

**Mobilizing Korean Family Ties:
Cultural Conversations across the Border
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Please note that this paper is a draft only and the references are incomplete.

My ethnographic points of departure and center for this talk are a series of conversations between husbands and wives, first and second cousins, and brothers and sisters; some of the conversations are literal (i.e., both parties are there); others metaphorical (i.e., the interlocutor is evoked, not present). The conversations in question can all be located genealogically from two cousins of the same age, both recent college graduates. They are the sons of a brother and sister now in their 50s and Korean immigrants living in Chicago, whom I met with throughout their college years at the University of Illinois. More specifically, many of my conversations followed the kin-tracks of Tony's visit to Seoul one summer, some I had in Urbana-Champaign and Chicago, others in Seoul with non-emigrated kin of Tony and Ethan.

My larger project is on the educational narratives and lives of current (or by now recently graduated) Korean American students in Illinois public higher education in articulation with the retrospective educational and immigration stories of their parents. I wrote this talk over my spring break in order to begin working with the Seoul interviews I did with the non-emigrated relatives of these immigrant parents.

Beyond their genealogical connection, the conversations I draw on today share a key feature: they mobilize "culture," specifically family ties and kinship solidarity. In speaking of the "mobilization" of "culture," I draw upon *but extend* Arjun Appadurai's (1996:13) concept of culture—the cultural—as "a pervasive dimension of human discourse that exploits difference to generate diverse conceptions of group identity." I will argue, however, that talk about, and through, family ties is *always* inflected by other *differences*—of class, gender, and ideas of the "modern"—such that the group identities that are mobilized are always already ambivalent, in flux, and challenged by cross-cutting "trajectories" (in the historically specific sense in which Bourdieu uses that term). It is important to understand that, following Appadurai, Timothy Mitchell and others, the migrant imaginary is inextricable from the modern project: that is, the modern has always been a transnational project in which the migrated (or colonial) other is a discursive site.

I have decided to pick up conversations about family ties or solidarity precisely *because* these comprise a well-worn discursive trope—one that is widely considered "cultural" in the Korean/American transnation (as Confucian, as somehow model-minority and so on). Family solidarity, then, is a trope in a global community of signs

that is distributed and inflected with great specificity. I go to this conversational jugular (of South Korean, Korean America, and mainstream American imaginaries on the migrant) not to wish “it” (family ties etc.) away (because it is in fact spoken and mobilized), but to challenge us to think differently about how to understand its “being-there.” Here I am, with many others (for example Abu-Lughod and Anagnost), doing an anthropology that takes the mobilization of culture seriously—as precisely those moments that we should pay attention to: neither for facile celebration nor knee-jerk dismissal, but rather for healthy suspicion and careful analysis.

My approach here—tuning into far-flung conversations across migrant ties and imaginaries—aims to interrupt received ways and sensibilities for thinking about transnational cultural fields, migration, families, and culture more generally. In my analysis of these conversations, I argue that they are inflected with signs/moments of difference that both *disrupt* facile agreement between the parties talking and/or the coherency of any single speaker. In some cases these disruptions can be best understood in the narrower matrix of genealogical stories and logics, while in other cases they instead speak to and from larger historical and discursive frames.

How then, and of what, are these (conversational, cultural) disruptions productive? I think that they interrupt facile understandings of group-identification or mobilization, as let’s say, South Koreans or Korean Americans. If, as I will show, any single conversational node is already shot through with signs of difference, this should make us think twice about many of the cornerstones of immigrant analysis, such as: ideas of “cultures” (as static properties or even projects) that are carried across borders in luggage-like fashion; “cultures” that are transmitted whole-cloth from the immigrant to the second-generation (in a particular and problematic understanding of “socialization”); and “cultures” that work as cultural capital—to be expended or drawn upon—across internal and international migrations. Although my talk today will not review these received understandings, they are critical to my larger project because the matter of “Asian American education” is an academic and popular stronghold of entrenched ideas about cultural baggage that is brought from a homeland, transmitted to children, and employed (i.e., effectively) in American schooling.

This approach to conversational and cultural disruptions should also help us to appreciate the volatility of group identities, ripe for organization along the lines of other (class, gender, etc.) trajectories. In much literature the transnation is mobilized in terms of ongoing ties and shared projects (be they economic i.e., remittances, or political i.e., nationalist projects) between migrants and the unmigrated—such that groups (national, familial etc.) are understood in corporate and coherent senses with the mobilization of singular differences. I shift the focus to a nexus of small conversations in order to suggest that the seemingly corporate and coherent is often quite ambivalent. This said, I take Lisa Lowe seriously in her caution about “master narratives of generational conflict and filial relation” that obscure “particularities and incommensurabilities,” class and gender among them (Lowe 1996:62). But, in my ethnography of precisely “filial relations,” I insist that we look, so-to-speak, for difference within. Here I follow from the work of my forthcoming book on women and class in South Korea, *The Melodrama of Mobility*, in which I pay considerable attention to class difference and disruption within the family. Likewise, I take inspiration from Stuart Hall who is careful to not go to the other extreme, to celebrate nomadic subjects; instead, he considers the particularity of hybrid cultural identities that emerge from “very specific historical formations, out of very specific histories and cultural repertoires of enunciation” (1996:502).

While appreciating these historical and cultural repertoires of enunciation, critical to my approach today is a call to think about conversations across borders and generations as sharing references or systems of difference that often extend *beyond explicit or articulated knowledge*—logics spoken often in other times and tongues, and even beyond conscious knowledge. Here I take inspiration from Carolyn Steedman’s multi-generational, auto-ethnographic critical history (Steedman ???), and from Pierre Bourdieu’s “social psychoanalysis” (Bourdieu 1984: 77).

Thus, echoing James Clifford—and by now so many eloquent others—on partial truths, I appreciate that the ethnographer *always* enters an already-ongoing conversation, ongoing in the narrowest and broadest senses. Conversations are referentially saturated genealogically, discursively, and historically (here I draw from Bakhtin on heteroglossia)—and these references often exceed conscious knowledge. This excess of the conscious has important implications for immigration research: in the case of my

project, for example, it leaves me willing to draw on conversations with the immigrant parents and even non-emigrated kin of Korean American 1.5 and second-generation youth, and on South Korean contemporary history (particularly educational history) in my efforts to make sense of Korean American lives.

[KINSHIP CHART: explain briefly that emanating from these cousins I take up kin on both Tony's patrilineal and matrilineal sides, and only on Ethan's patrilineal side]

Marriage 1: The Dentists

I begin in the middle of a marital conversation, that of Tony's 40-something second-cousin once-removed (his father's 13-year younger paternal first cousin) and his wife; I call them the dentist-husband and the dentist-wife. During his summer in Seoul, Tony felt most "at home" with these relatives: among other things, the dentist-wife's English was good. There was kinship logic to Tony finding his way to this couple: namely, Tony's father, hailing from the provinces, had for some years lived with the dentist-husband's family in Seoul. In fact, for a number of his childhood years the dentist-husband had not only shared one of his family's only two rooms with his maternal cousin (Tony's father), but also with his paternal cousin, both of them having come to Seoul to attend college. The dentist-husband's mother had been "like a mother" to Tony's father, and furthermore his years with the family had been critical to Tony's father's later emigration

Critical here is that for Tony and other observers, this dentist-couple (and the fact that Tony hung out with them that summer) are themselves signs of kin ties and solidarity. I proceed now to differences between the dentist-wife and -husband on kin ties, and in turn to the exercise of these differences with regard to Tony.

In the story of the dentist-husband's family, there was much ado about the gritty and heartwarming details of shared rooms where cousins were launched in the warm embrace of extended family in hard times with little to go around. After hours of these sorts of reflections, we arrived at the dentist-wife's natal family: middle-class, "modern," and above all "individualistic." The dentist-wife thought of hers as "the more developed family form: with each individual with their own life." As she put it, "I thought mine

was the model of a modern family.” Treading in a large Korean trope—that of the difficulties of the bride in adjusting to her husband’s family’s ways of being—the dentist-wife elaborated on her own early marriage struggles. It had, for example, been shocking to marry into a family where there was no “mine and yours—your thing, my thing”—even her own children were to be shared. But then came the conversational moment when the dentist-wife paused wistfully to suggest that her husband’s family’s ways were better: “Mine is yours, and yours is mine ... that solidarity.” The dentist-husband countered, by then against the conversational grain, that his dentist-wife’s family’s ways were superior: “Their personal styles are distinct. When they speak they bring various opinions to the table, and from there you can choose the best way. It is untenable [i.e., nowadays in South Korea] to sustain my family’s way of being; for the future it is their style that makes sense.” I turn now to the dentist wife on Tony—and to yet other class and gendered conversational reversals and ambivalences.

The dentist-wife was surprised about a number of things about Tony—a surprise that cannot be wrested from her migrant imaginary on Tony’s father. Tony’s father’s emigration, unlike those of “people who emigrate with nothing, hoping only for a better material life,” had been, she described, about moving his life to a “larger stage” (i.e., away from the smallness of Korea), about a dream that would bring him to “really live” in “immigrant society” (*imin sahoe*). For the dentist-wife, this “immigrant society” was drawn in contrast to those emigrants who end up in Koreatowns “speaking nothing but Korean” and so forth. Although she did figure that Tony and his family would have “my ‘identity’,” she imagined that they would take in the broader society and so forth. It was against this understanding, this migrant imaginary (one inflected by class and the erasure of race), that Tony surprised her: he was so “conservative”; he spoke about smoking and drinking as “crazy” and so on. “Sure,” said the dentist-wife, “There are kids like that in [South] Korea but why does a kid in the U.S. have to be like that?” And she was surprised that “exteriors aside,” the “truth” of Tony’s life was that all of his friends were Korean (erased here is that these friends were Korean Americans, racial minorities, not simply the Koreatown “Koreans” of a space that went unrecognized as immigration by the dentist-wife). When she had asked Tony “Why?” he had spoken about their shared thinking and language; “So,” the dentist-wife concluded, “I end up thinking, ‘strange,

why do they have to live like that?” She did, for a moment, wonder aloud about racism—“was that at play?”—but Tony had answered “no” so the thought had trailed off.

If the political and *ethnic* (in the logic of this conversation I think that is the operative word i.e., not racial) contours of Tony’s life surprised the dentist-wife, so did Tony’s “strange sense of duty to family” in Seoul that summer. In contrast with “[South] Korean kids these days” who “know how to ‘tell it like it is’—who can matter-of-factly announce when they don’t want to do something [like visit relatives],” Tony could not bring himself to say “no” to the call of family and in fact ended up, “slyly,” she added, playing his maternal and paternal kin off one another to get out of family obligations. The contrast here is interesting: between the radically individualistic but forthright South Korean youth who tell it like it is when it comes, for example, to the call of kin *and* the sly migrant ethnic caught in the mire of the *performance* of kin ties

We have just listened to the dentist-wife juggle the valence of kin-ties and solidarity in the case of her marriage—she and her husband’s families – and again in the discussion of Tony. On the one hand, her husband’s family’s kinship solidarity unsettled her classed logics of the modern—as she put it, “I used to think that being individualistic was being developed but now I don’t think like that ... and I used to think that things Western were more developed but now I don’t necessarily think so.” On the other hand, though, she nonetheless waxed surprised about Tony, inclined to wrest him from the very kinship logics that had carried him her way: to Korea, to feel compelled to visit, and so on. There are many points of revealing slippage across her observations: the elision of class in the name of culture that is spoken of temporally as “traditional” or “modern” -- “It seems that the ‘past’ is better,” she said at one point; the elision of ethnic networks and of race in the name of “[South] Korea” and the “United States” as distinct and homogeneous coherencies; the elision of class in the assignment of the “modern” to the West or the United States and so on. This complexity echoes Aihwa Ong on modernity as “‘a matter of signification,’ in which forms associated with Western modernization are renamed and reworked in local cultural contexts framed by an East-West opposition” (1999:53-4). For the dentist-wife, the (international) migrant imaginary—embodied here in the past of Tony’s father and in Tony—is fraught with difference. Here we find the disruptive

meeting of systems of difference-making—from that of her marriage (across class and other divides) to that of Tony vis-a-vis South Korean youth.

Finally, I want to call attention to ways in which the dentist-wife and dentist-husband's conversation was gendered in an again disruptive manner. The dentist-husband spoke somewhat smugly about the contingencies of his own career and life-course vis-a-vis that of his childhood room-mate, Tony's father; in so doing he spoke collectively for both himself and his wife: "We were the ideal students, everything went perfectly for us, on-course, studying at our country's best; yes, our parents suffered hardship and-all-that on our behalf, but our paths have been easy ... so there was no reason to go [abroad]. Of course when I was little I thought about riding in an airplane bound for the U.S. ... but those were nothing but the thoughts of a child." The dentist-wife interrupted to say: "But that's not all there is to it [i.e., to leaving]. That might be how my husband sees it, but I had always wanted to study abroad in the U.S. I really wanted to, but mine is a case of not being able to do so because of having married and had children." The "ideal student" and the "immigrant" in the dentist husband's narrative are implicitly gendered: male. He had sketched the life-course, the teleology of a national man; fascinating here is that in this triumphant course, the sticky web of kinship against which he had distinguished his wife's family is nowhere present. Nor, in turn, for the dentist-wife is the classed modern, lone individual present in her own gendered longing to go abroad as distinct from her husband.

To recall my opening point about the slippage and disruptions within speech and across conversations, I do not here juxtapose the dentist-wife on her marriage, on Tony, and on immigrant desires to in any way point to her *personal confusion*; rather, I want to underscore the complex referential system of signs of difference across the immigrant divide and imaginary. The dentist-wife is partaking, partially, as I in turn am partaking ever-so-partially of her, of a larger cultural conversation in which family ties or solidarity have rich cultural signification – signs that refer variously, but not *randomly*. It is only with an appreciation of this complexity that we can begin to grasp the field of talk and discourse from which identifications take and change shape.

Tony and Ethan

I turn now to Tony and Ethan (the cousins), to a conversation over pizza in their shared apartment on the almost-eve of their college graduation. Self-conscious that I was writing a book that would feature their family/ies, they raised the issue of their own representativeness, of Korean America as it were. Ethan put it this way, “I think we’re actually very atypical. I mean I don’t really associate with other Koreans in general.” Minutes later, he added, “I think our parents’ beliefs aren’t that common with the first generation here. ... more American, sort of anti-Korean.” And then later, to elaborate on this difference, he added, “My parents never pushed me hard. Like I think for most Korean parents, education is an important thing, but education probably for *the wrong reasons*, for the honor of the family or whatever.”

Tony interrupted, “It was the opposite for us [i.e., with my parents], maybe not for me, but at least for my sisters [i.e., that they pushed them hard].” Ethan was nonetheless comfortable to summarize that both of their families “began with more Western views than most.” To this, Tony elaborated, “*conservative* Western views,” to which Ethan then added, “Republican—like not believing in welfare.” Although not openly conflictual, each addition—“conservative” to Western, and again “Republican” to conservative—signaled difference. Minutes later they spoke of their shared difference as Catholics and thus distanced from the Korean American Protestant (and largely evangelical) church scene (that figures largely in my broader project)—and from the larger Korean immigrant “community.” In these short exchanges, there are many signs, and signs of difference: the pushy parent implicated behind the model minority as a (lower) classed image, the West, the conservative West, the (American) Republican, Catholicism, evangelical Korean American Christianity (also classed) and so on. Later in this talk I will partially connect these differences back to their sibling-parents.

As we talked on, the cousins did reach what seemed to be considerable agreement about their family ties and solidarity: that rather than rivaling, they help each other out. Although we will see in a moment that Tony would again disrupt Ethan’s assertions of shared difference. Said Ethan: “Everyone’s always looking out for each other and for the future, and their mentality is that Tony and I are doing well, so we’re actually helping the family and helping their kids too ... so there isn’t the competition or negative feelings that I would say is *typical with other Korean families or Koreans* in general.” Implicit

here is a vague logic in which instrumental educational ambition (of a model minority) is somehow irreconcilable with robust family ties; here, their difference, oddly enough, is their family solidarity—odd because it falls in an economy of signs that codes such solidarity as already ethnically distinctive (that is, that elusive ethnic capital that threatens American senses of fairness and so on). Tony, however—while at once agreeing on the solidarity etc.—refused Ethan’s meaning-making in that he denied it as either “anti-Korean” or as distinctive in a family way.

In my email correspondence with Tony since graduation, I asked him if he wanted to choose his own pseudonym; he wrote back, “As for the pseudonym, I haven’t seen *The Godfather* in years but perhaps a famous Italian name”—and so I settled on Tony. If with this pseudonym, Tony had wrested his family particularity by reference to the contours of a particular white ethnic American imaginary (of family ties and ethnic solidarity), so did he later that night over pizza by speaking of their family solidarity as very much Korean, subverting Ethan’s signs of difference. Tony said, “In Korea, I guess, especially during the War, I mean they all had to take care of each other”; he then went on to name the siblings and cousins who had helped his mother with her nursing school tuition (because her father had refused to pay) and he concluded summarily, “and “that happened basically with everybody [i.e., in the family] and I think it’s that [i.e., what our family is about]: every body supporting each other and helping each other, and that’s kind of what they stressed with us.” From there, Ethan—shifting back to *family* difference—moved matter-of-factly to Catholicism: “Maybe it’s [i.e., the supportive family] due to the Catholic religion—that’s my interpretation. And also what [Tony] said about coming to America and having only each other.” By evoking the Catholic religion, Ethan again erased ethnic distinctiveness, and the historical particularity of Tony’s mother’s immigration story (particularly its gendered contours). Furthermore, Ethan had managed to collapse Tony onto his mother’s emigration (a matter of gender difference) in his assertions about émigré family solidarity in the U.S. For his part, Tony in fact had not been speaking about the U.S. at all, but rather about his mother’s life in South Korea.

Even across Tony’s and Ethan’s considerable differences, the refrain of that evening’s conversation was the pull and comfort of family—that “when it is all said and done,” it is “family that a person can trust” and so on. In a long and humorous tryst they

even quibbled over the dates of the “peak of family-oriented interest” in their extended family. When they spoke of their future, the theme of family solidarity surfaced again. Tony spoke of some day moving to California, knowing though that “I’ll probably be labeled as, you know, I mean, I’m sure ‘selfish’ will come up because I’ll be pursuing my personal, you know personal interests over the family.” He spoke on, though, about his need to “do certain things on my own” sort of to prove himself after having had “all this help of the family.” For the first time that evening, Ethan spoke plainly about their differences: “I don’t know, we have *different* points of view ... I mean my family definitely gave me a good family background and everything but I don’t think they gave me everything... I don’t feel any need to prove myself or anything.” Ethan’s comments were consistent: for him, “family” was about “good family background”—a mark of difference—against Tony’s “white, ethnic” constellation. Also, for Tony, the “family” of “family interests” and “all this help of the family” was about family/ethnic ties and even solidarity.

That evening, Tony and Ethan had begun on particularity, wondering about their “representativeness” across their imagined screen of my representation; there Ethan evoked a particular discourse of difference, inflected I think by class stories of modern, elite capital: a preference, for example, for the personally fulfilled, cosmopolitan person over the striving, material-focused instrumental immigrant social climber (“education for the wrong reasons”)—you will hear echoes of this later in the talk in my conversations with Ethan’s father. Tony had disagreed. Later, in somewhat related vein, Catholicism stood to distinguish (mostly Ethan) from the Korean immigrant “hoards” of evangelical Christians. While Tony, on the other hand, took family solidarity as a sign of his mother’s (gendered) struggles and immigration, for Ethan that solidarity spoke mostly to family isolation from the ethnic (“community”). In turn, Tony charts his future course against self-conscious signs of family solidarity as an ethnic marker, while Ethan’s sign economy is entirely different.

Their conversation is, I think, hard to parse: with its many moments of seemingly agreed-upon difference, and again with its moments in which the signs of difference are fractured to reveal other contests. I do not mean to suggest that theirs was a veritable cultural contest that evening; it wasn’t. It was a pretty relaxed chat with little sense of

any particular disagreement: the various mobilizations of difference happened, I think, for the most part quite unmarked. What I do, however, want to suggest is that much cultural conversation is very much like this, complex in these ways -- comprising a transnational conversation about family-ties and solidarity, but importantly one that is cross cut with differences (of class, gender, and the sensibility of the modern). I turn now to several conversational nodes in Tony's maternal lineage (and Ethan's paternal; to recall—Tony's mother and Ethan's father are siblings).

Marriage 2: The Principal Couple

The principal is Tony's second cousin once removed on his mother's side (his mother's paternal cousin): namely, the "other relatives" that Tony visited regularly during his Seoul summer—the ones that, according to the dentist-wife, he "claimed" to be visiting when he didn't want to visit her and her husband. The kinship location of this couple is exactly symmetrical on Tony's mother's side to that of the dentist-couple on his father's side.

In addition to genealogical symmetry, there is more: echoing the dentist-couple's tales of family ties or solidarity in the stories of the dentist-husband's mother extending modest space and resources to her nephew (Tony's father), was Tony's maternal grandmother's special life-long relationship with her nephew—the principal—whom she nursed as a child. I met this 70-something retired school principal and his wife in a satellite city of Seoul. So as to not add further complexity I will, with some reservation, refer to the principal and his wife. Following from the principal having been nursed by his aunt, theirs' (he and his wife's) was a well elaborated story of family ties and solidarity that centered on the cousins having grown up together, in a shared countryside compound, and more than anything on the principal's life-long relationship with his seven émigré cousins and their children, among them Tony and Ethan. There was story after story about the principal and his wife hosting the barrage of émigré kin.

For the principal's wife, who did the lion's share of the talking, this family closeness harked back to her husband's aunt who had acted as a veritable mother-in-law to her and who had, she described, run a huge rural household that knew no bounds—welcoming both matrilineal and patrilineal kin from near and far; and this closeness stretched across

the immigrant divide to a Chicagoland émigré family that lived, she described, in much the same way.

For the principal's wife, family solidarity—recalling the dentist-wife—was spoken through differences with her own more privileged and urban natal family. She drew a stark contrast, for example, between the émigré lives of her husband's cousins and those of her own medical-doctor brother and his family. She described her brother's "much less successful"—the principal interjected "less human-like"—émigré life. The principal's wife went so far as to even categorically distinguish her brother from her conjugal kin: her brother's was not the case of an *imin* or immigration because he had only gone to study abroad (*yuhak*). Here we can recall the dentist-wife who also delineated this category, although differently; in both cases the migrant imaginary is classed. While for her, "real *imin*" was about family- or ethnic community-integration, for the dentist-wife "real *imin*" was about integration into an American "mainstream" (that was, in turn, racially and residentially coded).

The principal's wife's portrayal of her husband's aunt and her functional mother-in-law, and again of Tony's mother – the first of the siblings to emigrate—was of so-called "new women," a loose reference to "modern" women. The aunt was, the couple described in unison, large-hearted, broad-minded, a woman ahead of her times, a woman whose educational zeal was formidable, and so on. As for Tony's mother, a veritable "pioneer" they called her, her own emigration—albeit the start of a chain migration of family ties and would-become émigré kin solidarity—was one that capitalized on "all she had": her body and her health. It is, against the narrative landscape of kin ties and solidarity, perhaps ironic that the principal and his wife described that, "had she stayed in [South] Korea she would have 'drowned' having to support all those siblings—by going to the U.S., she won her independence." It is then signs of the "modern woman" that foretell a (poor) woman's emigration, on the one hand, while class inflections speak to a migration (the principal's wife's brothers') that she does not even count as "migration" so named. Furthermore, to confuse matters, it is family ties that mark a classed portrait of emigrated (largely male in this imaginary) kin/brothers, while it is the lone, modern woman, who takes her body—"all she had"—so as to migrate away from the work and weight of family ties. Here we can see the complex work of inflections of class, gender,

and the modern. As Lisa Lowe (1996: 80) so aptly notes, “there is never only one exclusive valence of difference.”

For the principal and his wife, the matter of having “not emigrated” was their own important mark of difference. For the principal, not unlike his some 30-year junior, the dentist-husband, his not emigrating spoke to contingencies of gendered family and personal histories: in contrast with his paternal uncle, his own father had been less profligate, and he himself had been the first in the family to make it to Seoul, the first and only to make it to Seoul National University, South Korea’s educational pinnacle; and he had quickly risen the ranks in a prestigious high school. “They were right to go and I was right to stay—no regrets” was the refrain of our conversation, and its opening and closing notes as well. For her part, however, the principal’s wife, identifying herself precisely with the “new woman” by which she had described her husband’s aunt and Tony’s mother, would have loved to emigrate; here we can recall the dentist-wife. For years she had urged her husband to emigrate, giving up though bit by bit as his career crescendoed. She is certain that she would have made more of herself in the U.S. She complained that despite her high level of education she had been unable to fully develop as a professional woman, thwarted foremost by her three daughters’ conservative desire for a stay-at-home mother. Second, she reckoned that by not-leaving, the professional development of two of her daughters had been dwarfed—not for want of prestigious education but because those same conservative social norms had led them to become housewives in spite of that education.

I will now follow genealogy a bit—with moments from the émigré generation straddling these two Seoul couples *and* Tony and Ethan: namely, Tony’s mother and Ethan’s father.

Ethan’s father

We can for a moment recall that Ethan began on his family’s (perhaps his own) non-representativeness, which had for him to do with his less instrumental educational trajectory, against the grain of the model minority image. Ethan’s father prides himself for being known to the whole extended family as “Mr. Culture”; his particular specialty is

an expert tour of the Chicago Art Institute that he has regaled on many visiting relatives. It is fitting then that his education and emigration stories are all about family cultural capital that did not quite translate into his educational and employment course—because of the disruptions and dislocations of family ruin with the end of the colonial period and the Korean War; his emigration is then the narration of his attempts to finally, and more fully, exercise that familial cultural capital. Throughout his accounts is a keen sense of his youthful cosmopolitanism—spoken through familial cultural capital embodied in his father (the father that his sister, Tony’s mother, thinks of as having thwarted her education). This cosmopolitanism—modern, gendered, and classed—is mobilized as a critical mark of difference, one that might not have charted his educational and employment course, but lives on in his sons’ trajectories.

One of the critical contingencies of Ethan’s father’s immigration story—and there is (often) a necessary teleology to such stories, in that the outcome (of leaving) is foretold—was his having finagled his way out of compulsory military service. In an ironic twist, this evasion both allowed him to attend night college and, as he described it, eventually precluded him from desirable corporate employment which relied (then and today) on men having a record of military service.

Having returned to his remote home-region for his military exam, Ethan’s father described how he caught the attention of one soldier at the center: “He kept watching me; I guess my actions were *different* from those of countryside kids—I have always been somewhat *different*: how I do things. That guy kept coming over and being friendly.” Later, on a walk in the hills, Ethan’s father ran into that very soldier and confided to him that he did not want to serve a military tour. The soldier fetched a recruiting officer and the long and the short of it is that a medical excuse was falsified to exempt Ethan’s father. Ethan’s father summarized the whole turn of events this way: “There were so many books I had read and I was so knowledgeable—books like Arnold Toynbee’s *Civilization on Trial*—and I could talk about modern war and the future of the world.” If this is a story of the modern, lone, cosmopolitan individual—with its echoes in Ethan’s family-thoughts, Ethan’s father *mobilized quite other cultural stories* on other occasions.

I turn now to an account in which Ethan’s father exercised a particular gendered and classed immigrant family imaginary in which family ties (inflected by patriarchy and

good upbringing) produce value in a Korean transnation located ironically at the heart of American capitalism. This is the story of his eldest son (Ethan's brother, Albert) and his post-college employment in the Chicago financial world. Albert's employment is a long, convoluted tale about connections that stem from the Korean émigré friend of an Irish American client of his youngest uncle (Ethan's father's youngest brother) who is a tailor in Chicago. Ethan's father was stunned to discover that these financial circles were not all about credentials (as the South Korean (migrant) imagination would have it); to wit, Albert's 1.5 generation Korean American boss is not even a college graduate. Ethan's father reported—hearsay from his youngest brother—on Albert's initial meeting, a dinner, with the Irish-American intermediary and that Korean American boss. The long and the short of it was that the Korean émigré boss—purportedly the 30-something son of a professor in South Korea but who himself speaks little Korean—was awed by Albert: awed by this “wholesome young man who made him feel ‘corrupt and dirty.’” Just before this description, Ethan's father had gone on at great length about Albert's very special (and gendered) role at the helm of the U.S. based patrilineage of their family—as the eldest male offspring in the United States, sitting at the top of a long run of cousins. I offer these third-hand observations of Ethan's father on that dinner to show how he mobilized a rhetoric of kin ties and family solidarity around the matter of his son's procuring a job in the American world of high finance.

In the story of his evasion of military service (a link in his larger emigration logics) and in the story of his eldest son's employment, Ethan's father mobilized family-related capital, albeit quite differently in each case: first, as cultural capital (signs of the modern, cosmopolitan individual) that propelled his education, and again in an ironic inversion (his inability to procure employment) his emigration; and second, as ethnic-familial capital that spoke to his son's (and gender does matter here) virtue in a transnational nexus.

Tony's mother

I turn now briefly to Tony's mother, for a very different, and entirely gender-inflected mobilization of family capital in her own emigration-life story. While Ethan's father has

a keen sense of family cultural capital, most embodied in his father (in spite of the familial economic downturn), Tony's mother thinks of her father foremost as having cruelly blocked her own educational and life course. Tony's mother identifies her symbolic capital in terms of her mother's lineage (echoing the accounts of the principal and his wife on their modern, enlightened aunt). While Ethan's father argued the logic of his cosmopolitan embrace of the high Arts as speaking through his emigration story, Tony's mother's emigration logics were entirely different: beginning in the provinces and later in Seoul, she was sick of again and again working (as a nurse) in hospitals where the staff could not work the machines. It was the technological frontier that had propelled her; she wanted to get to a place where people knew how to use the machines.

While Tony's mother's immigration story is one of poverty and gender discrimination, Ethan's Father's is a political expose on difficulties in the translation of his (male) birthright in South Korea. Tony's mother's émigré story, much of it told to me tearfully, had little of the triumphal quality of that her brother "Mr. Culture" (in spite of the fact that their children have fared very similarly in U.S. schooling and employment). Briefly, she understands her own youthful ambition—the educational zeal that against great familial odds propelled her to nursing school (a well-worn path for poorer girls with talent and zeal) and to emigrate—as inextricable from her father's gender prejudice.

When we met, she talked for hours about a "friend" of yore—a woman with whom she had briefly, but deeply, connected while working in Seoul. I was baffled—why all this talk about a fleeting encounter from decades ago when I wanted to talk about her own emigration, Tony's education, and so on? The friend in question had contacted her once in her early émigré years; in the thick of difficult times and with young children, Tony's mother had been entirely unable to extend to this woman, unable even to invite her for a visit. By way of a gross short-hand, let me tell you why I think she dwelled on this, why for her this seemingly trivial detail spoke worlds. Because as she sees it, her own ambition, itself twisted in the ravages of her familial and Korean past, has left her stranded, alone—alone *with* all those kin who figure in the "family" stories and celebrations of her son (Tony), her brother (Ethan's father), and her cousin (the principal). "When I think about it," she said, "I have never had the peace of mind, the room, for making a friend." The friend who had contacted her in those early years—who

didn't even remember Tony's mother when decades later she tracked her down by telephone (she even called back to try again)—was, she told me, the only “friend” she has ever had. There is more to be said here, but needless to say we find here little of Ethan's father's stories of father-based cultural capital, or of the triumph of cosmopolitan modern selves; nor do we find the warm embrace of the circle of émigré kin celebrated by the principal and his wife (on the topic of her family), or again by Ethan's father on Albert's employment, and by Tony and Ethan, if intermittently. Hers is a story against this grain, albeit with its own family logics. When she thought back to her mother – to all that kin-solidarity we have heard about (that no doubt she has heard rehearsed as well) – she spoke ambivalently: “When I think about it, my mother did lots of good things. So, if you think about it one way, we have all done this well because my mother did good deeds; but, if you think about it another way, we didn't go further ... because my mother did all those things.”

Tony's cousin

Finally I want to take you to my conversations with Tony's own paternal cousin (his father's younger brother's son) with whom he had spent his last night in Seoul, all night. A several-times college drop-out, and attending a junior technical college when we met, Tony's cousin was keenly aware of Tony's father, his eldest uncle (*k'ûn aboji*), who having emigrated had left family matters, most of all the *chesa* and *chokpo* (the familial ancestral services and family registers), in his father's—and someday his own—hands. The cousin spoke of his own father's hard life—having dropped out of college to tend to his parents, landing a civil service job, struggling with alcohol, later divorcing, and recently remarrying—and of his own rather miserable recent years with considerable family and schooling problems. Against this rather grim din, and in a very noisy and pricey up-scale hotel coffee shop (where I mistakenly thought we could have a quiet conversation), the cousin joked lovingly, if harshly, about Tony and their then summer-before encounter. He said, though, that “the memory of that night together is fresh—it doesn't fade.” Tony is, the cousin explained, “a ‘special being’ for me.”

It is hard to describe the feeling I had when Tony's cousin talked about Tony. Trying to capture it now, what comes to mind is a small flat pebble skipping lightly across water: playful, trifling, nostalgic, beautiful, fleeting... His words were at points disarming: taken aback, I remember thinking, "what do I say now?" Like when he laughingly said this about Tony's Seoul visit that previous summer: "He calls himself a 'relative' but just did his own stuff... He's a really bad guy [*nap'ûn nom*]." Devouring my awkward silence, he went on: "But you know he's my cousin—we share blood so I took him around; even though I was tired, I hung with him all night. And, after all, I'm not his only relative—he had to meet [relatives on] both sides and I was living far from Seoul..." Later he spoke seriously about the fact of the ancestral services and family registers all falling to him: "There is so much to learn ... Tony has American citizenship, so it falls to me." Just as he seemed to have shrouded these familial duties in an aura of sacrosanct duty he countered, "I hate all that junk, but what can I do?"

Over the course of our conversation it became clear to me that the cousin had gone to considerable pains to meet me, including an expensive trip to Seoul (on the phone he had told me that he would be in Seoul anyway). I felt terrible and a bit absurd for having called him out for this memory-scape of what turned out to have been after all a single drinking evening in Seoul (Tony had told me that they had often hung together that summer). Moreover for the cousin the memory had seemed to evoke a stream of heavy thoughts, albeit spilled out amidst chuckles and what I first decided after that meeting were perhaps new-generation (*sinsedae*) one-liners that had sounded to me a bit like non sequiturs with neither beginning nor end. When I thanked him profusely for having agreed and traveled to meet me (to make matters worse he had stood the whole way on the train), he skipped another pebble, "Well, that's OK, I have to do this so that Tony will get less abuse back home (*kubak ul tol padgaettda*)." What was I to make of this remark? How would the cousin's meeting with me ease Tony's path back home? I do not think that there really is a clear answer to be found here. Tony's cousin met me in solidarity with Tony: a favor to him (Tony had sent me). "Tell him to be sure to email me," was how we parted. Here the cousin mobilized culture ambivalently: asserting, breaking, and asserting again, family ties—asserting cultural difference, and again more difference (in

the diverse fates, for example, of him and his father's lives vis-a-vis those of Tony and his father).

At the time I thought about Tony's cousin as somehow unlike almost anyone I had ever spoken to: his thoughts seemed disjointed, his speech seemed at odds, his manner was awkward, and his tone bizarre. Truthfully I couldn't really connect this young man, and the utterances to any familiar reality, let alone to Tony and his family. It was in this context that I decided, as I mentioned, that this was perhaps about generation – new modes of being and speaking; but by now I think I was wrong. I end on this cousin because as I have been writing this talk I have come to think of his conversation as a *more intense* version of all the conversations I have shared today. His mobilization of family ties was, as I have tried to show, ambivalent in every word—shot through with so much difference and with a rich and varied play of the migrant imaginary. This is what I think I have found across all these conversations, but here I was more stymied to sort it out. I want, though, to end on that note: stymied. Not to suggest that the anthropologist—me—should close up shop in trying to make sense of cultural conversations, but to remind us that even little conversations are pretty vexed, shot through with far flung signs and references.

Conclusion

I have taken you to a number of conversational nodes along the genealogical lines of a family that (like most South Korean families) straddles the border. I have offered these as cultural conversations that mobilize variously, and loosely, kin ties and solidarity. I have asserted that, taken together, these dialogues can be taken for a transnational discursive cultural field. I have stressed, however, that these conversational bits, and bits they are, are *not* to be taken as puzzle pieces, to be later pieced together in the making of a tightly woven, neatly patterned whole cultural or genealogical cloth. Nonetheless there are, I think, logics here. What happens therein, in the name of, in the frame of, kin ties is (as we have seen) crosscut in turn with lines of difference—between the dentist-husband and dentist-wife, Tony and Ethan, the Principal and his wife, Tony's mother and Ethan's

father, and finally between Tony and his cousin in South Korea: differences that speak to inflections of class, gender, historical conjunctures, and the “modern.”

To take these dialogues as cultural is not, following Sahlins, to say that culture has determined what was said (2000:27). There are, as Sahlins also asserts—drawing from Sartre on the “irreducible particularity” of persons—“specific familial and psychological circumstances” that “mediate” “the larger forces and structures...” (2000:26). As I indicated at this paper’s outset, there is much more to be said about kin-ties and solidarity as a charged cultural discussion with its own quite particular discursive histories and inflections in both (South) Korea and the United States.

There are implications here for thinking about transnationalism because cultural logics work across borders—conversations settle across them, still ambivalent, still fractured. We hear more and more that ‘immigration begins at home’ that there is ‘migration without ever leaving home’ and so forth—that as Ania Loomba notes, migration has no monopoly on “ideologically or politically or emotionally fractured space” (????: 181). While I am well-aware of the dangers of denying the reality of borders (that police, exclude etc.) as corrections to an apolitical celebration of global cultural flows, these turns-of-phrase that unsettle home and afar do make sense, and they do have important consequences for thinking about area/national studies—and in my case for thinking about what it means to be an anthropologist of both South Korea and Korean American.

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