

Short-term Research Travel outside North America

Daughters of the Han River:

Educational Expansion, Women, and Status in Transforming South Korea

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A. Specific Aims

Scholars and government officials have observed the changing dynamics of family formation in post-industrial societies that have expanded education for women. These include changes in women's fertility, age at first marriage, and labor force participation (Goldin 1995). But the intensive study of the *outcomes* of educational expansion for women has left an obvious gap: who drove that expansion? In particular, did women themselves help drive the expansion of education—particularly of higher education—in their societies? If so, how? The project I propose positions women's lived experiences and voices at the center of understanding how they create pathways not only for their own children's achievement but also for the educational expansion of their society.

Among many societies that experienced educational expansion, South Korea (hereafter, Korea) stands out. First, for the younger cohort, Korea has the highest educational attainment level in the world for both men and women. Second, no other country has ever experienced so rapid an increase in women's entrance into and completion of university education. From 1980 to 2014, the percentage of women aged 25 to 35 who completed some form of college education grew from 8 to 80. Yet we still know little about the context in which mothers who had almost no opportunity for higher education decided to educate their daughters.

The aim of this project, then, is not to deny or downplay the influence of top-down policies that promote higher educational attainment and of an increase in the supply of higher education, but rather to explore the demand side of such an extraordinary expansion. This would be part of a recent and broader scholarly effort to understand the lives of women throughout history in order to understand, in turn, how a family's socio- economic status is made, remade, and sustained.

Lastly, the main purpose of this research trip to Korea is to conduct a follow-up trip to collect information about mothers of my respondents whom I interviewed in 2015. This particular research trip is crucial to completion of my bigger project – which I aim to finish before November 2020 – because the book focuses on both mothers and adult daughters who went through critical social changes in contemporary Korea.

For the short research travel project, I have four long-term aims—two empirical and two theoretical:

- 1) To understand how the older generation of mothers arrived at their desires and needs to send their daughters to college when their own generation had had almost no opportunity for college education.
- 2) To investigate whether—and, if so, how—the process of educating their own daughters transformed or reinforced these mothers’ original views on gender roles and women’s achievement. Also, to explain how self-definition of female success might differ from how mothers define their daughters’ success.
- 3) To critically re-theorize the concept of status by positioning and conducting the research from the point of view of women.
- 4) To develop theories and implications on the origins of a style of mothering in post-educational-expansion societies that is heavily focused on getting one’s children into college.

B. Significance and Innovation

With the aims proposed above, this research will provide preliminary findings on how families—but especially women—contribute to an important social change. Furthermore, by collecting the voices of women on status and educational mobility—the study of which has always depended heavily on male samples—this project will enrich the literature both empirically and theoretically.

Empirical innovation. We know that, in Korea, educational expansion has lowered the fertility rate and increased the age of first marriage, the divorce rate, and the non-marriage rate for both sexes. Yet we know little of the role that women themselves played in initiating, pushing, and/or continuing the expansion of opportunities for higher education for women. Previous work (Oh 2018 and Park 2019) has demonstrated that the educational and employment pathways of adult daughters have been largely influenced by their mothers. However, the voices of the mothers themselves have been missing. The proposed research fills this gap to develop implications about the multigenerational trajectory of women’s status. No longer relying on a concept of status that is often measured and operationalized with heavily father/son-centric data, I expect to find women taking an active role in lifting and/or sustaining the status of their families. The way that contemporary Korean mothers engage in mothering now should help us understand how important it is to change the way women view their roles as a mother.

Theoretical innovation. The proposed research will illuminate how mothers conduct “status work”—that is, trying to create more opportunities for their children to achieve higher income and occupational prestige. Mainly, the collection of projects initiated by this study will eventually contribute to theoretically correcting the male-centric nature of how status is conceptualized and measured. Empirically, it will open up the discussion of the origin of motherhood as we observe it

in the global era; in particular, how and why sending children to high-ranking universities moved to the center of contemporary mothering in many post-industrial societies. Although parents may plan jointly for their children's college education, the execution of such plans falls almost entirely on the mothers. Furthermore, within a particular generation of women, I expect to find reasonings behind the diverging patterns in how one defines a woman's achievement and legitimate goals in life. In the end, this project identifies mothers as key players in the educational expansion of women since they both benefit from it and— in a later era—carry it out themselves in the raising of their daughters.

C. Data Collection

In order to understand how individuals make sense of their world and explain reasons for their decisions, this project uses qualitative methods. Specifically, in-depth interviews. The author will be fully responsible to have an approval from IRB before the data collection.

This project will collect in-depth interviews of mothers who have adult-daughters who are born in the 80s. Utilizing already compiled data of 100 adult daughters who are born in the 80s in two large cities in South Korea (prior project that is at the closing stage), I will interview mothers of those 100 adult daughters. Based on the prior data collection of the younger generation, 80 mothers (the upper generation) are alive, thus the targeted number of interviews is 80 mothers of the interviewees that I have conducted in 2015.

D. Expected Products

Immediate outcomes of the project include conference presentations and journal articles. Specifically, products will be presented at the AAS and ASA (American Sociological Associations). I anticipate sending manuscripts to two main journals – American Journal of Sociology (using both daughters and mothers) and sociology of education (using mothers who contributed to the educational expansion of South Korea). Most importantly, this project will be a foundation for my theoretical book tentatively called, “Mothers and Daughters of the Han River: Status and Gender in South Korea” which will be on mothering, women's status, and intergenerational educational mobility in contemporary South Korea.