

South Korea

Olga Fedorenko

Flower of Capitalism: South Korean Advertising at a Crossroads

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Before the new millennium, I often found adults in South Korea to be exceptionally frugal. While invariably generous to friends and guests, they would rarely splurge on something for themselves, however small. I put the habit down to either Confucian values or Park Chung-hee's developmental state, the importance of saving for the next generation. Indeed, in her *Measured Excess: Status, Gender, and Consumer Nationalism in South Korea* (2000), Laura Nelson describes how the Park and Chun Doo-hwan administrations, in

their efforts to curb the import of foreign consumer products and avoid a chasm between households on vastly different budgets, promoted frugality as a moral obligation. Beyond the scope of her study is the effect this had on commercial advertising. Considering the emphasis on economic growth at the time and the strong ties between conglomerates and the government, one might wonder what norms the former had to conform to in promoting their products to this frugal domestic audience and who would hold them to account if they strayed.

To my knowledge, there is no study in English that examines the history of commercial advertising in South Korea. Olga Fedorenko's *The Flower of Capitalism: South Korean Advertising at a Crossroads* deliberates the main developments in commercial advertising in Korea, and based on thoughtful ethnography it examines how advertisers, governments, and the public have viewed its responsibilities and sometimes clashed over it. It ultimately demonstrates how a unique concept of commercial advertising—a blend of neoliberalism and serving the interests of the public—took shape in South Korea. The main title of the book is a metaphor that Koreans have often applied to commercial advertising and “acknowledges advertising’s intrinsic connection to capitalism but obscures any unfavorable implications of this connection or critiques of capitalism itself” (7), while the crossroads refers to the radical transformation that the advertising industry has undergone in the early twenty-first century. Although she relates the more recent developments briefly at the end, the focus is squarely on earlier advertising, through terrestrial channels and periodicals, from the mid-1950s to the Lee Myung-bak administration (2008–2013). The advertising landscape will be quite different today, and yet I do not expect the norms around commercial advertising to have changed much. The findings should, therefore, apply equally to the production and consumption of advertising in contemporary South Korea.

The book comprises an introduction, five chapters, and an epilogue. In the first, Fedorenko explains that historically, Koreans have expected advertising to serve the public interest, *kongik*, a concept she argues is often conflated with “*kongkongsŏng*” or “publicness” (3). For many years a vast censorship apparatus provided some protection of this ideal, but in the 1980s, and especially in the wake of the 1997 financial crisis, the ruling elites came to adopt a decidedly neoliberal agenda that implied the abolition of marketing constraints (4–5). While subsequent debates over the role of advertising commonly acknowledged the purpose and importance of commercial advertising, they continued to view it as subordinate to publicness. Cautioning against blindly universalizing the phenomenon of advertising and underscoring the importance of understanding the historical contexts of a particular culture (16), the focus then shifts to the role of advertising in places around the world and the historical development of the Korean advertising industry, including the role of conglomerates (*chaebŏl*) and agencies (25–28).

Chapter 1 opens with a discussion of an article that argued against government interference with advertising, published during Park’s authoritarian Yushin Constitution (1972–1981). Translated by Shin In Sup, a longtime advocate for the liberalization of commercial advertising, it appeared in the national daily *Dong-A Ilbo* in January 1975, shortly after the paper had been forced to lay off journalists critical of the administration. The controversial matter provides a segue to an analysis of efforts in postwar Korea to regulate Korean advertising and hold it publicly accountable. Following a historical overview of advertising channels and the expansion of marketing during times of major

economic growth in South Korea (39–44), Fedorenko examines the “*Dong-A Ilbo* White Paper Incident,” which constituted the government’s suppression of advertising in the newspaper in retaliation for journalists rallying against the oppression of free speech in October 1974. Fedorenko argues that it was through this measure and the many efforts by activists to counteract it, that “advertising became implicated in realizing a democratic public sphere and in protecting civic freedoms” (48).

In the subsequent chapters, Fedorenko delves deeper into the mechanics of advertising production. In chapter 2 she discusses the status of advertising professionals in South Korea over time, what they understood their role to be, and what the everyday realities of their occupation were like (87–96). In chapter 3, she examines censorship as applied by both past governments and the KARB, the industry’s own Review Board, and shows how the latter had to often weigh up the freedom of advertisers against the experiences of audience members (104). These members, the consumers, are the focus of chapter 4. The number of survey respondents whose experiences she draws on here is nevertheless small, and while she complements her data with anonymous comments posted on blogs, she draws rather a lot on the comments made by one informant (143–46, 148–51). Chapter 5 analyzes another important protest movement, a round of boycotts organized in 2008 and 2009 by the National Campaign for Media Consumer Sovereignty against the oppression of press freedom, this time by corporations. The activists argued that withholding advertising in left-wing dailies (166–70) was undemocratic and, ironically, in conflict with “the corporate freedom to advertise as businesses see fit” (189). Noting that it was common for corporations to withdraw advertising in response to criticism, Fedorenko argues that in Samsung’s case the decision whether to advertise or not had a greater effect on the revenue of the affected newspapers than on that of the company itself (173).

Flower of Capitalism provides a thorough overview of the advertising industry’s developments over time and demonstrates convincingly when and why the ideals of commercialism or neoliberalism, on the one hand, and publicness, on the other, clashed. I was surprised that apart from a brief note on page 224, there is no mention of the role of the KARB’s predecessor, the Korean Ethics Committee for Performing Arts. While I believe it merited inclusion, future deliberations of its role are unlikely to challenge Fedorenko’s carefully drawn conclusions. What may challenge a few readers, however, is the style of writing. Due to her habitual use of long, subclause-heavy sentences, with some pages (e.g., 135, 195) comprising no more than eight or nine sentences in total, I often struggled to follow the train of thought. But the research is excellent and apart from a few typos (e.g. *kongkong/konggong*, 3, 21; *kwengjang’i/koengjang’hi*, 113; *Kukmin K’aimp’ein/Kungmin K’aemp’ein*, 166), the romanizations are accurate, too, though I wish they included the Korean names of the various institutes. Like many of my peers, Fedorenko adopts the unrevised version of the McCune-Reischauer system that makes all instances of the sound “she” appear as *si* (“see”). And yet, presumably because it is a more natural representation, she uses the revised system’s *shi* in a few instances herself (266, 269). Whereas many of the blog posts referred to have now disappeared (229n41, 235, 236n14, 238n23, 238n24, 238n26, 240n33), most of the commercials discussed are available on a special YouTube page created by the publisher. I strongly recommend this book to anyone interested in advertising practices, public culture, and the history of democracy in South Korea.

REFERENCES

Nelson, Laura C. 2000. *Measured Excess: Status, Gender, and Consumer Nationalism in South Korea*. New York: Columbia University Press.

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