

## Between Patriarchy and Neoliberalism: Cho Namju's *82-nyŏnsaeng Kim Chiyŏng*

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Cho Namju's *82-nyŏnsaeng Kim Chiyŏng* is a 2016 bestselling Korean novel that has received international attention. Having achieved immense popularity in Korea, the novel has become a centerpiece of recent feminist discussions in Korea through its exposure of contradictions in and between the patriarchal regime and a neoliberal society. This article explores the tensions and contradictions of these two models of social organization and their uneasy alliance in this novel, particularly in the narrated experiences of young mothers.

**Key words:** patriarchy in Korea, Korea and neoliberalism, feminist literature in Korea, motherhood in Korean novels, Cho Namju [Cho Nam-joo].

## Feminist Consciousness in *82-nyŏnsaeng Kim Chiyŏng*

In recent years, scholars have noted a worrisome development in the current phase of capitalism: the erosion of local communities. Economist Raghuram Rajan has argued in *The Third Pillar* that community constitutes the “third pillar” in society.<sup>1</sup> Alongside the state and the market, communities are necessary for human beings to balance challenges faced in other sectors. Community, according to Rajan, is “essential for us to express our humanity.”<sup>2</sup> In a similar vein, the economist Paul Collier recently wrote that “deep rifts are tearing apart the fabric of our societies.”<sup>3</sup> Amid the new anxieties and anger, Collier wrote that a “practical communitarian ethic” must be restored to rebalance power.<sup>4</sup> The accentuation of individualism under the current phase of capitalism has prompted critics to draw attention to a recent phase of development, dating from the late twentieth century, called neoliberalism. Neoliberalism refers to an extension of market competition, with increased privatization and deregulation, as individuals are compelled to compete with each other over increasing terrain that now include information and data control.<sup>5</sup>

Neoliberal policy was first adopted in South Korea towards the end of the twentieth century, around the time of the 1997 Asian financial crisis. Critics have argued that over the past two decades, the economic policies and reforms implemented, under pressure from the International Monetary Fund, have led to increased individualization, competition, and overall strain on the everyday lives of most South Koreans. In a society that has traditionally emphasized family relations, community bonds, and patriarchal values, this transition has been more abrupt than in societies that have long favored a view of individual freedom. In some cases, this transition has led to added pressure on certain groups of the Korean population. The publication and public furor over a recent novel by Cho Namju, entitled *82-nyŏnsaeng Kim Chiyŏng*, highlights these anxieties, fissures, and tensions between older cultural values and newer socioeconomic practices that continue to reshape contemporary Korean society.<sup>6</sup>

*82-nyŏnsaeng Kim Chiyŏng* has been hailed a feminist novel and a popular contribution to contemporary Korean literature. The novel has already been published in translation

<sup>1</sup> Raghuram Rajan, *The Third Pillar: How Markets and the State Leave the Community Behind* (New York: Penguin Press, 2019).

<sup>2</sup> Rajan, *The Third Pillar*, 394.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Collier, *The Future of Capitalism: Facing the New Anxieties* (New York: Harper, 2018), 11.

<sup>4</sup> Collier, *The Future of Capitalism*, 19.

<sup>5</sup> See Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (New York: Public Affairs, 2019) and Bernard Harcourt, *Exposed: Desire and Disobedience in the Digital Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> Cho Namju, *82-nyŏnsaeng Kim Chiyŏng* [Kim Chiyŏng, born in 1982] (Sŏul: Minŭmsa, [2016] 2018).

in Japan, where it enjoyed some level of success and popularity.<sup>7</sup> It is also scheduled under its publisher, Minūmsa, to be translated and published in some sixteen other countries. The novel was adapted in fall 2019 into a film that starred Korean actors Kong Yu and Chōng Yumi in leading roles. Significantly, the original book sold a million copies within two years of its 2016 publication.<sup>8</sup> This statistic should be seen in the light of other data that show that Koreans are not avid literary readers. In a 2017 national survey, forty percent of Korean men and women said they had not read a single book in the past year.<sup>9</sup> In an earlier census in 2014, between thirty and forty percent of Korean adults said that they did not read during their leisure times at all.<sup>10</sup> In this 2014 survey, only about 10 percent said they read for over 10 minutes a day, while the average reading time among those who regularly read was about 6 minutes a day. These statistics suggest that reading trends among Korean adults generally decline beyond college. While *82-nyōnsaeng Kim Chiyōng* is a relatively short novel, spanning only 150 pages in length, its popularity and success can be attributed to its remarkable exposure of the tensions in the everyday lives of young women in contemporary Korean society.

The narrative sequencing of the novel also favors quick reading, since Cho Namju effectively skips over events in Kim Chiyōng's life that do not directly pertain to patriarchal or misogynistic experiences. This leads to a cumulative feeling of frustration and feminist ire towards the end of the novel. To say that the novel realistically portrays a female character's life would be challenged by its lack of information independent from a growing sense of masculine privilege and female disadvantage in Korea. The novel outlines the growth of a feminist consciousness that may be relatable to many female Korean readers. Rather than presenting the biographical narrative of an individual woman, the novel charts the emergent consciousness and a rejection of patriarchal norms in Korean society, symbolized through the narrated experiences of women in the late twentieth to early twenty-first centuries.

Kim Chiyōng's birth in 1982 (reflected in the novel's title) captures a historical moment when Korea was rapidly developing and modernizing. The span of Chiyōng's life includes her first-hand experiences of the 1997 Asian financial crisis and Korea's

<sup>7</sup> Kim Ŭn'gyōng, "82-nyōnsaeng Kim Chiyōng' Ilbonō p'an, 3-gae wōl man e 13-man bu" [Japanese edition of *Kim Chiyōng, born in 1982*, sells 130,000 copies in three months], *Yonhap News Agency*, April 2, 2019, <https://www.yna.co.kr/view/AKR20190402089700005>.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, "2017 kungmin toksō silt'ae chosa" [2017 Survey of Citizen Reading Conditions] (Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, December, 2017). <http://www.korea.kr/archive/expDocView.do?docId=37860>.

<sup>10</sup> Statistics Korea, "2014-yōn saenghwal sigan chosa kyōlgwa" [2014 Survey Results of Lifestyle Times] (Statistics Korea, June 29, 2015). <http://www.korea.kr/common/download.do?tblKey=EDN&fileId=212250>. (31 October 2019).

neoliberalization. This financial crisis occurs shortly before she became a university student, marking her transition into young womanhood. The name “Kim Chiyŏng” was reportedly chosen because it was the most common name given to Korean girls born in 1982. This detail indicates that Kim Chiyŏng’s evolving feminist consciousness represents that of many Korean women from the author’s perspective.<sup>11</sup> As Cho Namju described in an interview, her authorial intent in writing *82-nyŏnsaeng Kim Chiyŏng* was to “show what it was like living an ordinary life, or perhaps just a little better than the average Korean woman has it in reality.”<sup>12</sup>

The popularity of Cho’s *82-nyŏnsaeng Kim Chiyŏng* can be attributed to its exposure of tensions in contemporary Korean society, specifically between patriarchal values and neoliberal imperatives. The novel has accurately placed young women at the center of these contradictions, as they confront undesirable options on either side of this scale. Readers encounter the protagonist, a young mother in her mid-thirties, negotiating these competing normative compulsions. She grapples with the hierarchal order of a patriarchal society and discriminatory dynamics of neoliberal competition. As she struggles with the conflict between neoliberal labor imperatives and her labor contribution to the domestic sphere, she realizes that neither model of social organization can satisfy her. Facing intolerable pressure, the female protagonist bears the burden of these conflicting cultural regimes as a young mother, eventually taking out her anger and frustration on men, including her husband.

### The Patriarchal Legacy in *82-nyŏnsaeng Kim Chiyŏng*

*82-nyŏnsaeng Kim Chiyŏng* begins with a confrontation between Chiyŏng and her mother-in-law during a mid-autumn festival. Chiyŏng, her husband Chŏng Taehyŏn,<sup>13</sup> and their infant daughter drive down to Pusan to visit Taehyŏn’s parents and sister. Chiyŏng helps her mother-in-law cook dishes for the family meals, as do most married women during the extended national holidays. Taehyŏn berates his mother, asking her to buy prepared food instead of cooking, since cooking takes too much work. His mother replies that it is no trouble at all to feed her family, but suddenly turns to Chiyŏng. “Is this difficult for

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<sup>11</sup> Shin Joon-bong, “Bringing to Light the Subtle Sexism in Modern Korea: Cho Nam-Joo’s Book Reflects the Discrimination Many Women Face Daily,” *Korea JoongAng Daily*, September 6, 2017. <http://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=3038016>.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Most Korean women retain their original surnames, rather than taking on their husband’s surnames after marriage.

you?” she asks.<sup>14</sup> Chiyōng feels her face redden and says, “To be honest, I feel fatigued every national holiday.”<sup>15</sup> The family is shocked into “glacial” silence.<sup>16</sup> Chiyōng turns to her husband and says, “You too. Every national holiday, we spend all our time in Pusan and only sit for a short while at my family’s home. Let’s go there early this time.”<sup>17</sup> As her parents-in-law and sister-in-law look on amazement, Taehyōn silences her by placing his hand over her mouth and practically drags her out of the home, saying that she is in ill health.<sup>18</sup>

Aside from the dramatic confession, most Koreans will be familiar with the family scene delineated above. Many traditional aspects that have been retained in Korean culture become visible during events like the national holidays. While Korea is now admired for its popular culture, technological development, rising wealth, and near-universal Wi-Fi access, Korean culture still retains many patriarchal elements from the past. As Park Boo Jin explains, these originally arose from the organization of premodern Korean society into kin relations.<sup>19</sup> These relations were represented by patriarchs and organized through patrilineal descent. Within the domestic sphere, men and women were apportioned separate spaces, with patriarchs holding positions of “absolute power and authority at the apex of the family power structure.”<sup>20</sup> Korea’s patriarchal legacy is embedded in the Korean language still used today to refer to family members. The father’s family, for instance, is referred to as *ch’inke* (literally, close family), in contrast to the wife’s family, which is referred to as *oeka* (meaning outside family). A wife may still be referred to as *ansaram*<sup>21</sup> or *chipsaram* (literally, inside-person or home-person) to denote their traditional role in the domestic sphere.

The study of patriarchy in Korea and other East Asian countries inevitably opens a discussion of Neo-Confucian ideology. Neo-Confucianism was the revitalization of Confucian philosophy in China during the Song dynasty (960-1279), introduced in Korea in the thirteenth century, and adopted by the Korean ruling elites in the early Yi dynasty (1392-1910).<sup>22</sup> Neo-Confucianism became an organizational model for society,

<sup>14</sup> Cho Namju, *82-nyōnsaeng*, 132. All citations from the novel are my own translations.

<sup>15</sup> Cho Namju, *82-nyōnsaeng*, 133.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Her apparent mental deterioration is further dramatized in the film adaptation.

<sup>19</sup> Park Boo Jin, “Patriarchy in Korean Society: Substance and Appearance of Power,” *Korea Journal* 41, no. 4 (2001): 43.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> As Park explains, wives lived in *anbang* in the home, while the *sarangbang* was reserved for the patriarch and other male members of the family. See Park Boo Jin, “Patriarchy in Korean Society,” 44.

<sup>22</sup> See Kelly H. Chong, *Deliverance and Submission: Evangelical Women and the Negotiation of Patriarchy in South Korea* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2008), 58–59 and Yi Tae-jin, *The Dynamics of Confucianism and Modernization in Korean History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), 23. Yi Tae-jin

encompassing public and private relations. Kelly H. Chong highlights two aspects of Neo-Confucian ideology that consolidated patriarchal rule. These two principles for human relations were the hierarchal order between the elder and the younger, and the division between male and female. Chong writes, “With age- and sex-based at its center, this society was governed by a strict hierarchy among all groups of people, and it was believed that to adhere to and observe this hierarchical relationship was the only means of maintaining harmony within society and the universe.”<sup>23</sup> Martina Deuchler has also observed that the hierarchal relation between men and women in the Neo-Confucian social order was seen as “cosmologically sanctioned.”<sup>24</sup> These patriarchal norms still remain in Korean society, as scholars have noted, demonstrating how “a set of intractable societal contradictions” was formed in the accelerated process of modernization in the late twentieth century.<sup>25</sup> According to Chong, Neo-Confucian norms still enjoy “a surprising degree of legitimacy” in Korean families,<sup>26</sup> but these now coexist in contradiction with more modern values.

Since Neo-Confucianism warrants a separate theoretical examination, this paper generally refrains from using the term “Neo-Confucian,” when referring to patriarchy. As Dorothy Ko, JaHyun Kim Haboush, and Joan R. Piggott have noted, “Confucianism is such an amorphous and ahistorical concept” that it is difficult to do it justice.<sup>27</sup> Neo-Confucianism encompasses a comprehensive philosophy that should not be reduced to more generalizable terms, such as “patriarchy.” Yet, as Ko, Haboush, and Piggott have pointed out, many critics see Confucianism as “synonymous with patriarchy” in studies of East Asian women.<sup>28</sup> I am more interested in the coexistence of patriarchy with modern values in contemporary Korean society, rather than in the examination of patriarchy’s historical and ideological roots. Though I see patriarchy in Korea as

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writes that “Neo-Confucianism emerged in China at the end of the tenth century, came to maturity there in the twelfth century, and was introduced to Korea in the thirteenth century.” Subsequently, Neo-Confucianism achieved dominance in Korea for about five hundred years. According to Yi, Neo-Confucianism became “more deeply rooted in Korea than in China” (23). For more English-language studies of Neo-Confucianism in Korea, see Edward Y. J. Chung, *Korean Confucianism: Tradition and Modernity* (Seongnam: The Academy of Korean Studies Press, 2015); Wm. Theodore de Bary and JaHyun Kim Haboush, eds., *The Rise of Neo-Confucianism in Korea* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

<sup>23</sup> Chong, *Deliverance and Submission*, 59.

<sup>24</sup> Martina Deuchler, *The Confucian Transformation of Korea*, Harvard-Yenching Institute Monograph Series (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 231.

<sup>25</sup> Chong, *Deliverance and Submission*, 57. See also Seung-kyung Kim, “Family, Gender, and Sexual Inequality,” in *Modern Korean Society: Its Development and Prospect*, eds. Hyuk-Rae Kim and Bok Song, Institute of East Asian Studies (Berkeley: University of California, 2007).

<sup>26</sup> Chong, *Deliverance and Submission*, 67.

<sup>27</sup> Dorothy Ko, JaHyun Kim Haboush, and Joan R. Piggott, eds., *Women and Confucian Cultures in Premodern China, Korea, and Japan* (Berkeley: University of California, 2003), 3.

<sup>28</sup> Ko, Haboush, and Piggott, eds., *Women and Confucian Cultures*, 4.

culturally distinct from its Western counterpart, I also refrain from simplifying Neo-Confucianism into a synonymous relationship with patriarchy.<sup>29</sup>

Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* explored the interior world of the housewife in a twentieth-century European context. The housewife in *The Second Sex* lives in relative economic security, but she suffers from “impotent anger” and lives in “constant recrimination” of others.<sup>30</sup> Beauvoir’s exploration of the housewife’s frustrations allows us to make better sense of Chiyōng’s anxiety in another cultural context. Chiyōng’s outbursts against her husband are not merely expressions of anger and blame against him, but also are protests against much larger and abstract forms of patriarchal repression.<sup>31</sup> Beauvoir wrote,

[The woman] knows that her malaise is deeper than the pretexts she gives for it, and that one expedient is not enough to get rid of it; she takes it out on the whole world because it was put together without her, and against her; since adolescence, since childhood, she has protested against her condition ... she accuses the whole masculine universe; resentment is the other side of dependence.<sup>32</sup>

The housewife reacts by rising up against her husband, who, according to Beauvoir,<sup>33</sup> represents “the perfect victim” and “embodies the masculine universe.” For Beauvoir, such protestations represent “symbolic outbursts” expressed through “incoherent violence.”

Chiyōng’s outspoken resentment against men in the novel has led to a frosty reception from some quarters in Korean society. Students at Seoul National University collaborated on an alternative version of the novel, entitled “79-nyōnsaeng Chōng Taehyōn.” This version outlines the various difficulties and sacrifices experienced by Chiyōng’s husband, such as mandatory military service and the late-night shifts he has

<sup>29</sup> Nonetheless, readers should be mindful of the complex historical lineage of Korean patriarchal norms.

<sup>30</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (London: Vintage, [1949] 2009), 661.

<sup>31</sup> It should be noted early on that much of Chiyōng’s resentment against society is probably overstated. She grows up in a stable family, weathers the 1997 Asian financial crisis, emerging fairly unscathed, despite the fact that the crisis had catastrophic consequences for many real Korean families. She is admitted to a leading university in Seoul (Ewha Woman’s University), does not experience any abusive relationships, and meets an affectionate and hard-working husband, who is able to financially support their family even after she resigns from work. Chiyōng never experiences sexual harassment or abuse herself, nor does she become the victim of predatory boyfriends or men. Chiyōng marries at the age of thirty, around the average marriage age for Korean women (currently thirty-one years old). In no social or economic respect does Chiyōng significantly suffer as a victim of targeted violence. Rather, she becomes a symbol of a deeper contradiction within Korean society.

<sup>32</sup> Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 661.

<sup>33</sup> Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 662–663.

to work in order to support his family. This alternative version of the novel ends with Chiyŏng leaving Taehyŏn, an implicit act of betrayal.<sup>34</sup> It would be misleading, however, to read *82-nyŏnsaeng Kim Chiyŏng* merely as an indictment against Korean men, instead of as a reaction to deeper social tensions. The novel touches upon a fundamental contradiction of choices, in which neither model, either the older patriarchal regime or the newer neoliberal order, can resolve the tensions that many Korean women experience. *82-nyŏnsaeng Kim Chiyŏng* extends beyond the scope of Beauvoir's concerns, since both options available to Chiyŏng are deeply unsatisfactory and riven with contradictions. In a society that remains normatively patriarchal, the identification of freedom in the neoliberal market means that Chiyŏng is forced to make choices that are antithetical both to patriarchal norms and neoliberal values.

*82-nyŏnsaeng Kim Chiyŏng* becomes a sociological narrative of modern Korean development from the 1980's into the twenty-first century. Chiyŏng relates not only her personal history and childhood memories, but also the lives of her mother and the women of her mother's generation. The novel becomes a narrative history or a literary reimagining of women's lives through Korea's accelerated industrialization. Cho interweaves the life of Chiyŏng's mother (with her experiences of patriarchal values) and Chiyŏng's own life as a young woman, wife, and the mother of a young daughter. While Cho lays the blame on men, or at least vents frustration at male privilege, she also exposes how forms of oppression have continued from the past into the present by tracking their different causes and guises. Chiyŏng's inarticulate expression of resentment resembles what Beauvoir described as the "secret laws" of a masculine universe.<sup>35</sup> Whereas men are capable of real action based on "masculine logic," Beauvoir wrote that "the woman struggles in the blurry night."<sup>36</sup> Beauvoir wrote, "Not only is she unaware of what real action is, that is able to change the face of the world, but she is lost in the middle of this world as in the heart of an immense and confused mass."<sup>37</sup> While Chiyŏng seems, as Beauvoir described, to take out her powerlessness and frustration against men, the actual causes of her restrictive circumstances stem both from patriarchal culture and the neoliberalization of Korean society.

<sup>34</sup> Sŏul Taehakkyo Taenamusup, "79-nyŏnsaeng Chŏng Taehyŏn: 82-nyŏnsaeng Kim Chiyŏng ūi namp'yŏn" [Chŏng Taehyŏn, born in 1979: Husband of Kim Chiyŏng, born in 1982]," *Facebook*. March 21, 2018. <https://ko-kr.facebook.com/SNUBamboo/posts/1727482740676684>.

<sup>35</sup> Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 654.

<sup>36</sup> Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 655, 661.

<sup>37</sup> Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 655.



## The Rise of Neoliberalism: Contexts

Neoliberalism refers to an extension of capitalism from the late twentieth century that emphasizes individual competition, deregulation, and the efficiency of the market. Crucially, under neoliberalism, as theorized by David Harvey, individuals are held accountable for their own labor productivity and continued survival in the market.<sup>38</sup> As Harvey writes, under neoliberalism, “individuals are supposedly free to choose,” but also “they are not supposed to construct strong collective institutions.”<sup>39</sup> Put differently, the allure of neoliberalism lies in its promise of individual freedom, which conceals the withdrawal of protections for individuals who are unable to keep abreast of competition in the market. Harvey describes such contradictions as intrinsic to neoliberalism and argues that neoliberalism is inherently hostile towards democratic institutions, which hinder its processes.<sup>40</sup>

Pierre Bourdieu has noted that this “neo-liberal utopia of a pure, perfect market” actually rests on “structural violence” or the “fear provoked by the threat of losing employment.”<sup>41</sup> It has been widely observed among critics of neoliberalism that its consequent effects are individualization, segmentation, mutual distrust, and increased rivalry, which polarize or fragment political societies.<sup>42</sup> More recently, political theorist Wendy Brown wrote in *Undoing the Demos* that “neoliberalism is the rationality through which capitalism finally swallows humanity — not only with its machinery of compulsory commodification and profit-driven expansion, but by its form of valuation.”<sup>43</sup> A contribution of Brown’s work has been the attention she has drawn to the process of neoliberal subjectivation, namely, a fostering of *homo oeconomicus* or the “economic man.”<sup>44</sup> Under neoliberalism, there is only “a market formulation of winners and losers,” as the idea of freedom becomes reduced to the “market instrumental rationality

<sup>38</sup> Harvey writes, “While personal and individual freedom in the marketplace is guaranteed, each individual is held responsible and accountable for his or her own actions and well-being. This principle extends into the realms of welfare, education, health care, and even pensions ... Individual success or failure are interpreted in terms of entrepreneurial virtues or personal failings (such as not investing significantly enough in one’s own human capital through education) rather than being attributed to any systemic property (such as the class exclusions usually attributed to capitalism).” See David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 65–66.

<sup>39</sup> Harvey, *A Brief History*, 69.

<sup>40</sup> Harvey, *A Brief History*, 67–70.

<sup>41</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Acts of Resistance: Against the Tyranny of the Market*, trans. Richard Nice (New York: The New Press, 1998), 98.

<sup>42</sup> See, for instance, Henry A. Giroux, *Public Spaces, Private Lives: Beyond the Culture of Cynicism* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 58–59.

<sup>43</sup> Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015), 44.

<sup>44</sup> Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 41.

that radically constrains both choices and ambitions.”<sup>45</sup>

These consequences of neoliberalism are pertinent to *82-nyõnsaeng Kim Chiyõng* because, as Brown notes, neoliberalism carries with it specific associations with freedom. Neoliberalism, according to Brown, extracts and even distorts “the language and promise of inclusive and shared political equality, freedom, and popular sovereignty” into an economic register, which potentially “[signifies] democracy’s opposite.”<sup>46</sup> In effect, neoliberalism “discursively [disintegrates]” the language and conceptual apparatus of liberal democracy, as well as its associations with human freedom and collective self-rule.<sup>47</sup> While Brown discusses these matters from the perspective of political philosophy, a similar phenomenon may be observed in Cho’s novel, where the promise of freedom and feminist emancipation comes under the dominance of neoliberalism.

A similar critique has been levelled by educational theorist Henry A. Giroux, who has been increasingly devoted to the study of neoliberalism’s assault on the terms of freedom. In *Public Spaces, Private Lives*, Giroux wrote,

What is missing is a language, movement, and vision that refuses to equate democracy with consumerism, market relations, and privatization. In the absence of such a language and the social formations and public spheres that make it operative, politics becomes narcissistic and caters to the mood of widespread pessimism and the cathartic allure of the spectacle.<sup>48</sup>

Neoliberalism holds forth the promise of freedom, but ultimately frustrates it of having substantive meaning beyond the market. Put differently, neoliberalism entices people with the promise of freedom in the market, but conceals the hidden reality that this freedom may be used or enjoyed only within the constraints of the market. Once labor productivity or efficiency ceases to serve its needs, neoliberalism frustrates those who would seek a more substantive and richer understanding of freedom. These include a vision of society that is not predominantly structured through labor contribution to the market.

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 44.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. There has also been some debate about what Brown’s liberatory figure of *homo politicus* actually indicates. See Samuel A. Chambers, “Undoing Neoliberalism: *Homo Economicus*, *Homo Politicus*, and the *Zõon Politikon*.” *Critical Inquiry* 44, no. 4 (2018): 706–32.

<sup>48</sup> Giroux, *Public Spaces*, xiv-xv. He also wrote, “Within the prevailing discourse of neoliberalism that has taken hold of the public imagination, there is no vocabulary for political or social transformation, no collective vision, no social agency to challenge the ruthless [developments, such as] ... the elimination of benefits for people now hired on a strictly part-time basis.” See Giroux, *Public Spaces*, 58–59.

## Neoliberalism as a False Promise in *82-nyōnsaeng Kim Chiyōng*

It is fitting that Chiyōng's narrative should take us through the historical developments that unfold from the 1980's (or earlier) to the 2010s. Through the course of the novel, Cho narrates the sacrifices that Chiyōng's mother made while working in a factory to support her elder brothers' education, eventually giving up her own dream of becoming a schoolteacher. As Chiyōng's mother struggles to raise two daughters and becomes pregnant with a third daughter, her mother-in-law pressures her to have a son, which leads Chiyōng's mother to have an abortion. When Chiyōng's mother becomes pregnant for a fourth time, she gives birth to a son.<sup>49</sup> These experiences, as Cho repeatedly emphasizes, did not just belong to Chiyōng's mother, but to many other women of her generation. When Chiyōng's mother sacrifices her dream to support her brothers' education, Cho Namju inserts her own voice, saying that "all the girls lived like that" in that period.<sup>50</sup> When Chiyōng's mother has an abortion to avoid having a third daughter, Cho cites statistics to show that many mothers in the 1980's chose to terminate pregnancies of third daughters, resulting in a disproportionate sex ratio among infants in the early 1990's (Cho [2016] 2018, 142).<sup>51</sup> When Chiyōng's mother takes on various side jobs to support her family, Cho mentions the choices made by other housewives during this time, *ajummas* who became known for selling yoghurt drinks, insurance, or cosmetics in the 1980's and early 1990's.<sup>52</sup> The continuous and conscious interweaving of the lives of Korean women in this historical narration of Korea's modernization has led some commentators to describe *82-nyōnsaeng Kim Chiyōng* as a social documentary.<sup>53</sup>

Yet the insistence on male privilege and patriarchal norms also seems crudely expressed in the novel. The incoherence with which criticism is levelled against a male-dominated society has been part and parcel of the ambivalent reception that this novel has ignited. Anger seems an appropriate response to Cho's central criticism in *82-nyōnsaeng Kim Chiyōng*, but so is a measure of inaction or resignation. Cho's criticisms of Korean society conveys an ambivalence that has arguably contributed to the skepticism and even disdain for feminism among some critics in Korean society. The prospect of improved male-female relations does not seem to be the ultimate goal for

<sup>49</sup> Through the first part of *82-nyōnsaeng Kim Chiyōng*, Chiyōng narrates how her younger brother became the doted grandchild of his paternal grandmother and was lavished with attention and preferential treatment in their family.

<sup>50</sup> Cho Namju, *82-nyōnsaeng*, 149.

<sup>51</sup> Cho Namju, *82-nyōnsaeng*, 142. According to the data cited, there were about twice as many males to female children born as the third or subsequent child in Korean families during this time.

<sup>52</sup> Cho Namju, *82-nyōnsaeng*, 143.

<sup>53</sup> See Shin, "Bringing to Light."

feminist writers like Cho. Rather, by expressing their resentment and frustration, they seem merely to vent the intolerability of their circumstances without encouraging a form of constructive debate.

In this novel, patriarchy and neoliberalism engender ambivalent responses among Korean women. As earlier noted, patriarchy in Korea originates from a strong emphasis on familial bonds and male responsibility, which may ironically include some of the protections associated with paternalism. During the 1997 Asian financial crisis and other financial scrapes, Cho focuses on Chiyōng's mother's resourcefulness and proactive decisiveness, but also indirectly reveals Chiyōng's father's sense of responsibility and commitment. Chiyōng's father decides to start a business with his colleagues after "voluntarily" resigning from work, but Chiyōng's mother opposes the venture and invests his severance wage in commercial property instead. Under her initiative, they open a restaurant in their commercial property, but struggle to maintain a profitable business. Cho's intent is to highlight Chiyōng's mother's resourceful personality, but she also unintentionally reveals Chiyōng's father's sense of familial duty. Chiyōng seems to demonstrate an ambivalence towards a social hierarchy that simultaneously provides security and leads to the belittlement of women. It may be that feminism in Korea has been treated with little intellectual seriousness due to its tendency to simplify otherwise complex nuances and emotional dependencies, as seen in this novel.

It is a conventional move to denounce the Korean patriarchal legacy for being repressive, restrictive, and inconsistent with modern developments. The idea that Chiyōng is repressed, hindered, and fettered solely by patriarchy, however, overlooks the more complex dynamics and nuances of her situation. Chiyōng is arguably the beneficiary of an engrained tradition that places great weight on the role of fathers or patriarchs. To some extent, she enjoys some of these benefits, such as in the expectation of her father's commitment to his family and also in her relationship with her husband. Her husband, by all accounts, is supportive and helps with housework.<sup>54</sup> Even though he represents the views of a wider society with embedded patriarchal norms and serves as its mouthpiece at times, a balanced look at his character shows that he is supportive, attentive, and caring towards his wife. He helps with cleaning the refrigerator and does the laundry on days when his wife works night shifts.<sup>55</sup> He does not pressure her to have a child, though he says that having one will allay those who expect her to have one. Taehyōn is willing to support the family when Chiyōng decides to resign from her job (as a result of her pregnancy) and encourages her to make use of her time out to study,

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<sup>54</sup> This male character of near-perfection is emphasized in the film adaptation, where Kong Yu stars as Chōng Taehyōn.

<sup>55</sup> Cho Namju, *82-nyōnsaeng*, 233.

pursue new interests, or to find other work.<sup>56</sup> The argument that Chiyŏng's ills stem primarily or solely from the Korean patriarchal legacy overlooks the more complex dynamics in this novel and in the processes of subjectification. Chiyŏng expects her husband to be loyal, dutiful, and supportive, demonstrating how both men and women are enmeshed in the contradictions of competing cultural regimes. Chiyŏng's resentment against male privilege in patriarchal society overlooks the pressures placed on men to fulfill their expected roles as breadwinners and providers for their families. While it may be difficult to reconcile these contradictory aspects in her attitude towards patriarchy, this also reveals how Chiyŏng is "enclosed" in the masculine sphere,<sup>57</sup> rather than articulating a point of resistance external to it.

Neoliberalism also engenders ambivalence, if not more gender deception than patriarchal norms. Chiyŏng identifies a form of freedom in the neoliberal market. She is desperate to find a job after graduation, apparently less for financial reasons and more to secure her sense of worth. In the process of looking for post-graduation jobs, Chiyŏng struggles less with the insecurity of her future and more with her desire to belong to a certain social group of workers. Cho writes, "[Miss Kim Chiyŏng] really wanted to wear an ID card lanyard around her neck, to carry her purse and cellphone in her hand, walk through the crowds, and say, 'what should I eat today?'"<sup>58</sup> Chiyŏng identifies an attractive form of freedom in the market that provides her with opportunities for consumption and a broader choice of commodities. This power comes, Chiyŏng initially believes, irrespective of her gender. Chiyŏng seeks freedom through her participation and contribution of labor to the market, suggesting that this view of freedom is aligned with neoliberal ideals. A running criticism of neoliberalism has been that it transposes freedom from political life to "an economic register."<sup>59</sup> As stated earlier, neoliberalism does not allow individuals to think of freedom in terms other than the economic freedom to consume. Yet this neoliberal freedom comes with an imperative that compels workers to adhere to conditions of deregulated competition and labor productivity. These conditions mean, as Chiyŏng later discovers, that some women, especially young mothers, are particularly disadvantaged under the competitive conditions of the neoliberal market.

In spite of this, Chiyŏng associates her years at the public relations agency, where

<sup>56</sup> Cho Namju, *82-nyŏnsaeng*, 247.

<sup>57</sup> Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 653.

<sup>58</sup> Cho Namju, *82-nyŏnsaeng*, 216. It is not unusual in Korean novels for people to refer to themselves in the third-person, particularly when written in a self-reflective mode.

<sup>59</sup> Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 41. See also Bourdieu, *Acts of Resistance*; Giroux, *Public Spaces*; Noam Chomsky and Christopher Lydon. "Noam Chomsky: Neoliberalism Is Destroying Our Democracy." *The Nation*, June 2, 2017. <https://www.thenation.com/article/noam-chomsky-neoliberalism-destroying-democracy>.

she works for several years until her early thirties, with some pride, independence, and a measure of freedom. She reflects upon resigning from her job (as a result of her pregnancy after marriage),

I had felt a sense of accomplishment doing the work I was assigned and being promoted and there had been a sense of reward from taking responsibility for my lifestyle from my own income. But all of that had ended. It wasn't that Miss Kim Chiyŏng hadn't had the ability or that she hadn't been hard-working, but that's what had happened.<sup>60</sup>

In this free indirect discourse, Cho refers to Chiyŏng as “Kim Chiyŏng-*ssi*” using formal Korean language. This is in keeping with her conscious attempts at social documentation, supported by statistics and data, which renders Chiyŏng into a generalizable female figure who could theoretically stand for any number of real Korean women. Chiyŏng describes her experiences of independence and accomplishment in terms offered her by neoliberalism. Neoliberalism provides her with a language with which to resist patriarchal authority and gender discrimination. Yet, as she finds, neoliberalism has its own oppressive dynamics that indirectly or covertly discriminate against women, particularly those who choose to become mothers.

### **Young Motherhood in *82-nyŏnsaeng Kim Chiyŏng***

Chiyŏng's experiences are generalizable beyond Korea, as the experience of motherhood in most societies calls for a realignment of roles in the domestic and public spheres. Chiyŏng's experiences as a young mother are not specifically Korean, but her reactions and articulation of her circumstances are reflective of the Korean society in which she lives. Cho depicts a culture that advances male privilege and leads to fatalism over specifically Korean or at least East Asian circumstances. Chiyŏng's despair reaches a culminating point in the discovery that even her workplace had consistently discriminated against female employees and had treated its male employees preferentially. As she learns over drinks with her colleagues,

The director knew well that it was difficult to juggle intensive and specialized work with married life and especially childcare, so he didn't consider the female employees as colleagues who would last long. It was not as though he was planning

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<sup>60</sup> Cho Namju, *82-nyŏnsaeng*, 249.

to devote his energies to welfare. It was in the director's judgment that, rather than making more manageable conditions for those employees who could not manage [the work] (*pŏl'ida*), it was more effective to further support those employees who could manage.<sup>61</sup>

Though feeling betrayed, Chiyŏng understands the director's rationale in making these managerial decisions. She reflects,

The ultimate motivation for entrepreneurs is to make money, so she couldn't blame the director for trying to make the highest profits from the smallest investments. But is it really fair to insist on efficiency and rationality, which are immediately visible? What is going to remain in an unfair world? Will those who remain be happy?<sup>62</sup>

The level of emotional investment and personal dedication that Chiyŏng had shown in her work was not merely a means for self-promotion. It was also an expected expression of loyalty to the company. Her emotional investment in her workplace reveals a culturally mixed adaptation of neoliberalism and individual competition within a collective system. Chiyŏng relates her social ties to her company in highly personal terms that bind her sense of self-worth with a feeling of collectivistic loyalty. Chiyŏng's attachment to her workplace shows an identification with a collective group as distinct from patriarchal forms of society. Yet her expectations are more or less the same: the desire for affirmation, self-worth, belonging, and acceptance.

Chiyŏng misidentifies the individual opportunities of market freedom for a richer feeling of belonging and collectivity. Liberated by the opportunities granted her from participation in the market, Chiyŏng anticipates a resolution to the older and seemingly outdated patriarchal tensions. Yet in entering the neoliberal market with the expectation of affirmation and social recognition, she shows that she does not fully understand the logic of neoliberal rationality and individual competition. The free market is the only experience through which Chiyŏng can escape from what she viewed as a repressive patriarchal model of society. To her dismay, she finds that she is simultaneously involved in neoliberalism's labor discrimination and imperative towards productivity.

This is not to say that Korean society in *82-nyŏnsaeng Kim Chiyŏng* does not include any welfare benefits, such as maternity leave or a provision allowing Chiyŏng to arrive

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<sup>61</sup> Cho Namju, *82-nyŏnsaeng*, 229.

<sup>62</sup> Cho Namju, *82-nyŏnsaeng*, 230.

later to work.<sup>63</sup> Contemporary Korean society in *82-nyönsaeng Kim Chiyöng* does recognize the rights of working women who are pregnant or mothers. But the pressure is immense, as Chiyöng describes, for such women to continue to be competitive in the market. This becomes an added strain on top of the lack of appreciation for the difficulties that working mothers face. The view of society that Cho presents is impoverished in its vision of what a manageable life for such mothers could be. While welfare provisions work to smooth over some of the harsher edges of neoliberal competition, there is an underlying lack of social consensus on a satisfactory social life outside the market. Chiyöng's frustration is rooted in the sense that while she cannot accept the older patriarchal model of society, she cannot find validation in the neoliberal market, particularly after she has left it. Beauvoir wrote these words in a different context, but the analogy is striking here. "Halfway between revolt and slavery, she unwillingly resigns herself to masculine authority."<sup>64</sup> In Cho's words,

It was as though Miss Kim Chiyöng had been placed in the middle of a maze. She had been faithfully and calmly looking for the exit, but there hadn't been an exit from the start. Even as she vaguely fell to the floor [in despair], she had to keep on working hard, or at least to break through the walls.<sup>65</sup>

*82-nyönsaeng Kim Chiyöng* reveals that motherhood lies at the intersection of the contradictions between and within patriarchy and neoliberalism. The labor of childcare and housework are external to, and hence, unrecognized and unrewarded by the market. This means that, in withdrawing from labor participation in the market, Chiyöng becomes separated from the language of freedom, independence, and action, which had provided her with admittedly imperfect tools with which to express a desire for recognition. The language she ironically resorts to is that of patriarchal conventions, which places an impossible burden on her to be selfless and sacrificial, emptied of her own desires and need for fulfilment through the activities of caring for her family. It is through motherhood that Chiyöng faces the cruelties of both regimes, including the neoliberal imperative for individuals to compete in the market, with little interest in the demands of childcare or domestic labor.<sup>66</sup> She also faces the strain from patriarchal norms, which subordinate her interests and needs to those of other members in her

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<sup>63</sup> Cho Namju, *82-nyönsaeng*, 242. This provision allows her to avoid the rush hour on public transport by about thirty minutes.

<sup>64</sup> Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 666.

<sup>65</sup> Cho Namju, *82-nyönsaeng*, 229.

<sup>66</sup> Statistics indicate that there are more than twice the number of irregular female workers over the age of forty, compared to male irregular workers. See Shin, "Bringing to Light."



family. This seems a cruel repetition of the engrained customs and practices that she had witnessed growing up, contributing to her sense that she lives in an enclosed masculine universe. Her sense of frustration, rage, and impotence reaches a climax in the end of the novel, where Cho makes it clear that people suffer less as a result of individual actions and more due to “a social atmosphere, structure, and customs.”<sup>67</sup>

### Concluding Remarks

How does motherhood in *82-nyönsaeng Kim Chiyöng* expose the contradictions in and between neoliberalism and the patriarchal model? To better understand this, it is worth turning to one of the more memorable passages. Towards the end of the novel, Chiyöng picks up her infant daughter from the childcare center and takes a walk through a local park. On the other side of the park is a new coffee shop where she buys an americano for 1,500 *wön* as part of a promotional event (about 1.30 US dollars). As her little daughter sleeps in the stroller, Chiyöng drinks her coffee in the park. “Chiwön [her daughter] had fallen asleep, with clear and large dribble [from her mouth], and the coffee that Chiyöng was drinking, for the first time in a long while outdoors, tasted good.”<sup>68</sup> Besides her, on the next bench, sit two male office workers in their thirties who are drinking coffee from the same coffee shop. Chiyöng glances at them enviously, even though she knows “how tired, frustrated, and stressed” they must be from work.<sup>69</sup> One of the men sees her and starts speaking with his colleague. “[Chiyöng] couldn’t hear clearly, but she could hear parts of their conversation.”<sup>70</sup> Their conversation, as she hears it, include the following remarks. “I wish I could walk around drinking coffee with money earned by my husband ... The fortune of *mamch’ung* is the best ... I don’t want to marry a Korean woman.”<sup>71</sup>

It is these snippets of their conversation that prompt Chiyöng to quickly gulp down her coffee and hurry back home. Chiyöng spends the rest of the day in a daze and forgets to have lunch and dinner. When her husband returns after midnight following a

<sup>67</sup> Cho Namju, “Sesang kwa hamkke söngjangghanün ch’aegiössümyön chok’essöyo” [I hope this can be a book that can grow with the world], interview by Kim Sülgi, in Cho Namju, *82-nyönsaeng Kim Chiyöng*, 97–121.

<sup>68</sup> Cho Namju, *82-nyönsaeng*, 266–67.

<sup>69</sup> Cho Namju, *82-nyönsaeng*, 267.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid. The term *mamch’ung* is a derogatory neologism that describes a “parasitic” housewife who carelessly spends her husband’s hard-earned money often in her selfish interests. The word is derived from the English word “mom” and the word *ch’ung* 蟲 meaning “insect.” This is also the final syllable in the word *kisaengch’ung*, or “parasite.”

night shift, she tells him about the conversation she overheard in the park. “At the time, she had just felt surprised and ashamed, she had only wanted to run away, but as she recalled the events, she could feel her face burning and her hands shaking.”<sup>72</sup> Chiyŏng exclaims,

That coffee was 1,500 *wŏn*. Those people were drinking the same coffee so they would have known. *Oppa*, don't I deserve to drink one cup of coffee that costs 1,500 *wŏn*? No, it doesn't even matter if it costs 15 million *wŏn* instead of 1,500 *wŏn*. Regardless of how much money I spend from what my husband has earned, that's our family's concern. It's not as though I stole your (*oppa*'s) money. I gave birth to a child through excruciating pain and I'm raising a child having given up my entire lifestyle, work, dream, my life, and myself. What I am supposed to do now?<sup>73</sup>

One could criticize Chiyŏng for over-reacting to what strangers have said about her, but Cho writes this scene as the climactic moment of the novel. The views of the strangers reflect that of a deeply contradictory society towards women like Chiyŏng. The idea that mothers' work is not productive or valuable, in the sense that it is not rewarded by the market or does not generate profit, conflicts with the patriarchal injunction that women should stay at home, raise their children, and be supportive and affectionate wives. What is seen in this novel is that the idea of social progress and achievement in Korea has been closely intertwined with neoliberal views of productivity. Yet these ideas also spring from a patriarchal basis that expresses contrary views about women and mothers. Women can neither win under neoliberalism nor under patriarchy, since both regimes effectively cancel each other out to negate the scope of their achievements. This novel exposes the double bind in which young mothers like Chiyŏng find themselves in.

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<sup>72</sup> Cho Namju, *82-nyŏnsaeng*, 268.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

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