Park has more than her self-worth and self-confidence today. She is also proud to be able to share with her friends about Hye Jin's progress and future prospects. As she explains to me,

I used to tell my husband that our daughter is not good in her studies because she is musically and not academically inclined, but he just blamed me for pampering her and for not checking on her progress properly. I became so embarrassed that I stopped meeting my friends and the mothers of Hye Jin's schoolmates... because all I could tell them was how bad my daughter's grades were. I was even depressed for some time, wondering what I had done wrong and thinking hard about how I could remedy the situation. I am glad things are different now. I don't feel embarrassed anymore but proud. I hope Hye Jin would make me even prouder when she becomes a superstar and marries someone rich and famous... she would make my life really meaningful.

Yoon Ye Rim's mother also expresses similar concerns and desires as Mrs. Park, though she is less optimistic about her daughter's ability to become a successful K-pop star. The 14-year-old Ye Rim has an older brother who is attending university. Though her parents are struggling to pay for the two children's education with the little they earn from running a laundry and dry-cleaning shop in a suburban area in Seoul, they are willing to over-extend themselves financially by borrowing money from relatives in order to help both their chil-

dren secure a better future. Mr. Yoon is less concerned about Ye Rim's future career than his wife, as he believes she ought to get married before 30 years of age and to quit whatever job she might be doing then to become a wife and mother. Mrs. Yoon, however, could not bear the thought of having her daughter lead the same kind of life that she has led, that is, marrying at a young age and toiling day and night at her expected duties as wife and mother. She would like her daughter to marry well, preferably to a wealthy man or someone who is lawyer, doctor or any respectable, successful career. To do this, Ye Rim must be sufficiently "eligible." She could be such if she was a highly educated person, but since Ye Rim has not done well in school, putting money into her academic studies would be rather futile. Her parents were opposed to the idea when Ye Rim announced to her parents in 2009 that she wanted to be a professional singer, like BoA or a member of *Girls' Generation*. They eventually acquiesced, after being assuaged by the multitude of news reports and television programs that K-pop is a respectable and worthy pursuit for young men and women.

While neither Mr. Yoon nor his wife actually believes Ye Rim could be a "superstar" as their daughter would like to be, the couple nonetheless believes K-pop is offering a new opportunity for their child and family to gain more social respect. Mrs. Yoon repeatedly comments to me on her husband's defeatist attitude and expresses annoyance at his frequent mention that he would be contented just to see Ye Rim marry a good man. Mr. Yoon, on the one hand, feels justified in having low expectations of his daughter. Her parents had in the past spent a lot of money by sending Ye Rim to various private academies to learn non-academic skills, including fashion design, painting and even Chinese language, but none of these had yielded any fruitful result because Ye Rim simply dislikes reading and studying. Mrs. Yoon later urged her husband to let Ye Rim attend Z Academy for one semester, since it was what their daughter had wanted and not a pursuit they had chosen for her. Mr. Yoon had agreed only after Ye Rim's brother had been granted a place in a university. It had been his primary goal in life as a father to see his

only and oldest male child obtain a university degree, establish a good career and make the family proud. Seeing that goal was nearly achieved, Mr. Yoon readily let his wife decide on their daughter's education and future career path. Ye Rim later surprised her parents with her diligence and determination by completing her first semester at Z Academy with flying colors, and convinced them to pay for the entire three-semester core program. Though the adolescent had to repeat the final semester and taken two years to graduate from the program, her parents are today much more hopeful they were before that Ye Rim would make one day be accepted by an entertainment agency to be groomed as a "star." Mr. Yoon told me he has recently begun to imagine himself as father of his daughter who would become a "superstar," and is looking forward eagerly to be a proud father of a "real superstar." As he says to me: "You cannot imagine what it feels like for a poor dry-cleaner to have a daughter who is a successful idol!" Mrs. Yoon is equally excited, though she is contented enough to know her daughter has not disappointed her so far,

Poor families should hope for their children to rise above the conditions they are in and achieve what their parents could not. I will not have my children lead the same difficult lives as ours. What kind of a mother would people think I am if I did not try to help them succeed? Now that my son has become a university student and has a bright future ahead of him, I would also like my daughter to have a similar chance to lead a better life. So what if being a K-pop singer is not as respectable as being a doctor or a professor? It is much better than being the wife of a small launderette. My daughter may never be a rich and famous singer, but it is enough for us to know that we could have that dream...

The desires and motivations of these parents are about the struggles of some South Korean families to climb up the social ladder, and the "calculations" they make to ensure class reproduction and mobility (Kendall, 1996: 229; Abelmann, 2003: 100). For Hye Jin's parents, it is about the desire of a low, middle-class family to rise above their current conditions, while the hopes of Ye Rim's parents are to transform their working class status. Mr. Park's father was an elementary school

teacher who had earned little and his mother a full-time housewife who devoted her entire life to attending the needs of her husband's and two sons'. Mrs. Park is the third of five children born to a grocer and his wife, both of whom had no more than a high school education. The ability to secure a better future for Hye Jin is thus also a means of improving their own standard of living in their old age. As for Ye Rim's parents, Mr. Yoon is the second of six children born to a vegetable farmer and his wife in Jeolla province, while Mrs. Yoon's parents had moved from Gangwon province to Seoul where they distributed food products to feed a family of five. To both the Parks and the Yoons, the environment in South Korea today has become an extremely competitive one, where the possibility of having "the good life" is determined mainly by educational accomplishments. Even then, they explain to me that South Koreans view "success" and social status as based on the ability to attend the top tertiary institutions in the country, and not the mere acquisition of a university degree. Furthermore, a man's career success is again narrowly evaluated, that is, it is based on his ability to work for a large, prestigious employer — the South Korean government or a private corporation such as Samsung, LG and Hyundai — while a woman's in her ability to marry such a successful man and produce similarly successful sons. Both the Parks and the Yoons may be devoting all their resources to help secure a better future for their daughter, but they are also investing in their own dreams of procuring a higher standing in Korean society.

At the same time, the above cases also indicate that parents' desires are differentiated by gender, those of parents and the desires they have for their children. For both families, the mother is more involved emotionally in choosing and guiding a child's educational and career pursuits than the father, whose concerns are mainly economic. Mr. Park's hope is to prove through his daughter's future success — whether in attaining fame and fortune based on a career in singing, or by marrying a wealthy husband — that he has not been a "failure" as an economic provider despite being an ordinary white-collar worker. Similarly, Mr. Yoon also wishes to see himself as financially capable of supporting his daughter's K-pop dream, which he now interprets as

one that is making him feel proud to be a dry-cleaner. However, the desires and self-perceptions of Mrs. Park and Mrs. Yoon's are rather different. While both women also hope to be the proud mothers of a "superstar," their desires are much more personal. Neither woman is the main economic provider of the family, even though Mrs. Yoon helps out at the family's launderette and dry-cleaning shop. Their main duty is in childrearing, which constitutes the main — if not the only — source of these women's self-fulfillment, and the basis of their self-identity and self-worth. It is also through their children's success that these women could gain social recognition of their having been a "good mother." However, the woman's burden is particularly heavy if the child is male, because she then has the added responsibility of maintaining and enhancing the family's status and public image. The concerns of Kwon Jae Wook's mother clearly demonstrate this.

Mrs. Kwon was for many years worried that her only son and the youngest of three children would embarrass the family for being meek, unmotivated and "useless" for wishing to become a comic artist. Her two daughters are each attending a reputable university in South Korea to be trained as a medical doctor and a psychologist, but Jae Wook is neither academically inclined nor ambitious as his sisters. He used to spend all his free time reading and copying pictures from comic books, which distressed his father immensely. A self-made businessman, Mr. Kwon had worked hard at establishing his own transportation company and expanding it over the years to afford the family a sizeable apartment in Seocho, a prestigious district in Seoul. Mr. Kwon had wanted Jae Wook to be doctor, lawyer, diplomat, employee of a large conglomerate like Samsung, or perhaps to take over his business. As the only son, Jae Wook is expected to enhance and not ruin his family's status and image. Mr. Kwon could not imagine how Jae Wook could ever earn enough for himself as a comic artist, let alone support a family. What is worse, he thought Jae Wook's marriage prospects would also look bleak, as few respectable families would be willing to have their daughter marry to a man who does not have a respectable job.

Like Mrs. Park, Mrs. Kwon had been at the receiving end of her

husband's complaints and frustrations. She was also embarrassed to mention Jae Wook's intention to the various circles of friends she has, with whom she would meet regularly to exchange stories and compare with one another about their children's academic performance and career accomplishments, a common practice among many mothers in South Korea known as "children of a mother's friends" (*omchina*).<sup>7</sup> Mrs. Kwon told me she had even lied to her friends that her son had wanted to be an architect, art critic, or auctioneer at a prestigious organization such as Sotheby's or Christie's. Unlike Mrs. Park and Mrs. Yoon, Mrs. Kwon was initially opposed to Jae Wook's latest interest in singing, a pursuit which she regarded as intended for those who are uneducated, undisciplined and poor. The recent improvement to the image of the popular music industry gradually changed her perception. K-pop has gained global recognition while South Korea's animation industry is barely developed, she explains.

Unlike many mothers, Mrs. Kwon has ample time on her hands to closely monitor her son's progress in school and at three private academies including Z Academy, as well as to chaperone him everywhere he goes. What comforts her the most is that her once introverted son has gradually become a lively, sociable and energetic 17-year-old. The "old Jae Wook," she says, used to hide in his room after school and immerse himself in comic books and computer games. The "new Jae Wook" would watch television with his family; incessantly discuss with his mother and sisters a diversity of topics including fashion, skin care, cosmetic products and plastic surgery, and even arrange for the women to accompany him to a beauty parlor and spa. What pleases Mrs. Kwon the most is her son's readiness to greet her friends politely and charm them with his jokes, shedding their perceptions of him as a nerd and restoring her public image. Mrs. Kwon explains to me rather excitedly,

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7. This phrase is commonly used in South Korea to describe many mothers' preoccupation with comparing their children's achievements with their friends as a measure of their own abilities as a "good mother." Two other variations are also frequently used. One is a "mother's friend's son" (*omchinadeul*) and the other a "mother's friend's daughter" (*omchinddal*).

I don't know what they did to him at Z Academy, but I am so relieved I can now hold my head high when I meet my friends and relatives. You may think I am being shallow, but it is very important for parents in South Korea to be openly proud of their children, especially of their sons. It is particularly important for a mother because everything her children do reflects who she is. Her self-respect and social status are dependent on how good her children grow up to be. If her children are disappointing, then she is not a good mother, and she also embarrasses her husband and his family.

Mrs. Kwon's narratives of echo those of Mrs. Park and Mrs. Kwon's, and also point directly to the socio-construction of gender in South Korea which still imposes a sexual division of labor and expects women to perform their proper roles in society as wives and mothers, while a man's expected role is that of breadwinner and economic provider (Cho, 2002). This thus accounts for why women take their children's educational achievements, career accomplishments, marital success and characters seriously into account, since these are used to evaluate their worth as "good mothers" (Park and Abelmann, 2004; Kim, 2005). This explains why private academies adopt a marketing strategy that appeals to "motherly love" and not to "fatherly love" to attract students. This thus also explains why mothers consider their children's material well-being as a reflecting the extent of their "motherly love" and of the sacrifices they have made. To some mothers, it is women's low status in Korean society relative to that of men's that leads them to seek visible or tangible "proofs" of their children's success that they could use to show others. At the same time, some fathers too seek

Some other parents also hope to obtain tangible "proofs" of their children's future success, some explain these as indications of their having been "good parents" for bringing up filial children. Lim Yoo Seok's parents are as pleased as the Parks and Kwons with their child's improved character after attending Z Academy for several years, but the Lims read this as assuring them the 22-year-old would be a grateful son who would express his filial piety in tangible ways. The Lims run a humble restaurant in a suburban area where the family

of four also lives. Since Yoo Seok's eldest brother has already secured a good job as manager in a large company where he earns a substantial amount of salary that has significantly improved the family's economic position, there is less pressure on Yoo Seok to do the same. Still, his parents hope that his future success as a professional singer would enable Yoo Seok to make them openly proud by buying them a luxurious apartment, for example, or an expensive car, and perhaps also paying for a round-the-world trip that the couple has been dreaming about for years. Yoo Seok has since very young aspired to be a ballad singer like his idols Lee Seung Chul, Shin Seung Hun or Song Si Kyung,<sup>8</sup> but it took him a long time to persuade his parents that he could make a career out of singing. Unlike his older brother, who is cheerful, likeable and academically inclined, Yoo Seok was fickle, moody and rebellious until recently. His parents were worried his K-pop dream was just another of the many impossible dreams he used to have. He had entertained the thought of becoming a Formula One driver, a wildlife photographer, a film director and a pilot, but resented his parents for being too poor to support his dreams. He later became embarrassed by his parents' occupation that Yoo Seok stopped helping out at the restaurant after he entered high school. After several failed attempts to gain entry to a university, the Lims persuaded their younger son to perform his mandatory military service hoping that military training would make Yoo Seok more practical and mature, which it did. Yoo Seok became determined to pursue his old passion in singing.

The Lims would not have approved of Yoo Seok's K-pop dream had his older brother not started working and lightened their financial burden. What eventually convinced them to support Yoo Seok's dream were the "evidences" of K-pop's popularity across the globe on television and in the print media. What impressed them the most was the plethora of television programs and news reports on how the

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8. While the three singers are rather popular in South Korea, only Shin has gained a strong fan following in Japan, where he is known for singing theme songs from popular Korean television dramas such as IRIS. Sung has recently begun to perform in Japan, while Lee has never done so.

training process has produced K-pop stars who are also *hyododal* (filial idols). Like many parents I spoke to, the Lims could name a list of K-pop idols who have been nicknamed *hyododal* by the local media. One, in particular, is Yesung, the lead vocalist in the 13-member boy band Super Junior and whose real name is Kim Jong Woon, for having paid for an apartment, a café and expensive holidays for his parents. The Lims also recalled watching many television programs in which young K-pop idols talked about what they have done for their parents after becoming popular. One program that moved them was a weekly talk show aired by MBC on 4 January 2011 entitled *Noreowa* or “Come and Play,” where Yesung and members of other K-pop idol groups<sup>9</sup> were made to compete for the title “the most filial idol” by describing all the “filial” acts they are publicly known to have performed for their parents.

It sufficed for Yoo Seok’s parents to note from the many television programs that regretted their decision. After attending Z Academy for over a year, their son has already shown some assuring signs. He is more focused, mild-mannered and considerate, and even helps out at the restaurant whenever he has some free time. Mr. Lim is particularly relieved by these transformations, though he expects more. As he explains,

If success has not turned some popular idols into selfish or ungrateful people, I can hope that my son could also be filial. As a father, it is enough for me to know that my son has changed for the better and is doing something useful in his life. But my wife and I would also like him to show us some gratitude for what we have done for him. It would make us think we have not been bad parents. We have worked hard to pay for his dream and worried ourselves sick about his future...

Mr. Lim’s narratives further confirm that South Korean parents invest heavily — both financially and emotionally — in their chil-

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9. Apart from Yesung from Super Junior, among the other K-pop idols who spoke about their “filial” acts were Mir from the all-male group *MBLAQ* who bought his parents four cows for their farm, and Hyo Yeon from *Girls Generation* who purchased an apartment for her parents.

dren's education and career pursuits, and they do so not only to secure a better future for their young, but also with strong expectations of gaining intangibly and tangibly from their children's future success. For the Parks, Hye Jung's K-pop dream is also their personal dreams of becoming a professional musician and of having a home in Seoul's upmarket Gangnam district, which would enhance the family's social status. The Kwons, on the one hand, see in their son's dream their own desire to maintain the family's public image and status. Yet, like the Lims, all these parents also seek to derive from their children's success tangible "proofs" to assure them they have been good parents.

Several other parents have also expressed their desire for tangible "proofs" of their children's filial piety. They explain this desire as stemming from the financial demands on them to secure their children's future in an extremely competitive and restrictive environment. Many point to the fast pace of economic development in recent decades as having widened the discrepancies in income and social status in South Korea that those who have succeeded desire for others to know their hard work has paid off, and that they are no longer "worthless" or "insignificant" beings (*bojalgeotobneun saram*).

## V. Conclusion

The above stories are about the dreams of some South Korean parents to gain public affirmation of their worth as "good parents" that are closely interwoven with the South Korean popular music industry's dream of building a "global dreams factory" that would give them global recognition, and the nation's dream of attaining global validation of its cultural identity and of restoring its national pride. While these dreams ultimately serve the interests of music companies who are becoming South Korea's new *chaebols* (conglomerates) and those of policymakers and bureaucrats more than those of parents', many parents are also active agents who willingly participate in the process in the hope of gaining greater social recognition

and a stronger sense of self-worth in contemporary Korean society, and not passive victims of commercial and ideological manipulations. They have willingly participated in the nation's "global dreams factory" project to give legitimization to their own personal desires to reposition themselves favorably in an increasingly competitive and globalizing capitalistic economy so that they would not be "left behind."

At the same time, this paper also demonstrates that the "cosmopolitan strivings" of some families are still deeply entrenched in the conservative and patriarchal structures of Korean society, where a clearly defined gendered division of labor still exists in such a way that men are expected to be the main economic providers, while women caretakers of the household and the welfare of family members. As such, the struggles of South Korean parents are gendered and their desires demarcated further along the prevailing expected gender roles of fathers and mothers. Furthermore, these families' struggles are also political, since opportunities for upward mobility and wealth accumulation are not only determined and dominated by large corporations, but also entrenched in the rhetoric of national development by the state which demands the sacrifice and subordination of individuals and families for the wider society and the nation.

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