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PUBLIC FATHERING, PRIVATE MOTHERING:

Gendered Transnational Parenting and Class Reproduction among Elite Korean Students

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Drawing on 68 interviews with South Korean students at elite U.S. colleges, this article examines the intersectional power of gender and class in elite transnational parenting—a family strategy for class reproduction. Well-educated, stay-at-home mothers intensively managed their children’s school activities, often relying on gender-segregated networks, mostly during early school years. By contrast, cosmopolitan professional fathers heavily engaged in guiding their children’s education abroad and career preparation in later years, using their class resources (i.e., English proficiency, professional careers, and social networks of other elites). In high-achieving children’s narratives, mothers’ lifelong care for and management of their private life was undervalued and criticized, while fathers’ growing involvement in their higher education and career was highly valued and appreciated. The elite fathers’ occasional yet detailed involvement challenges the dichotomy that has long stereotyped Korean—or East Asian—mothers as overinvolved and fathers as distant in their children’s lives, especially with regard to education. Gender, through intensive parenting, reinforces and reproduces class disparity between elite couples and within their families.

Keywords: Asian; elite; family; parenting; transnational

Educating children abroad, mostly in English-speaking countries, has been a strategy of affluent Asian parents to maintain their class status intergenerationally in the global economy (see Bartley 2003; Chee 2003;

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Waters 2005). In South Korea (hereafter Korea), the nationwide aspiration for a cosmopolitan life led many affluent parents to send their children to schools abroad, roughly since the late 1990s. Consequently, the number of Korean international students dramatically increased in the 2000s: in 2016, about 58,663 Korean students attended U.S. colleges and universities, more than from any other country except China and India, whose populations are more than 20 times that of Korea’s (Statista 2017). The overrepresentation of Korean students also is apparent in the case of elite colleges. For example, Korean applications to Harvard tripled from 2003 to 2008 (Dillon 2008), and at Yale, Korean students represented the fourth largest ethnic group among international students, following students from China, Canada, and India (Yale International Students and Scholars Office 2016).

Korea has experienced what Douglass (2012) has referred to as “global householding,” a phenomenon where family members reside separately from each other. This transnational arrangement typically involves children receiving education abroad, mostly in North America, and sometimes accompanied by their mothers. It has prompted public criticism, particularly toward mothers, given the expectation that maternal duties include educating children. More often than fathers, mothers are criticized for “focusing too intently on social reproduction and personal mobility” (Abelmann and Kang 2014, 2). Mothers integrated into what are popularly known in Korea as “wild geese” families—ones with fathers staying behind in Korea and mothers accompanying children abroad—are often seen as the sole “directors” of families whose relocation risks engendering family bonds (E. Cho 2010; D.-H. Lee 2008). Despite such censure, children’s education abroad has been constructed, and is still employed as, an affluent family strategy for class reproduction in Korea. And while the mothers of those families have been the focus of public reprimand—or envy—regarding their children’s exclusive educational opportunities, fathers have not been discussed nearly as much.

Drawing on interviews with 68 Korean students at seven elite U.S. colleges, I examine the gendered aspects of parental involvement in the transnational education of high-achieving Korean students. I address the following questions: According to the children’s narratives, how do Korean mothers and fathers differently engage in their children’s transnational education? What constitutes a “good” mother and a “good” father within families and in social circles, and who receives more credit for children’s achievements? How do children’s gendered expectations of mothers and fathers shape the perception and evaluation children have of their parents?
My analysis of such families reveals the power of gender in the intergenerational reproduction of class privilege. An examination of global householding requires careful categorization of parental involvement. Parental involvement consists of parents’ special contributions to, or investments in, their child’s development (Furstenberg 1998). In this paper, it means the extent to which parents are concerned with (a) managing and guiding their children’s education; (b) utilizing social networks to assist their children; (c) serving as an exemplar for their children’s career; and (d) providing emotional support to their children. I show how gender, intersecting with class, differently shapes the involvement of mothers and fathers with their children’s life trajectories. Gender also shapes, I argue, who eventually receives more credit and respect for their children’s achievement.

CLASSED, GENDERED, AND RACIALIZED PARENTING FOR CLASS REPRODUCTION

Parenting is a site for class reproduction (Byrne 2006; Fox 2006; Gillies 2005), especially in a society where class is dynamic and “something that has to be achieved and struggled for” (Byrne 2006, 1002). Parents’ life conditions, especially occupational, largely shape their child rearing techniques and values (Kohn 1963). In her widely cited study, Lareau (1989, 2002, 2003) argued that class tends to outweigh race in shaping parenting styles. Using their financial, educational, and cultural resources, affluent parents tend to transfer their class privilege to their children through active involvement in their children’s lives. Swartz (2008, 2009) showed that parents’ long-time material and practical support for children enables the children to accumulate greater human capital compared to children who do not receive such parental support.

Class does not act alone: class, race, and gender simultaneously shape the expectations that parents have for their children, as well as parenting practices. The term “cultural logic of parenting” often implies an attempt to capture the interlocking impact of class, race, gender, and migration status. Many studies (Calarco 2014; Condron 2009; Cucchiara and Horvat 2009) developed Lareau’s theory by highlighting the ways class intersects with race, ethnicity, and other social locations to shape parenting. Ceballo (2004) and Cheadle and Amato (2011) showed how “concerted cultivation” (Lareau 2003), a strategy that incorporates diverse well-planned learning activities, has developed as a U.S.-based, white, middle-class parenting style that relies on parents’ racial, socioeconomic, and migrant
status. Not many studies, however, have examined how populations outside the United States implement such parenting strategies.

As a “basis for the distribution of rights, power, privilege, and responsibilities” (Risman 1998, 4), gender underpins cultural expectations concerning the ways men and women perform as “good” parents in the intergenerational transfer of resources. Across cultures, mothers tend to have more responsibilities for children’s well-being and education than fathers do. As primary caregivers of their children who conduct most of the “status production work” (Papanek 1979), middle-class mothers are expected to “train children in class-appropriate language, behavior, appearance, physical and intellectual skills, health, hygiene, and even presentation of the self” (777). This “intensive mothering,” which requires a significant amount of time, money, and devotion (Blair-Loy 2003; Hays 1996; Leigh et al. 2012), occasionally has been discussed as a set of strategies through which white, middle-class mothers seek to transmit class privilege to the next generation.

With a purported revolution in fatherhood, “new age dads” (Douglas and Michaels 2004) are now expected to be more nurturing and involved. Studies (Billier 1993; Wenk et al. 1994) found that fathers’ supportive involvement in child rearing is likely to enhance children’s self-esteem, life satisfaction, and social competence. Research, however, suggests a class divide in contemporary fathering—between professional fathers’ intermittent but highly visible “public fathering” and working-class fathers’ daily and less visible “private fathering” (Shows and Gerstel 2009). Lareau (2003) also argued that affluent fathers’ participation in “concerted cultivation” helps the transfer of parents’ class privilege to their children. Despite such a class divide, fathers are still expected to perform primarily as “good providers” in most two-parent families (Christiansen and Palkovitz 2001). The close link between mothers and child rearing continues to discourage fathers who happen to or volunteer to become primary caregivers of their children (Doucet 2006). The mother-focused family literature has not yet documented the character of “hands-on” fathers’ involvement and children’s perception of it.

Parenting literature (Backett 1982; Brannen and Moss 1987; Doucet 1995) has focused on the gender divide in the early years of parenting. In response, recent scholarship (Ball, Bowe, and Gewirtz 1996; Reay, Crozier, and James 2011; Wilkins 2012) is paying more attention to the parenting of adolescents or young adult children, particularly with regard to class-based school choices. While earlier researchers tended to examine parents’ perspectives, some recent studies (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013;
Fingerman et al. 2009) examined children’s views of parental support for academic and career achievement. However, because of the difficulties of “studying up” (Nader 1972), few studies have examined the parenting of adolescents or young adults in elite families, despite its significant role in the intergenerational reproduction of privilege.

By the same token, much research on transnational families (Fresnoza-Flot 2009; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997; Parreñas 2013; Uy-Tioco 2007) assumes that most transnational parents are working-class. It overlooks elite transnational parents’ attempts to reproduce class through children’s education, a strategy which has grown among Asian “new rich” populations (see Ong 1999; Waters 2005). Existing studies of education-driven Asian transnational families rely primarily on self-reports of mothers. The gender divide in such parenting, along with children’s views of it, is rarely documented. Drawing on Korean young adult children’s narratives, my study fills the gap by delineating both parents’ financial and nonfinancial involvements in their children’s elite transnational upbringing.

GENDER EXPECTATIONS OF KOREAN MOTHERS AND FATHERS

East Asian parenting is often described as overinvolved, authoritarian, and emotionally distant (A. Kim and Pyke 2015). Korean parents in particular often are stereotyped as “too children-focused” when it comes to utilizing family resources (see E. Cho 2004). Studies with cultural approaches, however, tend not to differentiate between gender and class, or how they shape each other, in such intensive parenting.

As in many other societies, gender largely shapes expectations and roles of parents in Korea, but gendered parenting styles also vary significantly based on class. In middle-class Korean families, mothers are expected to sacrifice themselves and their careers for the sake of their children’s education. “Good” mothers are viewed as the ones who provide their children with day-to-day, intensive attention so the children can become capable and competitive. To do so, mothers need to have profound knowledge of child rearing and the education system to which their children belong (Hong 2014).

Studies argue that Korean society burdens women with heavy domestic duties (E. Cho 2010; H.-J. Cho and Bang 2005; Yang and Shin 2011). Whether working outside the home or not, the ideal of the “perfect mother” as one who sacrifices herself for her children and is judged by children’s accomplishments is often internalized by Korean mothers (Chun 2002;
Particularly among parents of school-aged children, raising their children to be competitive is usually considered the responsibility of mothers, not fathers (Hwang 2012; E.-A. Lee 2013). In addition to the intense management of education, mothers, far more than fathers, also are expected to provide their children with emotional care and support on a daily basis (M.-H. Kim 2005).

Highly educated, middle-class Korean mothers especially are likely to share this “institutionalized maternalism,” which involves mothers’ self-giving, unceasing “service” to their children (Lim 2001). Consequently, stay-at-home mothers who have enough time and energy for their children’s education are often seen as “better” mothers than those who juggle work and family (Park 2009). Simultaneously, mothers who intensively engage in their children’s education often are criticized for being over-involved and instrumental. The term “Chi-ma-ba-ram” (literally meaning “the swish of a skirt,” a rough Korean equivalent to “helicopter mom”) stereotypes and even pathologizes Korean mothers as excessive when it comes to children’s education (Abelmann and Kang 2014; Lim 2001). In contrast, Korean fathers, regardless of class, are rarely accused of being overinvolved in their children’s education.

Like those in U.S. neo-traditional families, Korean fathers are expected to perform primarily as providers for their families rather than as caregivers or nurturers. Song (2011) showed that recent increases in time spent by Korean parents on child care result much more from an increase in mothers’ than fathers’ time. Breadwinner fathers who financially support their children’s education are often seen as fulfilling their paternal duties, while fathers who are—or who are willing to become—primary caregivers of their families often suffer the stigma attached to male nurturers (Na 2014). And the literature tends to overlook transnational arrangements that can modify presumed gender roles.

Transnational families experience and negotiate expectations organized around a gender divide in their relationships. Scholars (Abrego 2009; Dreby 2006; Dreby and Adkins 2010; Parreñas 2001, 2005; Waters 2002) have found that gender ideologies are often reinforced in transnational families: women have been the nurturers and men the providers. This gender divide also is found among Korean education-driven transnational households: a handful of studies suggest that mothers of “wild geese” families tend to take primary responsibility for their children’s well-being and education. Fathers, on the other hand, usually support the “family project” financially from a distance, and not much in other ways (see Finch and Kim 2012; Y.-J. Lee and Koo 2006).
Transnational family literature has not yet examined extensively non-financial paternal contributions, as well as the ways in which children in those families understand and respond to the gender divide. I, therefore, examine how both mothers and fathers in elite transnational families—who often have different levels of class-based resources—differently engage in their children’s transnational upbringing. Moreover, I analyze their children’s perceptions of the gender divide.

METHODS

Using in-depth, semi-structured questions, I interviewed 68 students who identified as Koreans at seven elite U.S. colleges from winter 2014 through summer 2016. I define elite colleges as those that have a lower than 15 percent acceptance rate; the majority of colleges I contacted were highly prestigious “Ivy League” schools. To recruit respondents, I distributed recruiting emails through the mailing lists of Korean student organizations at the colleges I chose. Because of a low initial response rate, I asked participants from this first phase to help me locate others. The contacts recruited through this respondent-driven sampling did not exceed three students from any initial participant.

Fifty-eight interviews were conducted face-to-face in a café or restaurant near the respondents’ schools, and 10 interviews were conducted via online video calls. Interviews lasted between 80 minutes and 2.5 hours, with the average in the two-hour range. Interviews were designed to ask about the ways mothers and fathers engaged in their children’s education, as well as the experiences of family life during stages of their educational trajectories.

I interviewed 35 sons and 33 daughters. Most were international students in the United States, but some had dual citizenship in the United States and Korea, as they were born in the United States while their parents were attending graduate school or working in the country. Of the 68 students, 35 graduated from high school outside of Korea, mostly from prestigious U.S. boarding schools, while the remainder came to the United States for college after graduating from prestigious Korean high schools.

Most of the students’ parents were living in Korea at the time of the interviews, except for five parents (two couples and one father) who were residing in third countries for their occupations. Also, there were four couples who eventually migrated to the United States for their children’s education. Those migrant families were “outliers” in my sample in terms of class: according to the children, their families experienced downward
mobility after migration, particularly in terms of fathers’ careers. Those students were more likely to receive financial aid from college than their upper-middle- or upper-class counterparts. Except for those four students, most transnational students considered themselves to be from upper-middle- or upper-class families.

All mothers and fathers graduated from college. About two-thirds of fathers earned master’s or doctoral degrees, often from U.S. colleges, whereas less than one-third of mothers earned postgraduate degrees. Only 15 mothers of the 68 held full-time jobs, whereas the majority of fathers were well-paid professionals, such as Chief Executive Officers (CEOs), executives of large corporations, lawyers, doctors, or professors. Regardless of their residency, fathers were the sole or primary breadwinners in all but one families. The majority of mothers were outside the labor force, even though many of them had professional jobs before marriage or having children. According to the children, most mothers quit their jobs as they thought them incompatible with intensive parenting. Even in the migrant families, fathers tended to have higher social statuses and incomes than mothers, both before and after migration.

My use of students’ narratives provides a useful approach to meanings that they “relate about their own life episodes or lives” (Polkinghorne 1996, 77). The young adult children’s accounts are reflective of their own experiences, but they also shed light on the household and parenting arrangements in which they grew up. While the homogeneity of the sample allows me to consider some within-group variations, it does not allow me to compare my sample and their lower-class counterparts. Instead, studying elite families is a “strategy of the extreme case” (Blair-Loy 2003) that seeks to document highly resourceful agents and any structural constraint that limits them.

After transcribing interviews, I read transcripts multiple times and loosely coded them, first based on the main questions of interest in the study, then proceeding to more “focused coding” following constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz 2014). While coding, I compared narratives with one another and to themes in the existing literature on intensive mothering, transnational families, and the impact of class on parenting. If respondents used any English word or phrase while speaking mostly in Korean during interviews, I used their exact word or phrase as much as possible. Because most respondents used their English names more frequently than their Korean names, I used English pseudonyms throughout.
Mothers’ “Concerted Cultivation” in Early Years

Students reported that in the early years before they entered high school, their mothers put more time and effort into their children’s education than fathers did. Most mothers, graduates from four-year colleges or above, seemed to confidently teach their children various subjects, especially English, when the children were young. Moreover, searching for the best *hagwon* (supplementary educational institute) or private tutor for their children’s schoolwork and extracurricular activities was an important part of their early mothering.

Yvonne, who spent her childhood in the Middle East, recalled her mother’s intensive involvement in her early education:

I remember my mom always encouraged me to study hard when I was in elementary school. . . . She made me work on math and science workbooks after school every day. She also made me read a lot of books. I think she ordered them [books in Korean language] from Korea and got those via air mail.

Even though Yvonne described her mother’s early involvement as intense, she did not refer to her as an overinvolved “tiger mom.” Students seemed to have expected their mothers to be highly involved, particularly early in their lives. The involved mom, in these early days, was in the children’s eyes a “good” mom whose intensive help was what they wanted or needed—whether it was to learn English or engage in extracurricular activities.

Mothers’ “concerted cultivation” often continued after the students entered high school. Many mothers cooperatively managed extracurricular activities that bolstered college application packages, such as volunteer work, internships, or tournaments. Those mothers interacted in what students called a “team”—a small, exclusive network of mothers who sent their children to the same school. For example, as a “team,” mothers hired private tutors for the children’s Advanced Placement courses or the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT).

Mothers’ collective management of education was not a surprise to the students. Rather, it seemed to be a quality of a “good” mother in their elite social circle. A small number of students even complained that their mothers did not—or could not—actively take part in such networks and emphasized this as a problem in their upbringing. Yoana, who described her mother’s parenting philosophy as “too hands-off” despite their affluent
background, explained why she wanted her mother to be more involved in her early education:

I sometimes blamed my mom when I was young. I was such a competitive kid so I wanted to learn everything my friends were learning, such as debates and dancing. But my mom kind of ignored me if I asked her to send me to such lessons, and it made me sad. . . . When I was in high school, many of my friends’ mothers brought opportunities for all kinds of extracurricular activities. But my mother never did so.

Although she felt proud of herself for her achievements, she simultaneously emphasized the efficiency of the “team” approach by saying, “If my mom would have hung out with more of my friends’ mothers, my college application could be so much easier.” Similarly, students from downwardly mobile migrant families seemed to be wistful about the lack of such maternal involvement, which they experienced after migration.

Despite the usefulness of the “team” for college applications, mothers’ collective management was quite often criticized by their children for non-academic reasons. The students’ ambivalent stance largely stemmed from the society-wide stigma attached to “too-involved” mothers. When I asked Sam if his mother joined any “team” for his education, he defensively answered:

My mom attended some mothers’ meetings but there were so many aggressive mothers there, like those who went to every briefing session on college admission. My mom was not like that, and she actually did not like those intense mothers. She usually hung out with mothers who were laid-back like herself, and if they came up with any plan for extracurricular activities, then I naturally joined it with the children of those mothers.

Although he admitted that he largely benefited from the opportunities his mother generated with other mothers, he tried to downplay his mother’s participation in any mother’s group, worrying that it could be seen as “too much” compared to what typical Korean mothers would do.

Mothers’ networks sometimes generated mother–child conflicts, especially for the students who attended boarding schools abroad. Rather than individual approaches, those transnational mothers seemed to prefer collective parenting arrangements, as they could not visit schools abroad frequently. Through intimate yet exclusive meetings, those mothers stayed informed about not only the school but their children’s daily lives, especially regarding dating relationships. This exchange of information was
seen as nosy and gossipy, as the children considered it their mothers’ covert surveillance.

James, who graduated from a U.S. prep boarding school, explained why he did not fully appreciate multiple mothers’ groups that his mother was participating in:

There are all sorts of mothers’ groups. Like my middle school’s mothers’ group, my [U.S.] boarding school’s mothers’ group, and current college’s mothers’ group. . . . She is not a leader of any of it, but she tries to attend as many meetings as possible. . . . When I was in high school, she heard that I had a girlfriend from other mothers before I told her . . . I felt awkward to talk with my mom afterward.

He admitted that getting along with other mothers was a part of his mother’s limited social life. However, when it came to the supervision of his private life, he could not help blaming mothers’ networks as the main source of conflict.

**Mothers’ Role as “Emotional Experts” at All Stages**

In students’ narratives, mothers, at all stages, were “emotional experts” (Risman 1998) whose primary job was to take care of the emotional well-being of their family members. Despite occasional mother–child conflicts, mothers seemed to be emotionally closer to their children than fathers; they shared more intimate moments with their children. Students tended to describe their mothers as more nurturant and sensitive than their fathers. Many of them said that emotional support was the greatest support they received from their mothers, especially after they started studying abroad.

Aaron, whose mother accompanied him for his high school education abroad, remarked:

I can’t believe how my mom supported me with all the rowing practices I had in high school. We sometimes had practices at 4 a.m. three times in a week. . . . She woke up earlier than me to wake me up, made a good breakfast, persuaded me to eat, and drove me to the practice place. . . . She always waited for me, standing at the riverside and watching me practicing until the end. Many of my teammates’ mothers also did so, but I still think it wasn’t easy for anyone.

His mother’s help with his extracurricular activities was not all about physical sacrifice. He rather interpreted the help as emotional, saying that his mother “was always there” whenever he needed to feel supported.
After entering colleges in the United States, students seemed to expect to receive more direct emotional support, such as warm words of encouragement, from their mothers. In fact, more mothers than fathers initiated overseas phone calls, video chats, and text messages with their children. This frequent conversation strengthened the emotional bond between mothers and children, according to many students. However, in the children’s eyes it also appeared to be their mothers’ way of transnationally managing children’s private life, sometimes tenaciously. To ensure that their children were transitioning to adulthood properly, in their eyes and the eyes of others in their social circles, mothers routinely checked on their children’s personal life across the ocean. And again, this part of “status production work” was often stigmatized as “too much” by the children.

Hailey, who introduced her mother as one of her “best friends,” elaborated on the ambivalent feelings she often felt when having an overseas call with her mother:

> When I was in ninth grade [in a U.S. boarding school], I thought my mom was too obsessed with me. ... I couldn’t understand why she wanted to know every bit of my life, especially about my friends. [In college], she is still asking a lot about my friends. She wants to know what I do with them, such as whether I drink with them after classes or not.

Although she seemed to see her mother’s surveillance as an inevitable part of transnational mothering, she could not help expressing her displeasure. This was exacerbated in daughters’ cases: given the double standard that punishes women’s casual sex more harshly than men’s, daughters tended to have a stricter curfew than sons.

This emotional and private maternal involvement appeared to compensate for the decreasing influence mothers had on the practical decisions of children’s college education and career preparation. At that point, most mothers, especially stay-at-home mothers, seemed to take their hands off from their children’s life decisions and cede the guiding role to their husbands. Students no longer seemed to see their mothers as having the cultural capital to be “good advisors.” That was reserved for fathers.

Heather, who decided to study abroad at her father’s urging, described her relationship with her mother in sharp contrast to her relationship with her father:

> [After studying abroad] my mom never gives her opinion on my education. My father is the one who is in charge of it. I sometimes talk about my grades or job plans with my mom, but very roughly. We just hang out together and talk about trivial things in my private life. We don’t get serious.
Although she seemed to appreciate the emotional bond with her mother, she simultaneously undervalued her mother’s involvement by describing it as related to “trivial things.” She gave more credit to her father’s advice for the “important” aspects of life, such as college education and career.

**UNUSUALLY TANGIBLE PATERNAL INVOLVEMENT**

**From a Distant “Good Cop” to a Study Abroad Counselor**

Few fathers directly managed their children’s early education. Because of busy work schedules, most fathers did not spend much time with their young children, leaving most of the child rearing to their wives. Some students whose fathers majored in the “hard” sciences said that they occasionally learned math or science from their fathers, but such paternal involvement in early education was uncommon. The fathers’ “hands-off” approach did not seem to surprise or disappoint the students, as they—and the society—did not expect fathers to be heavily involved in children’s education.

In the early years, fathers tended to play the role of mediator, or “good cop” as children put it, while mothers diligently managed their children’s daily schedules as the major part of their maternal role. Many students said that their fathers tried to relieve them from the “pressure of perfection” by frequently complimenting what they achieved, or siding with them if there was a mother–child conflict. Some even said that their fathers’ conciliatory role prevented possible mother–child conflicts.

Emily, who attended an elementary school in the United States for a few years owing to her father’s overseas assignment, spoke of an episode during those days:

> After I came back [from the United States], I attended an English supplementary institution specifically for returnee children. Oh, I hated it! Everyone except me spent several years abroad so they spoke English much better than me. The class was too intense. . . . My dad finally got to know how much I hated it, so he told me to quit immediately. My mom didn’t agree with my dad, but he told me it was totally okay to quit if I didn’t like it.

Emily attributed her relatively relaxing childhood to her father’s considerate and “laidback” attitude, while disparaging her mother’s intense involvement, even though she later added—perhaps out of a desire to not seem too critical of her mother—that both of her parents “did their best” for her.
The understated paternal involvement ended when the children applied to high schools, especially to those abroad. Utilizing their high level of education, English proficiency, and knowledge about the U.S. education system, many fathers seemed to confidently guide their children’s application for schools abroad: they initiated prepping for school interviews, and sometimes made contacts with school administrators or teachers abroad. Students seemed to welcome such guidance; recognizing the gap between their father’s and mother’s education and experience abroad, many asserted that their fathers were more appropriate guides for their education abroad.

Jennifer, whose father went to a U.S. graduate school, confessed that it was her father who initiated her and her brother’s education abroad:

One day, my dad asked us if we wanted to go to a U.S. boarding school. We first said no. But he didn’t give up and continued persuading us. He even gave us a book with a title something like “America’s top 100 boarding schools” and the book was all marked and underlined with the schools my dad chose.

Jennifer seemed to understand her father’s intense education fervor as a natural consequence of his own high academic achievement and came to attribute her academic success to his active involvement. Similarly, Jake, who went to the same U.S. boarding school as his older brother, explained why his father, who finished his Master of Business Administration (MBA) program in the United States, was more involved in his boarding school life:

My dad speaks English much better than my mother does, and he knew more teachers of mine than my mom knew. . . . My mom also can speak English a little bit but because my dad often goes abroad for his business, he knows more about the life abroad than my mom knows. . . . My dad took care of big, important things and my mom took care of other small things when they visited my school during parents’ weekends.

Jake seemed not to question much about his father’s heavy involvement in his education abroad, believing that his father “knew well” about U.S. education. Simultaneously, he seemed to see his mother as less qualified to be involved in his education abroad due to a lack of transnational experiences. To Jake and many other students, the parent who had more firsthand transnational experiences was the “better guide” for their education abroad.

Henry elaborated how his father, who once worked as an exchange professor in the United States, largely helped with his college application:
Korean magnet] schools do not help us boost our applications [with extracurricular activities]. We have to do it by ourselves. . . . Most information [about extracurricular activities] was on the Internet so my dad searched the Internet a lot for me. At that time, I was so busy with AP [Advanced Placement] classes so I didn’t have much time for that, so my dad did it for me. He found out some application deadlines and reminded me of them.

Henry seemed to consider his fathers’ guidance proactive and productive. By contrast, he said that his mother “usually gathered some information from other mothers.” Although he seemed to genuinely appreciate the support from both, he gave more credit to his father’s firsthand knowledge than to his mother’s secondhand information.

Professional Paternal Involvement in Later Years

In later stages, particularly after the children entered college in the United States, fathers’ involvement and influence tended to increase dramatically as they had more resources to offer to support their children’s academic and career achievements. Elite fathers’ social networks helped these fathers offer support as their children grew. High-status professional or CEO fathers introduced their children to people who could provide internship opportunities or detailed career advice. Many students said that such “bridges” were very helpful for their own career search.

Rachel, whose father was an executive member of a large Korean corporation, elaborated on how her father helped her career preparation:

My dad knows many businessmen or executives of major companies, so he asks a lot of things of them for me. . . . When I was searching for internships, he helped me a lot. He did not like my decision to work in a small start-up company. But I didn’t change my mind, and thankfully he continued helping me [find an internship at a start-up.]

To students like Rachel who could pursue a job either in the United States or in Korea after college, internships and detailed guides to the Korean (or the U.S.) job market would be one of the most beneficial resources they could get from their fathers’ network of diverse professionals.

As the children could see the (potential) value of their fathers’ class resources, their perception of their fathers’ involvement seemed to change dramatically. This unusually tangible paternal involvement was not what most Korean lower-class, less-transnational fathers—not to mention
mothers—would or could do for their children. This distinctiveness of their fathers’ involvement led these children to frame it more positively.

A handful of students who thought their fathers did not—or could not—provide them with such opportunities expressed bitterness about the lack they felt compared to their “more-supported” counterparts. Michelle, who came to the United States alone to attend middle school and reunited with her parents in the United States after a few years, had ambivalent feelings toward her father:

If any of my parents could have guided me more, everything could have been much easier. . . . My best friend’s father is a very successful doctor in Korea, and she is going to work at her father’s hospital after finishing her education. . . . I’m sometimes jealous of her. She can just focus on studying without thinking of what to do in the future. Her future is pretty much guaranteed, and mine is not.

Although she appreciated her parents’ sacrifice for her education, she simultaneously seemed to feel bad for—and also blamed—her father, who had to quit his high-status government job when they migrated. She continued, “When we were in Korea, I felt so proud of my dad.” Her lack of parental help for career preparation originated from the downward mobility her father experienced after migration, and it made her wonder, “What if my parents would have stayed in Korea?”

Except for a few immigrant fathers like Michelle’s, many fathers seemed to serve as examples of success for their children to emulate. Sometimes this started early: Suzie, whose major is cognitive science, explained how she ended up hoping to follow the same career path as her father:

My dad is a doctor, a brain specialist. He influenced me a lot on my interest in neurology. When I was in elementary school, our school had a lot of experience learning activities, such as shadowing our parents at work, so I often went to the laboratory where my dad used to work and played with brain models there.

When asked about career aspiration, Suzie did not talk much about her mother, who opted out of a professional job to prioritize motherhood. Instead, she said that as she grew up she started to understand how hard it would be to be successful and “hard working” as her father was.

This was even more common among sons. Ethan, who wanted to establish a start-up company after college, told me why he “wanted to learn more” from his CEO father:
He has gone through many hardships and tasted the sweetness and bitterness of life [outside the home]. . . . I really admire his diligence. He is quite old now but still works very hard. He always thinks big and looks far ahead. . . . He can see where the money goes.

As a “self-made” businessman, Ethan’s entrepreneurial father seemed to be the role model Ethan could look up to. Like many other sons, he said his father’s career achievement was a motivation for him to pursue high-level career goals.

Unlike mothers who tended to perform primarily as “emotional experts” after their children entered college, fathers did not seem to (try to) build a strong emotional bond with their young adult children. Some students said that their fathers did not fully understand their emotional turbulence. Whenever they had conflicts with their fathers, particularly regarding major or career decisions, they seemed to rely on the emotional support of their mothers, who usually “listen[ed] carefully.” They, however, still highly valued their fathers’ class resources and believed that their fathers made a big “investment” in their life, including a significant amount of spending on their education.

CONCLUSION

This study theorizes the effect of gender on parenting by demonstrating how affluent Korean mothers and fathers differently engage in their high-achieving children’s transnational upbringing. In the process, their practices rewrite gender relations traditionally found in Korean families. Documenting the gendered aspects of their parenting, I show that the opportunities, practices, and resources associated with gender and class—both in the early and later years—shaped what mothers and fathers did and could do for their high-achieving children. Gendered patterns of parenting are deeply intertwined with class and, specifically, with the transnational arrangements of these Korean families.

According to the narratives of the young adult children I interviewed, their mothers, often with the help of gender-segregated networks, practiced “concerted cultivation” (Lareau 2003) during their children’s early education. However, these mothers handed over most of the parenting work to their husbands after the children entered schools abroad. As “emotional experts,” mothers seemed always to be heavily involved in their children’s life, mostly by taking care of children’s physical and emotional well-being (Hays 1996). In private, however, the children
tended to undervalue or sometimes disdain their mothers’ “status production work” (Papanek 1979), which involved an intense supervision of children’s personal life. Compared to fathers, mothers in my sample did not bring much personal transnational education or career resources to their marriage, or gradually lost these after opting out of the workforce to prioritize child rearing. Their children seemed not to consider their mothers’ caregiving more worthy or desirable than work in professional fields.

By contrast, fathers, by using transnational resources and networks acquired through their own experiences as elite (transnational) professionals, shifted to heavily engage in their children’s later education and career preparation. The children highly valued and appreciated their fathers’ involvement in their college education and career horizons, and they believed that it was beyond what their mothers (not to mention lower-class, less-transnational Korean fathers) could provide. This class and gender disparity between couples eventually brought fathers more credit and respect from their children, while frustration or resentment of intensive involvement seemed to be directed mostly at mothers.

I contend that the gender divide in this study is shaped not only by parents’ differential occupational involvement but also by the broader social structure and normative gender expectations in Korea. In a society where men are expected to learn and achieve more than women, Korean elite fathers tended to practice career-oriented “public fathering” (Shows and Gerstel 2009), using their exclusive educational and occupational resources. Mothers, despite their above-average levels of education for Korean mothers, tended to meet their children’s—and society’s—expectations of “good” mothers mostly through emotion-oriented “private mothering.” Such mothering became less valued as the children entered transnational education tracks that required knowledge outside of those mothers’ local experiences or networks.

This finding extends our understanding of the gender divide in parenting among Korean—or more generally East Asian—families. In existing literature (Ide et al. 2018; McLoyd et al. 2000; Nguyen 2008), Asian fathers are often described as distant and underinvolved in their children’s lives, particularly with regard to education. Instead, Asian mothers are the primary implementers of intensive parenting, not only in childhood but throughout their children’s lives (Chao and Tseng
In contrast with existing literature, elite fathers in my sample were noted in their children’s narratives, especially with regard to later education. Using their gendered class resources, those elite fathers guided their children’s later education and career in a practical and detailed way, and their children evaluated such involvement as positive. Such involvement was not often expected of the (stay-at-home) mothers in my sample, despite their high levels of education.

This study broadens parenting literature beyond its concentration on working-class and middle-class experience. By analyzing upper-class elite transnational parenting, I illustrate the contexts in which affluent Korean mothers and fathers were viewed by their children as “good” mothers or fathers, and the ways this perception is organized around the families’ particular socioeconomic positions, as well as cultural expectations of Korean mothers and fathers. My analysis sheds light on the intersectional power of gender and class. First, gender, through intensive parenting, reinforces and reproduces class disparity between elite couples and within their families. Even in elite families, class advantage is tempered by gender, and children give more credit and respect to professional men/fathers than opted-out women/mothers. Second, in a wider social context, such gendered but affluent parenting appears to provide the children with ample transnational resources, such as native-like English fluency and degrees from prestigious U.S. colleges. All of these would increase the possibility of their success in post-college education, in their careers, and in the marriage market, not only within Korea but globally.

What might be the long-term effects of this type of parenting? Will gender continue to temper class in these families? The daughters I met had job aspirations similar to those of the sons in my sample, although daughters seemed to be more concerned about work–family conflicts they might face in the future. Given the high possibility of class homogamy, will they reproduce the gender asymmetry of elite families if they get married within their circle—or “bubble” as they put it? Speaking more generally, will these families’ parenting, especially the heavy involvement of elite fathers, change the gendered norms among Korean parents who have not had such elite transnational experiences? While I do not currently have the longitudinal data necessary to provide answers, future research usefully could delve into these questions.
REFERENCES


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