

The Aesthetics of Authenticity: Corporate Masculinities in Contemporary South Korean Television Dramas

By Joanna Elfving-Hwang, University of Western Australia

Asia Pacific Perspectives v15n1. [Online Article](#)



Introduction

In 2014, a television drama titled *Misaeng (Incomplete Life, tvN)* became a surprise hit with audiences in South Korea (henceforth, Korea). *Misaeng* was first published as an online graphic novel (“webtoon”) in 2012, and has since garnered over one billion hits on its website. The print version of Volume 1 has sold over a million copies since 2013, and the television adaptation became the second most-watched cable channel television program of all time in Korea.¹ When first aired it became little short of a cultural phenomenon for its unapologetic yet humorous take on the desperation that young corporate interns face when trying to secure permanent employment, as well as the travails of permanent employees who struggle to hold onto their jobs in the increasingly precarious employment market. Online fan-communities and media praised the series for its “realistic” depiction of the struggles and daily humiliations of salarymen who have to negotiate the increasingly exploitive corporate workplace without any real prospects for permanent employment.² Moreover, while romantic narratives with attractive male actors tend to dominate television drama ratings in Korea, *Misaeng* broke the mold as the

series was narrated from the perspective of an ordinary-looking salaryman (*chigwŏn*)³ and no significant romantic plot. Moreover, the leading male characters did not conform to the aesthetic expectations of contemporary Korean beauty cultures reflected in popular media, or other hegemonic definitions of manhood where the leading man was typically presented as “a man in power, a man with power, and a man of power.”⁴ To the contrary, *Misaeng* is concerned with the salaryman’s lack of power, and yet the success of the series indicates that it clearly represents a cultural narrative that struck a nerve with viewers.⁵ So what resonated so much with audiences that even the restaurant where many of the scenes were shot became a place of pilgrimage for some viewers?⁶

내가 일할 부서는 영업 3팀.



Figure 1. Sales Team 3 in the original webtoon (Yun T’aeho, Misaeng 2012). Available at: [Webtoon](#)

It would be tempting to read this popular narrative as mirroring the real lives of the *chigwŏn*, and there is certainly a didactic element in the way in which the show provides

strategies for survival in the changing corporate world. In this respect, the series follows many soap opera narrative conventions in that it focuses on the failures of the main characters, who are forced to “stoically [face] life’s problems rather than to make grandiose gestures or to seek magical solutions to them.”⁷ However, when one examines the aesthetic representations of corporate masculinity in this series and others like it, their narratives emerge as more than simple sites for learning about the lives of the *chigwŏn* in the ruthless, neoliberal corporate world. The salaryman, whose self-sacrificial devotion to a company in the developmental context of the 1980s and 1990s may once have signified nationalistic masculinity, is now represented as anxious, frustrated and powerless to withstand the exploitative corporate forces that require loyalty of their workers, but offer none in return. Within this context, the image of the oppressed salaryman emerges as a marker signifying masculine powerlessness, expressing – as Kimmel observes in the context of the American man – “the feelings of men who were raised to believe themselves entitled to feel that power, but do not *feel* it” (emphasis added)⁸, thus rendering visible the relations of power that engender such sense of powerlessness. While patriarchy is intact and men in Korea continue to benefit from what Connell has termed as “patriarchal dividend,” access to such dividend is not equally distributed among all men. As Connell explains:

For instance, working-class youth, economically dispossessed by structural unemployment, may gain no economic advantage at all over the women in their communities. Other groups of men pay part of the price, alongside women, for the maintenance of an unequal gender order.⁹

In this article I will explore how *Misaeng* emerges as an example of a popular televisual cultural text that reflects Koreans’ growing unease with the competitive value systems in the workplace which require individuals to submit to the logic of relentless investment in self (whether through education, appearance or connections) without offering any sense of empowerment in return. While the patriarchal gaze in Korean popular media has been explored in existing literature,¹⁰ less attention has been paid to how men experience the increasingly precarious work place in contemporary Korea. Popular culture texts such as *Misaeng* have become effective ways of raising consciousness of structural inequalities in the workplace, and also perform a cathartic function for the audiences.¹¹ As representations of underdog salaryman masculinity provide male viewers with achievable and positive “discursive positions that help [men] ward off anxiety and avoid feelings of powerlessness,”¹² although this cathartic function is not the focus of this present article. While the actions of the characters are important for the audiences to identify with their narrative development in the series, I will focus here on how appearance and the presentation of self are utilized to signify cultural resistance to aspects of corporate masculinities perceived as undermining “authentic” working class masculinity. Before discussing the link between appearances and traditional masculinities in popular culture narratives, this essay will first outline the development of masculine leads in Korean television dramas in order to contextualize the cultural significance of the salaryman or *chigwŏn* as a cultural sign of changing social conditions in the 1990s and 2000s.

Salaryman as a Cultural Sign: Contested Corporate Masculinities in South Korean Television

In Korean public discourse, masculinity and presenting oneself as a “manly man” (*namjadaun namja*) have typically been linked to notions of militarized masculinity. Seungsook Moon notes that in this context the “warrior man” has been represented as the mythopoetic and “authentic” measure of manhood, and military service represented as a rite of passage through which this authentic masculinity is discovered.¹³ Chungmoo Choi argues that militarized masculinity is an ideal which was constructed in the decades after the Korean War (1950-53) in cultural and state-enforced discourses to subvert the image of an emasculated and weak male, who in cultural representations had come to symbolize a sense of historical failure.¹⁴ In contrast to these images of “masculinity in crisis” and the emasculated male as symbolic of individual struggles to come to terms with the socio-economic changes in postwar Korea, Park Chung-hee’s (1961-1979) administration promoted a cultural meta-narrative intended to bring the nation together by quelling social unrest, and creating a an ideal (male) citizen as part of a discourse of shared cultural identity (“Koreanness”) for the post-colonial and divided nation. The “authentic” or “real” masculinity (and even citizenship) was constructed in relation to nation and duty, and to valorizing strength, courage, loyalty and leadership in men, and the ability to negotiate successfully the constraints of patriarchal capitalism.¹⁵ Within these discourses men were represented as warriors bringing glory to the nation, whether in the actual military¹⁶ or within the economic sphere, battling with the market forces to bring in maximum profits to benefit the nation and their families.¹⁷



Figure 2. Sales Team 3 in the television drama version of Misaeng (Episode 18, tvN 2014). © 2014 CJ E&M CORPORATION, ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. Used with permission.

Representations of men in Korean corporate settings in the 1990s were also not completely dissimilar to the way in which the Japanese *sarariiman* (salaryman) was portrayed as a “corporate warrior” in the Japanese popular cultural imaginary.¹⁸ However, unlike in Japan the

salaryman did not occupy quite as iconic position in the Korean cultural imaginary because of the emphasis on the military as a place where young man transitioned to full adulthood as an act of ritual citizenship – possibly also because Korea had less time to develop an idealized large-scale social organization centered around the white collar worker. This said, in the 1990s permanent employee status (*chǒngjig'wǒn*) at a large-scale organization (*tae'giyōp*) came to signify both masculine empowerment and success. However, cracks in the prevailing discourse of hegemonic masculinity linked to white collar employment first began appearing in the aftermath of the 1997 financial crisis, which brought the Korean economy nearly to collapse and led to mass redundancies. As the Korean patriarch's position of power had been built on his ability to provide for the family in cultural and state-led discourses, loss of employment meant not only the loss of income but of symbolic status as well. Public discourses about work became increasingly gendered, and female office workers often became the first casualties of the mass layoffs as various campaigns were initiated to protect the hardworking (presumably male) heads of families.¹⁹ Phrases such as “*Abba him naeseyo!*” (“Daddy, be strong!”) were plastered on large billboards in prominent locations around the cityscape of Seoul in an effort to lift the spirits of the struggling patriarchs, and to encourage their families to support them. Whether or not there was a conscious effort on the part on the government to promote patriarchal familial structure is debatable, but there certainly was a concerted drive to allay feelings of powerlessness among men. In public discourses of the social impact of the crisis, men were presented as primary “victims” of the crisis, emasculated through redundancy or demotion.²⁰ This image of the patriarch in crisis was used to legitimate the perceived necessity of supporting the existing gendered structures, which in turn repositioned women into the domestic support roles or into “flexible workforce” thought to benefit the nation and society at large by safeguarding the normative family.²¹

On large and small screen this remasculinization was achieved in two ways. In post-1997 cinematic representations, male characters were often remasculinized as action or military heroes.²² Moreover, at the same time Korean television series began to find international markets with narratives that offered light entertainment in the form of heterosexual romances in which men took the leading role in initiating and sustaining relationships, and in which the image of the hardworking salaryman was not the only measure of masculine achievement. These new masculinities reflected an increased fluidity in the ways in which hegemonic masculinities were understood and consumed in the post-financial crisis era. The early 2000s saw a rise in popularity of a new kind of “soft” masculinity, and the domestic and international popularity of the so-called *kkonminam* (“flower boy”) actors such as Kwon Sang-woo (*We Are Dating Now*, 2002; *Stairway to Heaven*, 2003; *Sad Love Story*, 2005; *Bad Love*, 2007) and Bae Yong-joon of *Winter Sonata* (2002) fame. Actor Bae Yong-joon's huge popularity in Asia following the release of the television series in Japan and Taiwan in particular, helped to create an overseas perception of Korean men as soft, romantic and sensitive. This image was further popularized and developed in romantic dramas such as *My Girl* (2005), *The 1st Coffee Shop Prince* (2007) and *Boys Over Flowers* (2009) which featured floppy-haired and androgynous male leads, whose images proved especially popular with young and middle-aged female audiences. At this point, there was some anxiety in the media over whether “authentic” Korean masculinity was under threat from being “effeminized”²³ as the new “sensitive” masculinity was embodied through a “soft” appearance, manner of speech and behavior which stood in stark contrast to the hyper-masculine and violent male lead characters of the 1990s. However, it should be noted that much

of this anxiety was either generated by Western media, or by domestic media's self-searching of whether encouraging "soft" masculinities (that in fact drew much on the Japanese *bishōnen* imaginary) was something that would fundamentally threaten "authentic" Korean masculinity. Perhaps to assuage any suspicion, the male leads began increasingly to show exposed torsos, and frequent fight scenes would also be built into the narratives without the need to tamper with the characters' soft, flowy hairstyles or cutting-edge fashion. In this sense, whether one presents masculinity in ways that may be coded as "effeminate" in some Western cultural contexts (such as the *kkonminam*'s soft aesthetics and attention to maintaining carefully groomed appearances), a person's sexual orientation is not necessarily immediately in doubt in the same way that it might be in the West. For this reason, popular culture representations of masculinity in Korea have often afforded male characters a significant degree of fluidity and flexibility in terms of the aesthetics without linking fashion or use of makeup to a specific sexual orientation.²⁴

Toward the end of the first decade of the 2000s, there was a resurgence of televisual narratives dealing with the ruthlessness of the corporate world, and the increasing precariousness of the contemporary workplace where no traditional other-oriented social values seemed to matter. As companies came to be seen as increasingly hostile environments for individuals who sought to make success of their lives as employees, a number of television dramas tapped into this sense of powerlessness and rage, creating characters that sought to make the most of the opportunities presented to them. Examples of such include *Hot Blood* (2009), *Incarnation of Money* (2013), *Empire of Gold* (2013), *Flames of Ambition* (2010), *The Innocent Man* (2012), *Bad Guy* (2010) and *Shark* (2013), which all used the revenge plot to present male leads who are ruthless and intelligent enough to utilize corporate structures to their own (often destructive) ends. These characters differed from the ideal salaryman masculinities of 1990s television dramas which featured men who were loyal to their companies. Those characters succeeded in the corporate world by perfecting their ability to negotiate within corporate cultures informed by Confucian structures of corporate paternalism, and by sacrificing their individual needs for the sake of the company's success. This aspect of Korean corporate culture has been referred to as "dynamic collectivism," which draws on Confucian cultural notions of in-group/out-group distinctions where an individual's focus is always on ensuring the success of one's own social group over individual gain (such as one's work team). Cho and Yoon argue that in the past, such a group orientation was perceived as a highly positive aspect of Korean management culture because it tended to "reinforce the boundary between in-group and out-group and to intensify competition between the two groups, which in turn [made] Korean society more dynamic and competitive."²⁵ In addition to considerations of competitiveness, the dynamic collectivist organization of the corporate labor force has been observed to foster a strong "we"-spirit. While the individual may be required to conform to the group's or company's values to attain shared goals, the individual is rewarded by a strong, often homosocial sense of belonging to a "brotherhood" and loyalty (*ūiri*) to the group.

눈이 항상 충혈돼 있고
외모에 신경을 쓰는
타입은 아닌 듯 하다.



Figure 3. Team Leader Oh Sang-sik in the original webtoon (Yun T'aeho, Misaeng 2012).
Available at: [Webtoon](#)

In the post-financial-crisis era, however, the widespread mass redundancies, increasing job insecurity and the precariousness of fixed-term employment have meant that corporate working environments have become more transactional than relational, meaning that workers became more likely to allow individuality, self-interest and rationality to guide their actions and choices in the workplace.²⁶ As the government encouraged large corporations to restructure to better respond to challenging global financial circumstances, workers were often forced to move on to precarious contractual arrangements that created “flexible” (that is, undemanding) and self-governing workers who were transformed into what Jesook Song calls “commodifiable labor power.”²⁷ New recruits (*sin''ipwŏn*) in particular were envisioned as citizens who competed as for a chance to prove themselves as exceptional and deserving to hold onto a job in the labor market that already had a surplus of graduate employees, each one of whom were seen as potentially disposable unless proven useful. The alternative was to enter the world of venture companies in which “their employment depended on their own capacity for maneuvering, inventiveness, and adaptation.”²⁸ While in one sense, the responsibility of one’s success was thus

shifted on the individual, Song goes on to point out that “these autonomous individuals became micro-engineers of “productive” labor as a whole and involved themselves in the appropriation and exploitation of surplus labor power.”²⁹ There was a dramatic rise in the number of irregular workers and a decrease in expectations for companies to consider their workers’ rights or concerns (such as the right to form a labor union or fair pay), and each worker was increasingly seen as having to “earn” their right to stay in the company or face being laid off and replaced by others waiting to seize their opportunity to prove themselves.³⁰ Consequently, many workers now feel very little to no emotional connection with or loyalty to their companies. In this context, You-me Park notes in her nuanced analysis that corporate masculinities now intersect with profit-driven neoliberal ideologies in ways that have created “toxic cultural practices” requiring individuals to measure up to a “quasi-utilitarian criteria of productivity and consumption” that effectively reduces the workers themselves to the status of a function more so than an individual. What is more, Park notes that the measures by which success is defined are by and large unobtainable and require constant effort which is unlikely to be rewarded with long-term work prospects.³¹ Moreover, the uneven ways in which individuals have fewer resources to constantly invest in themselves leave a growing number of citizens vulnerable to precarious economic realities. Park argues that both militarism and neoliberalism “both justify their absolute power to adjudicate whom to let live and whom to let die by resorting to idealized forms of masculinity and heroism” from the past, but in ways that rarely guarantee an individual success in the present.³²

However, while “heroism” and militarism are still expected, the transactional way in which the individual salaryman is positioned within the system simultaneously requires them to develop a degree of detachment from others in order to pursue individual goals. In this sense, contemporary corporate salarymen may feel disempowered not only by the unequal level of resources to compete with other, but also by the culture of corruption and cronyism that often marks contemporary Korean work cultures and large scale corporations in particular.³³ Unsurprisingly, television representations of corporate masculinities are marked by ambiguity and ambivalence about previously essentialized and relatively stable notions of presumably “authentic” masculinities. The South Korean corporate workplace is increasingly shown to be a place of alienation rather than of belonging, and a place of powerlessness rather than empowerment.

Negotiating Masculine Power in the Precarious Workplace

It is in this context that the televisual representations of the Korean salaryman have recently witnessed a reincarnation of the anxious, but immensely likeable anti-hero. Anxious and insecure male characters have featured in Korean popular culture since the Korean War, but what sets these anti-heroes apart is that despite being full of self-doubt and fear of failure, they emerge in many ways as positive role models to the modern man. While vulnerable to abuses of power, the characters are determined to find workable solutions to their predicament. The root of their struggles is not that they are lazy or incapable, but that they lack the right connections (*yŏnjul*) to achieve permanent employment (*chŏnggyujik*) – or refuse to use them to gain shortcuts. As noted previously, this predicament is rooted to real work-life conditions, as the first two decades of the 2000s have also witnessed a significant rise in youth unemployment and the one of the highest rates of youth inactivity as university graduates struggle to secure permanent employment.³⁴ The

rapid casualization of the Korean work force has meant that over 30% of the waged and non-self-employed work force is now on non-permanent contracts (*pijŏnggyujik*).³⁵ The lack of secure employment opportunities occurs in tandem with more global management styles and reorganization of the work force, which has meant a shift away from the harmony-oriented management practices described above. The in-group harmony-focused corporate management practices of the pre-1997 financial crisis era were replaced in the post-Crisis era by practices that emphasized individual attainment over the previous group-oriented performance appraisal. A shift toward constant self-monitoring and improvement through “ability- and performance-based appraisal, appraisal feedback, merit pay and 360-degree appraisal” has increased the possibility of being singled out for redundancy³⁶ and one’s level of anxiety about job security. More significantly, the focus has shifted increasingly to the individual’s *own* responsibility to ensure their employment. Nelson has termed this as “elaborated ethos”³⁷ under which an individual’s failure to succeed in the corporate workplace is never blamed on the company’s structural weaknesses which prevent them from thriving and developing, but on the individual’s inability to adapt to the demands of the workplace. As a result of precarious contractual arrangements and a decreasing emphasis on values such as dynamic collectivism, a feature of the new corporate culture has been constant self-surveillance and competition, as well as the willingness to “endure (*kyŏndita* or *ch’amta*) present privations or troubles for future rewards.”³⁸ Furthermore, such vulnerability to redundancy has also meant that bullying (*kabjil*), which refers to a superior being abusive to their workers just because they can, has become a feature of contemporary corporate cultures. Such practices include humiliating subordinates verbally or requiring bodily display of absolute self-effacement. This aspect of Korean corporate culture is perhaps the most unfortunate mix of traditional and global in as much as Confucian hierarchies are kept in place, but are stripped of traditional ethics of reciprocity and affection (*chŏng*) that would have previously regulated (at least in part) some of the more extreme aspects of bullying.

Given the toxic mix of hierarchical social structures which concentrates power in the hands of a few, and performance-based appraisal systems which focus on the individual actual realities of corporate cultures in Korea, it is perhaps no surprise that parody and humor in particular have increasingly become the vehicle through which the nationalistic ideology of the white-collar patriarch as the imagined ideal of hegemonic Korean masculinity is both critiqued and problematized in contemporary popular cultural texts. Successful television dramas that focus on the lives of the underdog have included series such as *Queen of the Office* (2013), which pokes fun at the precarious lives of contract workers who are willing to go to almost any length to secure permanent employment; *History of the Salaryman* (2012), which parodies office politics and performance-driven corporate cultures focused on short term gains;³⁹ *Ms Temper and Nam Junki* (2016), which features a male lead who is the ultimate, yet utterly likeable, yes-man; and *Neighborhood Lawyer Jo Deul-Ho* (2016), which followed the struggles and victories of a self-made man and lawyer. What all of these narratives share in common is that rather than simply lamenting the sorry state of the contemporary salaryman, their protagonists actively reject both the capitalist symbolic economy which values material possession over other things and a neoliberal logic according to which an individual is required to constantly engage in self-cultivation (*chagi kyebal*) to survive in the competitive and changing corporate environment. Instead, the main characters draw on older moral code to guide their social interactions, which are defined in terms of absolute loyalty to the in-group, shared gains and harmony – even in a workplace which does not ultimately care for their wellbeing.

An (In)appropriate Presentation of Self as a Critique of Hegemonic Corporate Masculinity in *Misaeng* (Incomplete Life)

It is in the context of (non)belonging, homosocial in-groups and their relation to renegotiating contemporary corporate masculinities that I now turn to discussing the presentation of masculine selves in *Misaeng* (tvN, 2014) as a counter-corporatist critique of self-oriented neoliberal masculinity. In this section of this essay, I will analyze representations of corporate masculinities through the aesthetic gaze that the viewers are invited to fix on the main male characters as a reflection of their return to traditional “other-oriented” values and social practices. I argue that in these cultural narratives of masculinity in *Misaeng*, appearances are coded as aesthetic points of resistance to the “inauthentic” performance of greed-driven, individualistic and global masculinity. However, rather than signifying a crisis of masculinity⁴⁰ in Korea, resistance to conform to sleek corporate appearance in popular television narratives such as *Misaeng* emerge as visual reminders of (or nostalgia for) lost authenticity and to reorient hegemonic corporate masculinities toward traditional other-oriented social values.

Misaeng centers on the experiences of Chang Kūrae, a 26-year-old temporary worker (*kyeyajig'wŏn*), who narrates his desperate effort to succeed in gaining an elusive permanent contract in a large trading company. Yun T'ae-ho, the author of the original webtoon *Misaeng*, aimed to capture this sense of struggle both in the storyline and the visual narrative of the manhwa.⁴¹ Chang Kūrae's point of view as a “newbie” is utilized as an effective narrative device that allows the audience to learn about the world of office politics from a perspective of an only partially-informed narrator as the audiences are rarely given information about the decision-making processes of the executive board. Instead, the viewer experiences the workplace through Chang's point of view where minor tasks (such as writing a report) are seen in isolation from wider corporate aims, but at the same time fill his whole purpose within the company. Moreover, Chang Kūrae is physically slight and unimposing, with androgynous facial features and awkward social skills. As such, he is scripted as the ultimate disempowered “yes-man” whose very name, “Kūrae,” translates as “yes I agree.” Despite having enjoyed some significant success as a *baduk* (a popular but difficult Korean board game) player, his lack of connections and formal education are shown to have barred him from securing permanent employment in the past and taught him determination to take every insult and order unquestioningly to succeed. As such, he is presented as the ultimate disciplined individual, trained to benefit the company and not himself through – as Foucault notes – its “specific technique of a power that regards individuals both as objects and as instruments of its exercise.”⁴² After passing a grueling series of company entrance tests, he is overjoyed with relief to join “One International” with four other new entrants (*sinipjawŏn*) on a two-year contract, and is assigned to Sales Team 3. Sales Team 3 is headed by a hardworking and capable team leader by the name of Oh Sang-sik,⁴³ whose tendency to make decisions on moral grounds and refusal to sacrifice team members have cost him a number of promotions which he otherwise would have been expected to have been due. The third member of the team is a good-natured character Kim Dong-sik, who has been equally unlucky in his career thanks to his loyalty to Team Leader Oh. Ultimately, none of the characters succeed in the greed-driven and individualistic workplace because of their decision to resist its disciplinary practices. However, it is precisely this process by which the characters are shown to actively resist neoliberal logic that

prioritizes individual attainment and success over that of the team, that is presented to the audiences as the proof of their moral character, and a comforting cultural sign of “authentic” Korean masculinity that also makes the series resonate with the audiences.



Figure 4. Team Leader Oh Sang-sik in the television series *Misaeng* (Episode 6, tvN 2014). © 2014 CJ E&M CORPORATION, ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. Used with permission.

Central to *Misaeng* is the way in which corporate ideologies are critiqued and parodied both through overplaying selected disciplinary signifiers of corporate masculinity (such as obedience and subservient body language when dealing with superiors or clients) whilst on other occasions, certain idealized external markers of success (such as expensive suits and watches) are passed over by the main characters as unnecessary. Moreover, none of the characters in Sales Team 3 are shown to focus on maintaining a disciplined and well-groomed appearance. The refusal to maintain the suave corporate appearance expected of a *chigwŏn* is significant here because it allows the director to visually juxtapose characters with shabby appearance as signifiers of dynamic collectivism (willingness to sacrifice for one’s team for common good) with characters who are well groomed but also willing to forgo the needs of the group to pursue their own gain. It is important to note here that an appropriate presentation of self – both in terms of behavior and attire – has traditionally been considered very important in Korea, and it is difficult to understate how much symbolic value is put on the maintaining of age and class-appropriate appearance in professional contexts. In contemporary Korea, the idea of appropriate appearance is typically linked to one’s real or aspirational class status, and in professional contexts follows very closely Erving Goffman’s observation of how “a given social front tends to become institutionalized in terms of the abstract stereotyped expectations to which it gives

rise.”⁴⁴ However, the importance of appearances also goes beyond simply mimicking an appearance deemed suitable to a given profession, and draws on much older Confucian ideas of how the body and self are perceived as indivisible – quite unlike the Cartesian duality of immaterial mind and material body. Lee Seung-hwan notes in his analysis of Confucian conceptions of body-mind, thinking about the relations between appearance and inner self, “the self *is* the body in which the corporeal and the spiritual are inseparable” (emphasis added).⁴⁵ This idea draws on the belief that the self cannot be “hidden” on the inside of an individual subject, because the inner self is always and necessarily available to others to “read” as signifiers of the inner qualities each individual on the surface of the body. Because of the perceived unity between the mind and the body, the surface of the body (individual gestures, behavior, and facial expressions) becomes the agent through which propriety (or *li*) is expressed in social contexts through a properly maintained and presented body. During the Chosŏn dynasty (1392-1910) a truly righteous gentleman (*sŏnbi*) was expected to project his inner virtue via an orderly outward appearance.



Figure 5. The outside space where pretenses are dropped (Episode 8, tvN 2014). © 2014 CJ E&M CORPORATION, ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. Used with permission.

The appearance appropriate to one’s status was then validated and acknowledged “by the intersubjective gaze of the community,”⁴⁶ which in turn made the individual socially “visible” as an outstanding and successful member of a particular social group. There is a high degree of continuity between this principle and the way in which the self is presented in the contemporary workplace (and other contexts). Displaying appropriate external signifiers of white-collar corporate masculinity through appearance, fashion, behavior and grooming are important ways of signifying not only an appropriate appearance for a salaryman, but an individual’s economic

value to their organization. Even cosmetic surgery and various facial treatments such as fillers and frequent treatments of microdermabrasion are utilized to ensure a well-kempt and fresh appearance that belies the physical effects of stressful work environments, and to signify not only youth and strength but also a disciplined body that is valuable to the organization.⁴⁷ Fashion is used to signify class status (aspirational or real), and hair and skin care play an important role in creating an important impression of age-appropriate or class-appropriate status. Consumption of beauty practices and a presentation of a class- or profession-appropriate appearance are therefore closely tied to the accumulation of social capital through reinforcing existing social hierarchies, and a strategy to make visible one's willingness to appear as a disciplined body that is of value to the organization. Moreover, self-presentation is also considered a statement about one's inner self: a disheveled appearance signaling unease on the inside, and inappropriate clothing signifying lack of moral judgment and respect to others.⁴⁸ Because a tidy appearance is encoded as a signifier of an "orderly" inner self, a disheveled appearance is considered discourteous toward others because an unruly presentation of self raises questions about the mental state (or physical health) of the person and can cause anxiety in others. A neat, orderly appearance with a dress code appropriate to one's social status and role is therefore considered a basic form of social etiquette (*yewi*).⁴⁹

It is in this context that the characters' "scruffy" appearances and overplayed markers of humility to superiors are utilized strategically in *Misaeng* as "flawed" performances of hegemonic corporate masculinities. The donning of unfitting suits and presenting an unkempt (*ch'orahada*) appearance can be read as signifiers of the main characters' unease with and inability to mimic the hegemonic ideals, as well as resistance to the disciplinary power of self-cultivation (*chagi kyebal*), and markers of their inner distress about the inauthenticity and cruel nature of the contemporary workplace. The visual aesthetics of the television drama adaptations of online cartoons such as *Misaeng* typically borrow heavily from the original webtoons, albeit occasionally there is some element of "fine tuning" to ensure that the main character appears more palatable to broader audiences. Example of such can be seen in the case of the television show *Neighborhood Lawyer Jo Deul-ho* (KBS, 2016) in which both the titular character and his female assistant lawyer were presented as significantly more kempt and attractive than the same characters in the original webtoon. In the original version Jo Deul-ho sports stubble, carelessly tied necktie and an ill-fitting old suit, whereas his assistant is presented as a bookish wallflower without the typical manga aesthetics of an attractive woman. In the small screen adaptation the appearances of both characters have been altered to better correspond to audiences' aesthetic expectations of normative beauty, which in turn has the effect of lessening the visual effect of their potentially transgressive appearances unsuited to the high-flying world of the law courts.



Figure 6. Business cultures as ritual humiliation (Episode 8, tvN 2014). © 2014 CJ E&M CORPORATION, ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. Used with permission.

The visual representation of the main characters in the television adaptation of *Misaeng*, on the contrary, is truer to the original webtoon in terms of how the presentation of the self is used to signify unease with the values (or perceived lack of values) of current hegemonic corporate masculinities. These visual signifiers that mirrored closely the original webtoon were a conscious choice on the part of the director (*Figures 1 and 2*).⁵⁰ From the start of the series, main character Chang Kūrae's unease with his ill-fitting suit, his initial inability to fix a tie, and even his androgynous facial features mark him as an outsider. It is his appearance that causes other characters to initially deem that he, if anyone, is a dead-end candidate destined never to secure permanent employment. His soft-spoken and anxious manner is picked on from the start by those around him, and he is advised to learn assertiveness if he is to achieve his goal of permanent employment. However, he turns out to be a perfect fit for the Sales Team 3 as Oh Sang-sik and Kim Dong-sik are shown equally reluctant to conform to either the attire or hairstyle expected of a worker in a global trading company. In the original webtoon version, Oh Sang-sik's disheveled appearance – with perpetually blood-shot eyes and a stubble – and Chang Kūrae's ill-fitting suit are even more accentuated than in the television series version, clearly signifying their “outsider” status (*Figures 3 and 4*).⁵¹ Their abject status in the corporate machinery is heightened by the way in which everyday existence is presented as a constant struggle for survival. As many of the themes in *Misaeng* deal with the unrealistic demands put on the sales team as they work to ensure the best profits for their company under nearly impossible trading environment, their workdays require them to choose between moral integrity and survival in the work place. For this reason, the office and the business world are often described as a battlefield or a war zone. However, rather than being “warriors for the nation” or even the corporation they work for, the men are shown to fight for the survival of their immediate team. On the contrary, the company is

presented as nothing more than a stage on which the individuals perform their daily struggle. After years of service and personal sacrifice, Oh Sang-sik realizes that in the corporate space the individual has been reduced to nothing more than their perceived economic value, and that neither effort nor ability can guarantee one's success. The company is no longer a "safe place" that offers a lifetime of protection and security. In fact, in Chang Kŭrae's frequent voiceover narration the corporate world is described either in the language of competitive *baduk*, or as a war zone, in which survival can never be guaranteed and annihilation can only be postponed through careful strategic thinking and planning. This war zone mentality is reinforced through the settings in which most of the work takes place: in the confines of the impersonal office environment in which the individual is constantly open to attacks from other teams in the company. The only place of relative safety is on the roof space of the office building, where Oh Sang-sik's team frequently retreats to plan their next move, away from the prying eyes and ears of other teams that are plotting their demise (*Figure 5*). The "war zone" mentality thus critiques the flawed logic of self-governance and internal competition as clearly damaging to the company.

Outside the office, and when attempting to win new business for their team, even entertaining potential customers is described and planned in the language of war. The mise-en-scène for the shots are framed in dark, claustrophobic night clubs into which the team "descends" – as if to the netherworld – in order to seal deals at the expense of their dignity and health after long hours of drinking games and excessive alcohol consumption. These scenes relate to Korean business culture practices where suppliers are typically expected to provide potential buyers with entertainment, which sometimes can be very costly. For Sales Team 3, the "entertainment" – aside from pouring drinks for their customer – is shown to consist mostly of the ritual humiliation of Oh Sang-sik and his team (*Figure 6*). Chang Kŭrae's voiceover accompanies his concerned gaze as he observes their vanishing chance to clinch a deal: "We panicked even before we could load our guns" (Episode 8). Chang Kŭrae's point of view is again utilized here to draw the viewer's attention to the pathetic ways in which true emotional connections as a means of building lasting business relationships have been transmuted into practice of *gabjil* (bullying) and bribery. The audience is invited to witness the pathetic heroism of the common salaryman as their feigned enjoyment appears tragic and humiliating. Chang Kŭrae's gaze thus both bears witness to the heroism of Oh Sang-sik (with whom Chang has formed a son-like attachment and genuine sense of loyalty) in Oh's marionette-like performance and condemns those who humiliate Oh for their own twisted entertainment (*Figure 7*).

Throughout the series, the embodied performance of the expected external signifiers of corporate masculinity are thus revealed as inherently false and not a basis for a meaningful identity. The pathetic and exaggerated demonstrations of humility and subservience to superiors and business partners belie any real meaning attached to them in ways in which the salaryman masculinity may have once signified devotion and loyalty to the extended in-group of the company. The series openly critiques the excessive entertainment practices of both superiors and customers, which are purely shown as transactional (and thus immoral and ultimately meaningless) rather than relational (the ideal). In some scenes where signs of humility might be expected, markers of respect which in the past would have been read as genuine communicative tools representing power relations of domination-subordination are taken to the extreme in the form of over-exaggerated bows and self-effacement. The self-humiliation of the salaryman thus

marks him both as the abject of the corporate system and the signifier of the system's corrupt and empty nature for the individuals within it. Moreover, scenes of elaborate corporate entertainment are juxtaposed with scenes depicting the moment after the "battle" for business, featuring images of pathetic drunken men, spent and desperately ill after overconsumption of alcohol. The workers barely conscious and vomiting from binge drinking, their expelled bodily fluids are symbolic of their own position in the corporate machinery.



Figure 7. Chang Kūrae's concerned gaze witnesses Oh Sang-sik's forced masquerade of joy (Episode 6, tvN 2014). © 2014 CJ E&M CORPORATION, ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. Used with permission.

While on the one hand the behavior of the characters (Oh Sang-sik in particular) can be read as a spectacle of powerless salaryman masculinity for the audience to witness, as the series progresses Oh's disheveled appearance comes to signify the character's authenticity. Observing the desperate "battles" fought in nightclubs to win a deal, and practices of *gabjil* in the office, Chang Kūrae's persistent gaze makes Oh Sang-sik's inner human virtues visible to those around him. Rather than signifying a self in crisis, Oh's unkempt appearance is thus used to suggest his refusal to pretend that the system works: a marker of his inner authenticity juxtaposed against well-presented but "inauthentic" corporate masculinity. Through the process of making contemporary hegemonic masculinities visible, their precarious discursive foundations are thus revealed as inauthentic and contradictory and their value as a measure of success is contested.⁵² In this context, Oh's character emerges as the ultimate superior man (*sōnbi*) both because of his moral fiber, and because he becomes everyman's hero in his ingenuity to survive in the corporate world. The title of the series, *Misaeng*, is taken from the piece of advice that Oh Sang-sik gives to his new intern: "Since you have entered the company, do your best to hang in there (*pōt'ida*). In this place, sticking with it (*pōt'ida*) is winning, and enduring (*pōt'ida*) can perhaps be seen as

moving toward complete life (*wansaeng*). We are still living incomplete lives (*misaeng*)" (Episode 8). In this sense, Oh becomes perhaps paradoxically a true *sŏnbi* in a Confucian sense in that he earns his subordinate's respect through displaying "internal virtue [...] manifested in his face, people see it, are admonished by it, and voluntarily submit to it."⁵³ His virtue, however, is not derived from a pursuit or display of wealth, but on traditional values of loyalty (*ũiri*) and genuine affection (*chŏng*) for his team.

By positioning the character of Oh Sang-sik as an archetype of authentic Korean masculinity which is defined by one's moral character, *Misaeng* thus presents a cultural counter-discourse that aims to reclaim hegemonic masculinities from neoliberal materialism. The ending implies, however, that integrity can only be found and upheld outside the system. Despite their best plans, global corporate values are presented as alien to the other-oriented traditional values of the characters because the system is set up to bring the maximum benefits to the company and the overseas investor rather than the Korean individual. Ultimately, then, the narrative undermines faith in the neoliberal corporate structures, while providing an ode to *chŏng* as the true connection of affection that was traditionally thought to bind workers together in meaningful harmonious relationships. *Misaeng's* narrative also focuses on homosocial bonding as a precondition for respectful relationships and survival: the workplace is claustrophobic, but it is so because of individual workers' willingness to buy into the logic of transnational business masculinities as a norm that builds on "the competitive individualism of contemporary business ideology."⁵⁴ So while on the one hand the narrative illustrates how corporate workers buy into the logic of entrepreneurship of the self (or self as an object of entrepreneurship) – as reflected in their conformity of maintaining corporate code of dress and appearance⁵⁵ – the main characters appeal to the majority of working men who know that they will never be able to reach the executive ladder of the corporate sector. Therefore, through presenting a critical perspective embodied in the refusal of the main characters to buy into the aesthetic conformity of the corporate world, the male characters in this drama present a powerful cultural counter-discourse to transnational business masculinities. Transnational corporate masculinities are presented as an anathema to "authentic" Korean masculinity defined by shared cultural values, rather than entrepreneurship of the self.

Conclusions

This article has discussed how transgressive appearances and overly compliant parodying of social signs of respect and humility present embodied sites of critique and resistance to contemporary neoliberal hegemonic masculinities. In *Misaeng*, the underdogs are depicted as truly manly men (*namjadaun namja*) not because of their accidental successes in mimicking the corporate ideal of the disciplined individual, but because of their desire to maintain traditional Korean values. While it should be pointed out that these "traditional" values are of course as much a product of social discourses that go back no further than the "New Village Movement" (*Saemaŭl undong*) of the 1970s, the success of the program and the way in which these flawed characters have resonated with the viewing audiences suggests a broader desire to resist individual-centered work aspirations as the new norm. In many ways then, these narratives work to reclaim *Korean* or national masculinity back from what is seen as inauthentic (and perhaps foreign) pursuit of individual gain. The return of the unprivileged but hardworking "common man" who has no connections to speak of (or refuses to utilize them as a matter of principle) and

whose unsophisticated adherence to traditional values sits uneasily within the competitive corporate landscape, emerges as an uplifting cultural narrative that rejects domination and neoliberal logic as desirable markers of hegemonic masculinity. Symptomatic of the growing unease with the increasingly alienating landscape of the Korean corporate cultures, the common corporate worker is once more presented as the place of return, a site of cultural counter politics of resistance to the more negative aspects of the contemporary corporate cultures which normalize abuses of power through engendering neoliberal technologies of the self.

Bibliography

Ahn, Sung-Mi. "Misaeng' syndrome grips the nation." *Korea Herald*, November 12, 2014. [The Korea Herald: "Misaeng' Syndrome Grips the Nation"](#).

Bae, Byung-yul. "Webtoons emerge as source for dramas, films." *Korea Times*, January 27, 2016. [The Korea Times: "Webtoons emerge as source for dramas, films"](#).

Cho, Yung-Ho, Gyu-Chang Yu, Min-Kyu Joo, and Chris Rowley. "Changing Corporate Culture over Time in South Korea." *Asia Pacific Business Review* 20, no. 1 (2014): 9-17. [Asia Pacific Business Review: "Changing corporate culture over time in South Korea"](#).

Cho, Yung-Ho and Jeongkoo Yoon. "The Origin and Function of Dynamic Collectivism: An Analysis of Korean Corporate Culture." *Asia Pacific Business Review* 7, no. 4 (2001): 70-88. [Asia Pacific Business Review: "The Origin and Function of Dynamic Collectivism"](#).

Choi, Chungmoo. "Nationalism and Construction of Gender in Korea." In *Dangerous Women, Gender & Korean Nationalism*, edited by Elaine H. Kim and Chungmoo Choi, 9–31. New York and London: Routledge, 1998.

Connell, Robert. "Politics of Changing Men." *Australian Humanities Review* 4 (1996). [Australian Humanities Review: "Politics of Changing Men"](#).

Connell, Raewyn and James Messerschmidt. "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept." *Gender and Society* 19, no. 6 (2005): 829-859. [Gender and Society: "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept"](#).

Connell, Raewyn and Julian Wood, "Globalization and Business Masculinities," *Men and Masculinities* 7, no. 5 (2005): 347-364. [Men and Masculinities: "Globalization and Business Masculinities"](#).

Dasgupta, Romit. *Re-reading the Salaryman in Japan: Crafting Masculinities*. Routledge/Asian Studies Association of Australia East Asia series; 13. New York: Routledge, 2013.

Denney, Steven. "South Korea's New Labor Plan Looks to TV Drama." *The Diplomat*, December 31, 2014. [The Diplomat: "South Korea's New Labor Plan Looks to TV Drama"](#).

Elfving-Hwang, Joanna. "Cosmetic Surgery and Embodying the Moral Self in South Korean Popular Makeover Culture." *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 11, Issue 24, no. 2, June 17, 2013. [PDF: "Cosmetic Surgery and Embodying the Moral Self in South Korean Popular Makeover Culture"](#).

Elfving-Hwang, Joanna. "Old, Down and Out? Appearance, Body Work and Positive Ageing among Elderly South Korean Women." *Journal of Aging Studies* 38(2) (2016): 6-15. [Journal of Aging Studies: "Appearance, body work and positive ageing among elderly South Korean women"](#).

Gledhill, Christine. "Speculations on the Relationship between Soap Opera and Melodrama." In *American Television: New Directions in History and Theory*, edited by Nick Browne, 123-144. New York: Routledge, 2013.

Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. London & New York: Penguin Books, 1990. Originally published by Anchor Books, 1959.

Han, Jongwoo and Ling, L. H. M. "Authoritarianism in the Hypermasculinized State: Hybridity, Patriarchy and Capitalism in Korea." *International Studies Quarterly* 42 (1998): 53-78. [International Studies Quarterly: "Authoritarianism in the Hypermasculinized State"](#).

Hong, Denny. "Explosive Success of Korean TV Drama Misaeng." *Korea Today*, Episode 722, Arirang Television Broadcast. Seoul: South Korea. December 11, 2014.

Jun, Woo and Chris Rowley. "Change and Continuity in Management Systems and Corporate Performance: Human Resource Management, Corporate Culture, Risk Management and Corporate Strategy in South Korea." *Business History* 56, no. 3 (2014): 485-508. [Business History: "Change and continuity in management systems and corporate performance"](#).

Kim, Seung-kyung and John Finch. "Living with Rhetoric, Living against Rhetoric: Korean Families and the IMF Economic Crisis." *Korean Studies* 26, no. 1 (2002): 120-39. [PDF: "Living with Rhetoric, Living against Rhetoric: Korean Families and the IMF Economic Crisis"](#).

Kim, Yeran. "Idol republic: the global emergence of girl industries and the commercialisation of girl bodies." *Journal of Gender Studies* 20, no. 4 (2011): 333-345. [Journal of Gender Studies: "Idol Republic: the global emergence of girl industries"](#).

Kimmel, Michael. "Masculinity as Homophobia: Fear, Shame and Silence in the Construction of Gender Identity." In *Feminism and Masculinities*, edited by Peter F. Murphy, 182-199. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

Korean Labor Institute Statistics. "Employment Report 2015," December 2015. file:///C:/Users/00081053/Downloads/2015_%E2%85%A1_Employment.pdf

Lee, Jin-kyung. "Surrogate Military, Subimperialism, and Masculinity: South Korea in the Vietnam War, 1965-73." *Positions* 13, no. 3 (2009): 655-82. [Positions: "Asia Critique: Surrogate Military, Subimperialism, and Masculinity"](#).

- Lee, Seung-Hwan. "The Social Meaning of Body in Confucian Tradition: Between Moral and Political Power." *Korea Journal* 44 (2) (2004): 5-29.
- Maliangkay, Roald. "The Effeminacy of Male Beauty in Korea." *IAS Newsletter* 55 (2010): 6-7.
- Moon, Seungsook. "The Production and Subversion of Hegemonic Masculinity: Reconfiguring Gender Hierarchy in Contemporary South Korea." In *Under Construction*, edited by Lauren Kendall, 79-114. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002.
- Moon, Seungsook. "Trouble with Conscription, Entertaining Soldiers: Popular Culture and the Politics of Militarized Masculinity in South Korea." *Men and Masculinities* 8, no. 1 (2005): 64-92. [Men and Masculinities: "Trouble with Conscription, Entertaining Soldiers"](#).
- Moon, Seungsook. "Begetting the Nation: The Androcentric Discourse of National History and Tradition in South Korea." In *Dangerous Women: Gender & Korean Nationalism*, edited by Elaine H. Kim and Chungmoo Choi, 33-66. New York and London: Routledge, 1998.
- Murphree, Hyun Joo Yoo. "Transnational Cultural Production and the Politics of Moribund Masculinity." *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 16, no. 3 (2008): 661-688. Project MUSE.
- Murphy, Peter. *Feminism and Masculinities*. Oxford: OUP Oxford, 2004.
- Nelson, Laura C. *Measured Excess: Status, Gender and Consumer Nationalism in South Korea*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2000.
- Park, You-Me. "The Crucible of Sexual Violence: Militarized Masculinities and the Abjection of Life in Post-Crisis, Neoliberal South Korea." *Everyday Militarism* 42, no. 1 (2016): 17-40. [Everyday Militarism: "The Crucible of Sexual Violence: Militarized Masculinities"](#).
- Reeser, Todd W. *Masculinities in Theory*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.
- Renshaw, Jean R. *Korean Women Managers and Corporate Culture Challenging Tradition, Choosing Empowerment, Creating Change*. Routledge Studies in the Growth Economies of Asia. Florence: Taylor and Francis, 2012.
- Saeji, CedarBough T. "Juvenile protection and sexual objectification: analysis of the performance frame in Korean music television broadcasts." *Acta Koreana* 16, no. 2 (2013): 329-365. [Acta Koreana: "Juvenile protection and sexual objectification"](#).
- Shin, Kwang-Yeong. "Economic Crisis, Neoliberal Reforms, and the Rise of Precarious Work in South Korea." *American Behavioral Scientist* 57, no. 3 (2013): 335-353. [American Behavioral Scientist: "Economic Crisis, Neoliberal Reforms, and the Rise of Precarious Work in South Korea"](#).
- tvN, *Misaeng* promotional website: [TVing](#). Last accessed October 6, 2017.

Yoon, Tae-ho. *Misaeng* [Incomplete Life], Webtoon, 2012. Available at: [Webtoon](#). Last accessed October 4, 2017.

Yoon, Tae-ho. *Misaeng, ajik sar-a itji mothan cha*. Vol 1. Seoul: Wuijüdüöm hausü, 2012.

Endnotes

¹ Webtoons (web-based comics/graphic novels) have become extremely influential in the contemporary Korean cultural context, and their wide popularity indicates the role they play in shaping popular attitudes toward social issues, cultural values and even politics. The most popular webtoons deal with issues of social importance to average citizens, and often address issues that are highly topical as the serialized online publishing format allows for a quick process of getting creative content out at minimum risk. Unlike television miniseries which usually tend to rely on recycling “safe” subject topics because of their high production cost and need for high viewer ratings to recoup their costs, webtoons have arguably become one of the most accessible outlets for the dissemination of new creative content and imaginative story lines. Similarly to the way in which many popular literary works of 1970s and 1980s Korea were turned into film adaptations, television producers have turned to webtoons to source popular content for television miniseries (Byung-yul Baek, “Webtoons emerge as source for dramas, films,” *Korea Times* January 27, 2016, [The Korea Times: "Webtoons emerge as source for dramas, films"](#)). As story lines which garner a significant number of hits online are taken as indicators of wider popular interest in the topic addressed by a given webtoon, television producers are increasingly developing a more or less symbiotic relationship with webtoon artists. Conversely, the webtoon authors also benefit from TV drama success which can lead to increased sales of print copies of their work. This was the case with *Misaeng*, which has since the broadcasting of the TV series sold over two million copies, and became the best-selling print book in 2014. (Mi-hwan Oh, “*Misaeng*” webtoon and drama... the *manhwa* sells 2 million copies, *Hanguk Ilbo* 26 November 2014: ["Misaeng" webtoon and drama manhwa copies](#))

² Sung-Mi Ahn, ““*Misaeng*” syndrome grips the nation,” *Korea Herald* (English edition), November 12, 2014, [The Korea Herald: "Misaeng' syndrome grips the nation"](#).

³ While the term “salaryman” (*saellerimaen*) was in use in Korea until the 1990s, the terms “*hoesawŏn*” (company worker) and “*chigwŏn*” (employee) are more commonly used today because of their gender-neutral connotation.

⁴ Michael Kimmel, “Masculinity as Homophobia: Fear, Shame and Silence in the Construction of Gender Identity,” in *Feminism and Masculinities*, edited by Peter F. Murphy, 182-199 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 184.

⁵ Sung-won Yoon, “Office Workers are already Missing *Misaeng*,” *Korea Times* December 21, 2014, [The Korea Times: "Office workers already missing 'Misaeng'"](#)

⁶ Denny Hong, “Explosive Success of Korean TV Drama *Misaeng*,” *Korea Today*, Episode 722, Arirang Television Broadcast, Seoul: South Korea, 11 December 2014.

⁷ Christine Gledhill, "Speculations on the Relationship between Soap Opera and Melodrama," in *American Television: New Directions in History and Theory*, edited by Nick Browne, 123-144 (New York: Routledge, 2013), 135.

⁸ Kimmel, "Masculinity as Homophobia," 194.

⁹ Robert Connell, "Politics of Changing Men," *Australian Humanities Review* 4 (December 1996), [Australian Humanities Review: "Politics of Changing Men"](#).

¹⁰ See for example: Yeran Kim, "Idol Republic: the Global Emergence of Girl Industries and the Commercialisation of Girl Bodies," *Journal of Gender Studies* 20, no. 4 (2011), 333-345, [Journal of Gender Studies: "Idol Republic: the global emergence of girl industries"](#); and CedarBough T. Saeji, "Juvenile protection and sexual objectification: analysis of the performance frame in Korean music television broadcasts," *Acta Koreana* 16, no. 2 (2013): 329-365, [Acta Koreana: "Juvenile protection and sexual objectification"](#).

¹¹ After the final episode of *Misaeng* aired, the government introduced a proposal for a new law to improve the working conditions of workers on temporary contracts. While no claim is made here that the proposal was in any way linked to the television drama discussed here, the fact that the plan was dubbed "Chang Kŭrae Protection Law" after the main protagonist of *Misaeng*, speaks of the iconic status that the main character had taken in the public imaginary (see Steven Denney, "South Korea's New Labor Plan Looks to TV Drama," *The Diplomat*, December 31, 2014, [The Diplomat: "South Korea's New Labor Plan Looks to TV Drama"](#))

¹² Raewyn Connell & James Messerschmidt, "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept," *Gender and Society* 19, no. 6 (2005): 842, [Gender and Society: "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept"](#).

¹³ Seungsook Moon, "Trouble with Conscription, Entertaining Soldiers: Popular Culture and the Politics of Militarized Masculinity in South Korea," *Men and Masculinities* 8, no. 1 (2005): 66, [Men and Masculinities: "Trouble with Conscription, Entertaining Soldiers"](#).

¹⁴ Choi, Chungmoo, "Nationalism and Construction of Gender in Korea," in *Dangerous Women, Gender & Korean Nationalism*, edited by Elaine H. Kim and Chungmoo Choi, 9-31 (New York and London: Routledge, 1998), 20.

¹⁵ Seungsook Moon, "Begetting the Nation: The Androcentric Discourse of National History and Tradition in South Korea," in *Dangerous Women: Gender & Korean Nationalism*, edited by Elaine H. Kim and Chungmoo Choi, 33-66 (New York and London: Routledge, 1998), 42.

¹⁶ Jin-kyung Lee, "Surrogate Military, Subimperialism, and Masculinity: South Korea in the Vietnam War, 1965-73," *Positions* 13(3) (2009): 660, [Positions: "Asia Critique: Surrogate Military, Subimperialism, and Masculinity"](#).

¹⁷ See Jongwoo Han and L. H. M. Ling, "Authoritarianism in the Hypermasculinized State: Hybridity, Patriarchy and Capitalism in Korea," *International Studies Quarterly* 42 (1998): 65,

[International Studies Quarterly: "Authoritarianism in the Hypermasculinized State"](#) and Hyun Joo Yoo Murphree, "Transnational Cultural Production and the Politics of Moribund Masculinity." *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 16, no. 3 (2008): 662-663, Project MUSE.

¹⁸ Romit Dasgupta, *Re-reading the Salaryman in Japan: Crafting Masculinities*. Routledge/Asian Studies Association of Australia East Asia series; 13 (New York: Routledge, 2013), 29.

¹⁹ Seung-kyung Kim and John Finch, "Living with Rhetoric, Living against Rhetoric: Korean Families and the IMF Economic Crisis," *Korean Studies* 26, no. 1 (2002): 123, [PDF: "Living with Rhetoric, Living against Rhetoric: Korean Families and the IMF Economic Crisis"](#).

²⁰ Kim and Finch, "Living with Rhetoric," 127-130.

²¹ Jesook Song, *South Koreans in the Debt Crisis, the Creation of a Neoliberal Welfare Society* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 52.

²² Films dealing with the troubled North-South Korea relations such as *Swiri* (1999), *JSA Joint Security Area* (2000) and *Last Witness* (2002) can be seen as examples of such. The number of Korean War films which focused on brotherhood and heroism under extreme stress, such as *Taegugki: The Brotherhood of War* (2004) and *Welcome to Dongmakgol* (2005) also focused on characters who suffered trauma but found comfort in building strong homosocial ties over fighting for a just or common cause.

²³ Roald Maliangkay, "The Effeminacy of Male Beauty in Korea," *IIAS Newsletter* 55 (2010): 6-7.

²⁴ This said, willingness to resort to acts of violence has continued to feature as a marker of hypermasculinity in popular culture whether or not the male lead character is carefully groomed or not. Moreover, where a character is represented as queer or gay, this is often achieved through excessive, camp "gay gesturing" (*kki*) rather than through clothing and use of makeup.

²⁵ Yung-Ho Cho and Jeongkoo Yoon, "The Origin and Function of Dynamic Collectivism: An Analysis of Korean Corporate Culture," *Asia Pacific Business Review* 7(4) (2001), 71, [Asia Pacific Business Review: "The Origin and Function of Dynamic Collectivism"](#).

²⁶ Yung-Ho Cho, Gyu-Chang Yu, Min-Kyu Joo, and Chris Rowley, "Changing Corporate Culture over Time in South Korea," *Asia Pacific Business Review* 20(1) (2014), 11, [Asia Pacific Business Review: "Changing Corporate Culture over Time in South Korea"](#).

²⁷ Song, *South Koreans in the Debt Crisis*, 96.

²⁸ Song, *South Koreans in the Debt Crisis*, 98-99.

²⁹ Song, *South Koreans in the Debt Crisis*, 99.

³⁰ Shin, Kwang-Yeong. "Economic Crisis, Neoliberal Reforms, and the Rise of Precarious Work in South Korea." *American Behavioral Scientist* 57, no. 3 (2013): 340; 347. [American Behavioral Scientist: "Economic Crisis, Neoliberal Reforms, and the Rise of Precarious Work in South Korea"](#).

³¹ You-Me Park, "The Crucible of Sexual Violence: Militarized Masculinities and the Abjection of Life in Post-Crisis, Neoliberal South Korea," *Everyday Militarism* 42(1) (2016), 19, [Everyday Militarism: "The Crucible of Sexual Violence: Militarized Masculinities"](#)

³² You-Me Park, "The Crucible of Sexual Violence," 20.

³³ Jean R. Renshaw, *Korean Women Managers and Corporate Culture Challenging Tradition, Choosing Empowerment, Creating Change*, Routledge Studies in the Growth Economies of Asia (Florence: Taylor and Francis, 2012), 72-73.

³⁴ Byoung-Hoon Lee and Kim Jong-Sung, "A Causal Analysis of Youth Inactiveness in the Korean Labor Market," *Korea Journal* 52, no. 4 (2012): 140-142.

³⁵ Korean Labor Institute Statistics, "Employment Report 2015," December 2015, file:///C:/Users/00081053/Downloads/2015_%E2%85%A1_Employment.pdf

³⁶ Woo Jun and Chris Rowley, "Change and Continuity in Management Systems and Corporate Performance: Human Resource Management, Corporate Culture, Risk Management and Corporate Strategy in South Korea," *Business History* 56, no. 3 (2014), 495. [Business History: "Change and continuity in management systems and corporate performance"](#).

³⁷ Laura C. Nelson, *Measured Excess: Status, Gender and Consumer Nationalism in South Korea* (New York: Columbia UP, 2000), 187.

³⁸ Nelson, *Measured Excess*, 187.

³⁹ *History of the Salaryman* (SBS) reached a staggering 21.7% final audience share when the final episode was broadcast in March 2013 (AGB Nielsen, 2013)

⁴⁰ Todd W. Reeser, *Masculinities in Theory* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 27-28.

⁴¹ Yoon Tae-ho, "Introduction," in *Misaeng, ajik sar-a itji mothan cha*, Vol 1: 4-6 (Seoul: Wuijüddöm hausü 2012), 5.

⁴² Foucault, *Discipline and Punish, The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), 170.

⁴³ Oh Sang-sik's name is again a play with words, and can be translated as "Oh common sense," which ironically is shown not to take him very far in the fictional company of One International Trading.

- ⁴⁴ Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (London & New York: Penguin Books, 1990 [Originally published by Anchor Books, 1959]), 37.
- ⁴⁵ Seung-Hwan Lee, "The Social Meaning of Body in Confucian Tradition: Between Moral and Political Power," *Korea Journal* 44 (2) (2004), 9.
- ⁴⁶ Seung-Hwan Lee, "The Social Meaning of Body," 10.
- ⁴⁷ Joanna Elfving-Hwang, "Cosmetic Surgery and Embodying the Moral Self in South Korean Popular Makeover Culture," *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 11, Issue 24, no. 2 (June 17, 2013), 2.
- ⁴⁸ Joanna Elfving-Hwang, "Old, Down and Out? Appearance, Body Work and Positive Ageing among Elderly South Korean Women," *Journal of Aging Studies* 38(2) (2016), 10, [Journal of Aging Studies: "Appearance, body work and positive ageing among elderly South Korean women"](#)
- ⁴⁹ Joanna Elfving-Hwang, "Old, Down and Out," 9-10.
- ⁵⁰ "Making of *Misaeng*," *Misaeng TV Series Deluxe Set (Director's Cut)*, DVD Disk Set (Seoul, South Korea: CJ Entertainment, 2015). The way in which the link between the original webtoon artwork and the television series was also emphasized in the innovative marketing material for the program in which each of the actors in character were shown as "half-drawn" cartoon characters (see for example: [TVing](#)).
- ⁵¹ See [Webtoon](#) for examples of these aesthetics.
- ⁵² Connell and Messerschmidt, "Hegemonic Masculinity," 836-838.
- ⁵³ Seung-Hwan Lee, "The Social Meaning of Body," 18.
- ⁵⁴ Raewyn Connell and Julian Wood, "Globalization and Business Masculinities," *Men and Masculinities* 7 (5) (2005), 353, [Men and Masculinities: "Globalization and Business Masculinities"](#).
- ⁵⁵ Connell and Wood observe similar conformity in dress code and even political opinion in their study of Australian corporate masculinities in "Globalization and Business Masculinities," 353.