Book Review

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The (Un)making of *Hanyeo* in Modern Korea

Hanyeo: Bingon-gwa nagin-ui sahoesa (Housemaid: A Social History of Poverty and Stigma). By Young Hyun SO. Seoul: Munhak dongne, 2024, 273 pages. ISBN: 978895469 838293300.

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In *Hanyeo*, So Young Hyun, a renowned critic and scholar of Korean literature, examines modern Korea's gendered history of labor to articulate a fresh perspective on invisible lives and labor that escape economic metrics and remain obscured in a highly capitalist modern society. In so doing, she focuses on one of the most marginalized figures in Korean history, the *hanyeo* (housemaid), a term that broadly encompasses lower-class women, including *sikmo*, *yumo*, *chimmo*, *eomeom*, *omoni*, and *anjamjagi*. While grounded in the context of modern Korean history, her work argues that *hanyeo* persist into the 21st century on a global scale. More broadly, in a universal context, her historical recontextualization of *hanyeo* highlights the indispensable nature of their labor, without which human life cannot be sustained. By offering such an insightful analysis of the social (re)production mechanisms of *hanyeo*, So Young Hyun's work extends beyond the limits of Korean studies.

Taking on the seemingly anachronistic subject *hanyeo*, the author instead emphasizes its contemporary relevance by critically examining scholarly biases in Korean studies. So points out that, due to its ambiguous and unsettled position in relation to the nation and class, *hanyeo* has received far less scholarly attention than figures such as *sinyeoseong* (new

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woman) and working-class women. Indeed, researchers have long explored *sinyeoseong* in relation to modernity and colonialism, while more recent scholarship has shifted focus toward the political and socioeconomic dynamics of working-class women in the context of rapid industrialization and democratization. By contrast, *hanyeo*, which emerged in the early 1900s following the official abolition of the slavery (*nobi*) system in Joseon, and persisted into the 1980s— and even today continues to exist under the rebranded term *gasa doumi* (housekeeper)—has remained largely unexamined. So's critical review of literature challenges this neglect, reframing the issue by highlighting the (un)making of *hanyeo* within a socioeconomic system and discourse structured around the separation of the public—or the market in this highly capitalist era—and the private. For instance, as evidenced by the recently launched Filipino *gasa doumi* program in Seoul, the socioeconomic system, when in need of labor supply, draws women from their households and into the market—only to replace them with other women, thus reconstituting *hanyeo* in a new form. This program, in particular, has been widely criticized for failing to pay Filipino domestic workers the minimum wage, effectively turning them into another form of *hanyeo* under exploitative labor conditions sanctioned by the government.

In the first half of the book, the author traces the early stages of *hanyeo*'s establishment in modern Korea, illustrating the mechanism of its (un)making through the case of *hanyeo hakgyo* (educational institutes for training *hanyeo*) and *hanyeo* abolitionism in the 1930s. The early 1930s industrialization led by the Japanese colonial government attracted an increasing number of Japanese residents to Joseon, who demanded domestic workers. Employment statistics from contemporary newspapers reveal that over a hundred women seeking jobs were hired within a month—significantly, all as domestic workers in Japanese households. This demand led to the establishment of *hanyeo* training institutes, where Joseon women were taught basic Japanese, arithmetic, and etiquette necessary for employment in Japanese homes. During the colonial period, women increasingly became primary breadwinners as traditional agriculture, the economic backbone of Joseon, was devastated, resulting in widespread male

unemployment. Under these conditions, women were drawn into the labor market as substitutes for male workers. As a result, once regarded as mere servants, *hanyeo* came to constitute the majority of *jikeop yeoseong* (working women) as visible participants in the public sphere.

The situation changed, however, with the emergence of a nationwide campaign to eradicate the *bad* custom of employing domestic workers, which began in the late 1930s following the passage of the Japanese State General Mobilization Law. The Japanese colonial government shifted its policy on managing female labor, remodeling the role and function of the household so that women would support the war effort from the home front. This state-led household reform paralleled the rise of *hanyeo* abolitionism at a societal level, in which *hanyeo* were regarded as both an economic burden and a potential threat to the idealized home. As a result, housewives were encouraged to reclaim their domestic spaces from *hanyeo*. At this point, society actively reversed the making of *hanyeo*, pushing women back into the home and reinforcing their original roles as housewives. Notably, a similar logic applies to contemporary debates surrounding *jeoneop jubu* (full-time housewives) and *matbeori jubu* (working housewives) in Korea. While *matbeori jubu* are often forced to leave the workforce due to their relatively lower earnings—a situation exacerbated by Korea's having the largest gender wage gap among OECD member countries—this is often because the financial burden of hiring domestic workers outweighs their potential wages, making it more economically viable for them to stay at home and take on household labor themselves.

So conceptualizes the *hanyeo* (un)making mechanism that takes place within and around the household as the exchange of *jubu* (housewife) and *hanyeo* (housemaid), a process that complicates the women's liberation theory advocated by *sinyeoseong* at the time. The unsettled position of *hanyeo* demonstrates that entering the public sphere (or the labor market) through paid employment does not necessarily equate to women's liberation from feudalistic and patriarchal household structures. *Hanyeo* remains positioned at the intersection of labor and non-labor (or *mere house chores*), existing alongside housewives as both competitors and substitutes. As the

hanyeo abolitionist discourse of the 1930s asserted, domestic workers were regarded as temporary stand-ins for housewives, whose rightful place in the home would eventually be restored. On the other hand, since the boundary between *hanyeo* and *jubu* is thin and easily crossed, no woman is ever fully exempt from the possibility of becoming *hanyeo*.

Through an analysis of Choe Jeong-hui's short story "Ji-maek" (The Energy of Land), So Young Hyun maintains that the experience of becoming *hanyeo* is not limited to lower-class women. Even *sinyeoseong*, elite women from upper- or middle-class backgrounds in Joseon, were not immune to this precarious status. In Choe's story, Eunyoung, a young woman returning home from Tokyo during summer vacation, meets a man and eventually begins living with him. However, following the prevailing custom of early marriage, he already has a legal wife, leaving Eunyoung without any lawful rights or protections afforded to married women. Despite her exceptional educational background—having studied in Japan, a rare opportunity for women at the time, she is repeatedly rejected from positions at schools, banks, companies, and private educational institutes. As a result, she resorts to working as a *chimmo* (live-in seamstress) in a *gisaeng* house, where she faces hostility due to her social position as an educated woman.

Through Choe's story and other historical cases, So further argues that *hanyeo* should be examined as a collective category—one that both encompasses and extends beyond its subcategories of individual occupation and specific class, particularly within the context of the colonial period. This approach is also crucial for addressing the problem of national hierarchy in the *hanyeo* (un)making mechanism and for situating it within a postcolonial and transnational framework. As previously discussed, *hanyeo* in modern Korean history initially emerged and increased in number under Japanese colonial rule. Today, in South Korea, migrant workers from developing countries such as the Philippines are replacing Korean domestic workers, reflecting a continuation of the national hierarchy system. In discussing this embeddedness in hierarchical structures, So highlights a colonialistically nuanced term —*omoni*—which specifically referred to married Joseon housemaids employed in Japanese households during the

colonial era. The Korean word *eomeoni* (mother) was transformed into *omoni* through Japanese pronunciation, with its meaning shifting to signify Joseon housemaids. So argues that this linguistic transformation reflects the power dynamics between Joseon and Japan as colonized and colonizer. A metonymic term that once broadly signified all Joseon women as mothers was reduced and degraded into a word denoting a woman performing domestic labor, often in subordination to her Japanese master. (It is also worth noting that there is no corresponding term used to refer to all Joseon men.) Though So's analysis may be controversial, it provides a historical foundation for examining the underlying structure of power relations between nations in constructing gendered and marginalized subjects such as *hanyeo*, a process that continues to be reinforced on a global scale today.

In this book, So Young Hyun reconstructs even the genealogy of *hanyeo* in modern Korea, tracing and restoring its trajectory through the postwar period, a history reflected in Kim Ki-young's famous crime film *Hanyeo* (The Housemaid). As illustrated in the film, the social imagination of *hanyeo*'s sexuality is immediately linked to crime—an important yet underexplored aspect in this review. So's inquiry ultimately leads to the following question and conclusion: "Can we say there are no more *hanyeo* in this world? No, they are just invisible, and we need to unbury and uncover them." Drawing on Susan Buck-Morss's *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History*, So emphasizes the necessity of rewriting the universal history of modernity through and from the historical archives of marginalized figures such as *hanyeo*. Through this work, she calls for a critical reexamination of both the epistemology of modernity that erases these figures from history and the gendered logic of the capitalist labor market that continues to render them invisible today.

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