

# The Well Traveled Yet Rough Road: Korean Housewives' Everyday Life Experiences and Strategies for Identity

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**Abstract :** The authors examined how Korean housewives manage family resources, make decisions, handle pressures, and negotiate the constraints of everyday life in a society that places unrealistic expectations upon them. The authors approached housewives by imagining them as thinking, strategizing, and problem-solving individuals, who are capable of speaking for themselves and making choices within situational and personal limits. Eleven full-time housewives were interviewed on how they experience their marriages, children, families, and society. Their narratives were then analyzed to sort out the strategies the women employed to maintain their identities. The narratives showed women's will and agency as they worked to resolve the contradictions in their daily life, and revealed individual differences within this group of women who are often seen as homogenous.

Key Words : housewife, identity strategy, women, Korean family, marriage

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I--  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.  
-- Robert Frost, *The Road Not Taken*

visibly defeat and destroy those divisions.  
-- Kang Shinju, *Feminist Homemaker, Ph. D.* (Kang, 2003)

The problem of being a full-time housewife is not about having to spend so much time next to sink drains that you become friends with them, or being unable to make money. What is more insidious and frightening is the disease that eats away at your self-esteem. Unless I relentlessly fight against the society [that puts down housewives] that disease will remain incurable; and it will claim me, my daughters, my sisters, and my friends. I came to realize that it is not enough for me to personally overcome in my consciousness the sharp divisions our society imposes between inside and outside, between private and public, and between paid and unpaid: I had to

## I. Studying Housewives

This article was conducted to examine how full-time housewives define themselves and maintain their self-esteem. As there are just few studies about housewives themselves, the full-time housewives have been identified with the static and homogeneous entities. From such a prospective Hye-kyeung Chang and Young-rhan Kim (2000) focused on their present living condition. On the other hand, some researchers defined several alternatives for the full-time housewives to have social identities; leisure activity such as a calligraphy community 'Seoyehoi' (Lee, 2000), religious activity

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(Kang, 1994), volunteerism (Kim, 2001), participation to non profitable and non governmental organizations (Youm, 1998) and participation to the cultural activities initiated by some department stores or broadcasting companies (Kim, 2000). However, more studies need to be completed about the context for them to use these alternatives.

Over the years, the authors of this article have observed housewives around us who were friends, relatives, and neighbors, struggling to raise children, maintain the household, deal with extended family and work through their marriages. We also have encountered numerous studies on the “problems” of modern Korean housewives, and popular narratives generated by diverse media, such as “*ajumma*, the third gender.” Many academic discourses variously represent the housewives as objects of emancipation, mobilization, or education, thereby overlooking their agency. In popular discourses, housewives are portrayed as unproductive and lazy creatures who lead leisurely, consumption-driven lives (*nolgo meokneun jonjae*); especially when compared to the employed married women who do everything that full-time housewives *and* make money.

This study approaches housewives from a different perspective: we imagine them as thinking, strategizing, and problem-solving individuals who are capable of representing themselves. This does not mean that we imagine housewives as highly intelligent, particularly rational, fully purposeful or eminently ethical human beings. We imagine housewives as individuals who make decisions and choices within situational and personal limits. Therefore, we started with the women’s own narratives on how they see their marriages, children, families, and society. Our purpose is to analyze their strategies on how to maintain the integrity of their identities and lives. We intended to find women’s will and agency to resolve the contradictions in their everyday life.

Our study emerged out of the realization of how difficult it is for the housewives to maintain a positive self-image in contemporary Korean society, where the

concept of *New Wise Mother and Good Wife* (*sin-hyeonmoyangcheo*) has emerged as a cultural ideal. In the late capitalist society, a “traditional” housewife who stays at home and manages the household is no longer a symbol of a happy, affluent middle-class family. During the 1980s, increasing the family wealth was added to the long list of roles and duties for a *Wise Mother and Good Wife*. So-called “*jae-tech*”, or investment management, quickly became a crucial role for the housewives. Many participants in this study mentioned how they had “failed” in *jae-tech* or how they have been successful in it, and how central it is for the family’s well-being and the quality of the marriage. There is also a tremendous pressure on housewives to help their children succeed academically and eventually make it into a “first-rate” university, because in most families the children’s education is entirely the mother’s responsibility (Mun, 1997). In fact, all of the housewives interviewed for this study organized their daily schedules around their children’s after-school educational activities.

Originally, the *New* idea of *Wise Mother and Good Wife* surfaced as a counter discourse for the housewives to defend themselves from the negative stereotypes of housewives as unproductive and wasteful: in other words, housewives seemed to endorse the idea that household management is a worthwhile profession from which women can gain a sense of accomplishment and joy. However, the need for modern housewives to live everyday life within a society and culture wrapped up in capitalist forces has greatly complicated this effort since these women have become essentially dependent upon a world of commodities and consumption (Hart, 2003). The *New Wise Mother and Good Wife* must constantly strive to improve her family life and reinvent herself with aid from “scientifically” designed consumer goods. The new ideal touts a very narrow, one-dimensional role for women to the point that diverse ways of self-definition for women are prohibited (Kim, 1996).

Four decades ago, Betty Friedan found that many American suburban housewives silently suffered “the problem without a name.” (Friedan, 1963). Kang Shin-

jyu wrote that the core of this nameless problem is loss of self-esteem (Kang, 2003) and Sin Gyeong-a defined it as "loss of the self." (Kang, 2003) Cho Haejoang (Cho, 1981). and Kim Myung-hye Kim, 2000) pointed out that housewives are a socially devalued minority group, and they cannot but feel insecure and question their identity as individuals. The authors became curious what kind of everyday strategies the housewives employ in order to make meaning out of their lives and to maintain self-esteem. At one point, we considered selecting the participants among women who live "differently", who have a critical consciousness about social problems such as education, environment, human rights, and gender discrimination. We thought perhaps we could distill an alternative lifestyle from their visions. We decided against this approach because we concluded that finding individual differences and psychological processes among the seemingly "ordinary" housewives would be more meaningful: By observing women who do not choose to denounce their marriages and families nor to work toward more radical changes, we could find more subtle differences among women, and identify more typical and common ways women negotiate with their immediate environments. Our intention was successful in that we were able to sort out shared aspects of many women's everyday life with which our initial readers of this manuscript could identify and connect. Many of our readers commented, "I know someone just like Ms. X and Ms. Y... for a moment I thought they were the women I knew personally!"

## **II. Research Methods and Participants of the Study**

Kim Seonmi, the first author of this article, conducted in-depth interviews with eleven housewives in their late thirties and early forties, between January and September 2003. The participants were largely middle-class, although there was a wide variance in the level of household income and assets. The participants were

selected among the housewives who were willing to give lengthy interviews over several months, and were sympathetic toward the goals and necessity of this study. The demographic and family information of the participants is summarized in <Table 1>.

The interview process followed Spradeley's (1980) spiral course : data collecting with general question and then recording -> analyzing the data and writing a short report -> deciding the next interview task. Interviews were conducted at the participants' homes, so that the interviewer could observe the participants in their everyday life settings. The interviews were loosely based on an unstructured questionnaire, and the interviewer listened to the participants with minimal interruptions. At first, the participants responded to the interviewer defensively or somewhat timidly because she is an employed housewife and a professor. Ultimately the participants grew more comfortable over time and eventually even shared stories they had not told to anyone else. Interviews were continued until there was a repetition of content or no more new interpretation was possible. After the initial interview was completed, the tape was transcribed immediately and the interviewer wrote a short analytical report based on it. The subsequent interview questions were formulated based on the short report. The participants also recorded their daily activity schedule for a week, a monthly income and expenditure report, and a history of their family's asset accumulation. They generously gave many hours for the interviews, and they were cooperative, open, and thoughtful. Many said after the interview that they enjoyed talking about themselves because there are so few such opportunities, and because the interviews gave them a chance to reflect upon their lives.

As an ethnography, this study transformed the data in three aspects: description, analysis and interpretation of the culture-sharing group (Creswell, 1998). Strategies for identity maintenance were analysed and interpreted from data. First, researchers read all the text repeatedly and made the first codes. After describing participants' socio-demographic backgrounds, agents, and events or

&lt;Table 1&gt; The Participants of this study

Name	Age	Major, Education	Age at Marriage	Children (Age, school)	Job Experience	Husband's Job (Age)
So, Jinhwa	46	Christian Seminary	25	Daughter (20, college freshman); Son (14, 8 <sup>th</sup> grader)	None	Executive, MNC (49)
Yi, Jongmin	39	Junior college business	26	Daughter (12, 6 <sup>th</sup> grader); Son (10, 3 <sup>rd</sup> grader)	Clerk (before marriage)	Team head, Construction company (43)
Choi, Hyonji	41	College, Food & nutrition	27	Daughter (10, 3 <sup>rd</sup> grader); Daughter (8, 1 <sup>st</sup> grader)	None	Dept. head, Investment company (43)
Yang, Sonhee	41	College, Math Education	25	Son (16, 10 <sup>th</sup> grader); Son (14, 8 <sup>th</sup> grader)	High school teacher (quit when the first son was born)	Dentist (42)
Kim, Mihyon	38	Women's College, Econ	26	Son (11, 4 <sup>th</sup> grader); Son (8, 1 <sup>st</sup> grader)	None	Professor, Two-year college (42)
Ko, Hyonjong	37	Women's College, Math	31	Daughter (6, half-day art school)	None (private teacher while husband was out of work)	Employee, Construction company (37)
Yi, Yujae	43	College, Korean Lit	37	Son (6); Son (4)	TV script writer (till 2 <sup>nd</sup> son was born)	Division head, Construction company (44)
Kang, Hyonson	36	Women's college, French Lit	25	Son (10, 3 <sup>rd</sup> grader)	Airport job 3 years (before marriage)	Owner-dentist, Dental clinic
Yun, Misuk	43	High school	27	Daughter (16, 8 <sup>th</sup> grader); Daughter (15, 7 <sup>th</sup> grader); Daughter (10, 3 <sup>rd</sup> grader)	Marketing, 7 years (quit when married)	Owner, Small company
Shim, Heegyong	36	High school	24	Daughter (12, 5 <sup>th</sup> grader); Daughter (10, 3 <sup>rd</sup> grader)	Blue collar job, 2 yrs., Clerk job 2 yrs.	Vice-division head, Construction company
Chung, Hajin	38	Music College, viola	26	Daughter (6, kindergarten); Daughter (3)	None	General practitioner

The names provided here are pseudonyms. Following the Korean custom, when we mention a participant's name we place the family name first.

episodes, we analysed the data to define the main themes or patterned regularities with classification and contraction. Two controversialists advised all through the data transforming process. And three examiners scrutinized the strategies chosen.

### III. Strategies for Identity Maintenance

From the narratives of our participants, it appears that

there were certain situations that provided the housewives with a momentum to question their identity and consequently, to develop strategies to maintain self-esteem. Some women found it hard to see themselves as individual human beings because they were fully occupied with, and exhausted from, taking care of young children. For older women, as their children entered college and their role of coaching children with the entrance exam came to an end, an opportunity to reflect upon their lives arose. Several women could not experience the kind of relationship they wanted with

husbands, or their marriages had become seriously dysfunctional, and they naturally began wondering about where their lives were going. Lastly, because the very concept of “housewifedom” is defined mainly by domestic work, the housewives began to question who they are, especially when they wondered (or someone else asks) whether they are doing a good job as a household manager. They would also think about their roles if there were noticeable indicators of their success or failure in such tasks. We assume that women who find themselves in an unsatisfying situation, wherein their sense of self-worth is threatened, will try to develop and employ strategies to maintain integrity and self-esteem. Our analysis of the narratives of the eleven participants yielded five different kinds of strategies for their identity maintenance: resistance to social and cultural pressures; investment in good health and looks; justification of housewifedom; dreaming about or attempting at employment; and participating in outside-home activities. The following sections discuss each type of strategy.

## **1. Resistance to social and cultural pressures**

The everyday life of housewives reflects the tremendous social and cultural pressures upon them. For example, the Korean public school system takes it for granted that the parents (read: mothers) volunteer for a variety of school activities, to the degree that it cannot operate without the support from housewives (Mun, 1997). Also, as after-school private educational programs for pre-college children have now become a functional requirement, these have become profoundly meshed with the everyday life of housewives. Academic-pedigreeism (*hakbeol ju-ui*), familyism, the middle-class culture of consumption that is held as the standard for everyone, and a parental desire to reproduce this affluent life-style for the children are all part of the social and culture pressures that affect housewives. However, there are individual differences among housewives in their values, orientations, resources, and

perspectives. Such differences will lead to different strategies to cope with the pressures.

Some participants reinterpreted their daily experience in a more positive way by resisting social and cultural pressures. More concretely, they either utilized their identity resources or realigned their reference group in order to reject the standards beyond their abilities and reformulate new standards. When the housewives did not have enough resources to maintain the level of consumption, one of their first responses was to try to increase them. Ms. Kim Mihyon's parents provide a monthly stipend of about 500,000 won (about US\$ 450.00) because her monthly budget for household spending is “only about 3,000,000 won (about US\$ 2,700.00) and is not enough to live in Apkujongdong.” (An affluent residential district in Seoul) Ms. Ko Hyonjong often has to resort to bank loans to subsidize her monthly spending budget. But more generally, the housewives would cut spending in one area in order to allocate more resources to a more important area. For example, when there was an overall financial strain, they reduced spending for themselves to secure money for the children's after school lessons. Also, some of them hired a domestic helper so that they would have more time to take better care of the children. The former required resisting the cultural pressure that emphasizes consumption for the self, and the latter mandated going against the expectation that housewives must do their own housework. The results were occasionally contradictory. The housewives might adopt immediate tactics to solve immediate problems; but in so doing they sometimes set in motion a deeper conflict with other aspects of their role as housewife.

The examples of utilizing different aspects of the self were, calling the self a “country person (*sigol saram*)” or “lower class (*seomin*)” and conjuring up “independent thinking (*jugwan*)” and “good conscience (*yangsim*)” and such concepts. Such an identity strategy was used as a mechanism that filters out ever-rising standards of consumption. For example, Ms. Yun Misuk sends two older daughters to a private art middle school. She finds

the other housewives she occasionally comes across at the children's private-lesson related scenes "filled with selfish greed and overly controlling the children." She believes herself to be different: "I am a country person. I grew up in the countryside and could enjoy mountains and fields even though I did not own them. I don't want to push my children like the other mothers do." As the interviewer asked how country people differ, she answered, "Country folks are less calculating and less competitive." Her identity as a "country person" helps her distance from the fierce competition in the world of private art lessons.

Ms. Yang Sonhee informed that she "failed in *jae-tech*" because her investment in property was not profitable, and also she had to help out her impoverished parents and in-laws. She uses her identity as a "lower-class person (*seomin*)" and "country person" to scale back spending. She thinks she is a giver, and that she learned from her own mother to give away whatever she can. Yet she still feels pressure to live a middle-class life style, and desires to play golf and procure a decent-sized house. Her identity strategy is used in the process of accepting such desires while simultaneously modifying them.

Since I have always been frugal (*seominjeok*) I didn't mean to play golf, because if we had money for such luxury, I thought we should help out our parents first. But my husband said "Hey, let's just start at the indoor golf practice facilities, since we are lower class (*seomin*)." So we bought some cheap tickets to use those facilities and started [playing]... but during the whole time I was ill at ease, and I had to quit after a while.

To redefine their reference groups, the participants avoided groups that pressured them to accept higher standards and aligned themselves with other groups of women who would resist the social pressures together. Ms. Choi Hyonji emphasized "independent thinking and problem consciousness." She has "failed in *jae-tech*," and has trouble keeping up with the level of consumption in

her neighborhood. She thinks that other mothers in the neighborhood waste money needlessly on inessential educational programs, and that she can save money by teaching some lessons at home: "I think it is stupid to pay money for first and second grade math lessons. Why would anyone need to hire someone to teach kids how to add and subtract? Why can't mothers teach the kids? I don't follow the lead of mothers in this neighborhood." She classifies the housewives in the neighborhood into two kinds: women who have good judgment and are capable of independent thinking; and those who waste money or indulge themselves in conspicuous consumption.

Spending 1,000,000one to 2,000,000 won (about US\$ 900.00 to US\$1,800.00) for a kid's birthday party is normal in this neighborhood. But the mothers I am close to are not like that. Some mothers don't even give birthday parties, not because they cannot afford it, but because it is wasteful. They have good judgment. If I followed the example of the extravagant mothers we would be bankrupt. But even some of the extravagant mothers are not really rich. (...) I tell you, there are only two kinds of mothers. Those wasteful ones who have more money than they know what more stupid thing to do with, and those who are not affected by others and manage their households well.

By creating such a reference group and contrasting it with an aversive group, Ms. Choi can affirm herself as a wise mother.

The participants all felt enormous pressures regarding their children's education. Participating in and supporting school events, expressing gratitude to the teachers (in the forms of money and presents), and after-school programs are not only burdensome in themselves, but the women also felt that they had to compete with other mothers over these. Redefining standards of living when there are not enough resources is unavoidable; yet, simply lowering the standards involves a danger of hurting the self-esteem of housewives. It is understandable that housewives feel that they failed in managing the households if they have to reduce living standards,

because none of our participants were free from the dominant way of thinking: “More is better,” and “There is no limit to the things that I want to give to/do for the children; it is only that we cannot physically do more.”

## 2. Investing in fitness and good looks

Many participants of this study were assured of their self-worth and gained pleasure by maintaining health and physical beauty. Ms. Yang Sonhee climbs mountains; Ms. Choi Hyonji works out at a health club; Ms. Shim Heegyong regularly plays badminton; and Ms. So Jinhwa often goes for a walk on the walking trail near her neighborhood. They not only maintain their desired weight through exercise, but also find time for themselves and even feel more independent from their husbands. Ms. Choi and Ms. Yang are strongly invested in health maintenance and they both started exercising after dealing with an identity crisis as a housewife. Ms. Choi heads to the health club as the children leave home for school at 8:20 AM, and spends three and a half hours working out at the health club, Monday through Friday. She says exercising is rewarding: “It helps me fight the empty feelings that other mothers try to soothe with designer-label clothes and accessories. It is one my two great joys of life-the other is raising my children.” Ms. Yang chose mountain climbing because it does not cost any money, and thus “fits with our budget.” For Ms. Yang, mountain climbing is an escape from her husband’s control and a form of resistance: “I detest that my life is under the complete control of my husband. I was always too obedient and accommodating to my husband and I can’t take it any more. I am rebelling right now, and I am doing it in a healthy way.”

Physical beauty for the participants was “a means for marriage” in the past, and currently is “what keeps me looking young.” Ms. Choi had an eyelid surgery before marriage as her mother paid for it, and continued getting cosmetic surgeries including a facelift, after marriage. She is currently saving money with other housewives to

have another facelift surgery and receive botox shots. Ms. Kim Mihyon also had her nose and eyelids done before marriage, again as a present from her mother, and had a facelift and eyebrow tattoo after marriage. Ms. Kim says that her husband teases her “You were just barely marriageable thanks to those cosmetic surgeries.” Both Ms. Choi and Ms. Kim started such “beauty maintenance” because of their mothers, and the mothers of the two drilled the idea of *wise mother and good wife* into their daughters since they were young. The mothers paid for the cosmetic surgeries because they thought those were an investment for them to marry well.

Some participants have not had any cosmetic surgeries yet also considered those as a means of self-satisfaction, something that they would do if only they could afford it. Ms. Yi Jongmin says that she does not like her body, and has very specific hopes: “Everyone, including my husband, calls me pretty, and I have big hips, but I want a bigger chest, and... well, I am not satisfied with my looks. I wish I could get a facelift and breast enhancement surgery.”

What is common among the participants is that they want cosmetic surgery for their own satisfaction, not for their husbands. This indicates that the housewives of today have an aspect of identity that cannot be fulfilled solely through roles within the household. Since the culture defines bodies and physical beauty as objects of management, the identity of housewives as individuals seems to be closely connected to beauty maintenance: All of the participants mentioned their concerns over weight control during the course of the interviews. They commented that they had recently gained or lost weight. Jang Mi-hye explains that subjective evaluation of one’s body and other’s perception of one’s looks are seen as fundamental elements of identity in the postmodern age, whereas gender, vocation, or class constituted modern identities (Jang, 1999). Shim Young-Hee points out that postmodern motherhood is now emerging, as can be seen in the emphasis on self as opposed to others; on expressive, emotional relationship as opposed to instrumental and materialistic relationship [with

children] (Shim, 1999).

The most frequently used method of maintaining good looks among the participants was buying clothes. Ms. Kang Hyonson and Ms. Ko Hyonjong are both slim and strikingly beautiful women. For these two women, the desire for clothes shopping is second to nothing. Ms. Ko says that her expenditures exceed the family income every month because of her clothes shopping. Ms. Ko originally wanted to become a wealthy housewife by marrying a high-income professional man, but ended up marrying an ordinary white color worker. She calls herself "a nobody, who has done nothing and who didn't become anyone." She is aware of her strategies: "I tried to use my education and good looks to get a status-elevating marriage [but I failed to marry up]; now I've made it a habit of buying clothes to maintain my good looks." She consciously imitates the styles of "high-income professional career women" and "the wives of who's who". Her intention is to borrow the aura of the desired identity by mimicking the very women whose presence challenges her self-worth.

Ms. Kang, on the other hand, buys clothes "almost everyday." For Ms. Kang, maintaining her beauty by constantly shopping for clothes is the only means to distinguish herself from her reference group—the wives of her husband's friends. Ms. Kang incessantly compares herself with that group, and suffers confusion and depression because she feels inferior to them. The criteria by which Ms. Kang compares women in the reference group are the wealth of the parents, level of education, and looks, the first criterion being the most crucial. Since her parents went bankrupt and have been poor ever since, she feels that she has a fatal weakness that other wives do not. She has a BA from a decent college, but she does not think it makes up for her having poor parents. She thinks what she has inside does not help distinguish her from others; therefore, she must focus on competing with the other wives through external and visible beauty. Ms. Kang is in her mid-thirties, but she only shops for brands that target younger women. "If I go to clothing stores shabbily dressed, the

salesclerks immediately looks down at me," she explains why she is impeccably dressed even when she goes shopping. Her insecurity, which originated from her parents' bankruptcy, is always in her consciousness and her clothes are her defense. When asked what she thought of people such as the interviewer, who are dressed humbly, she responded, "I wonder how sure they are about themselves to be able to go out like that."

The same defense mechanism of compensation is found in Ms. Ko: Expensive clothes defend her from her inferiority complex and make her feel secure and worthy. Ms. Ko asked the interviewer to accompany her to a store at the second interview. She had just purchased a piece of clothing the day before, which she did not like any more, and she had to go back to the store to exchange it. She now needed someone else to go with her and provide morale support, because she had argued with and yelled at a sales clerk at the store. According to a mutual acquaintance, Ms. Ko "is very arrogant toward sales clerks, and she quickly raises her voice." Ms. Ko confesses, "I get into arguments very easily." Ms. Kang is similar: "I get into a fight wherever I go... it is because of my depression." Even during an interview at her house, Ms. Kang argued severely with a technician who came to fix an air conditioner.

The two participants above are not the only ones who affirm their self-worth by shopping for clothes. As Radner states, shopping is no longer a leisure activity of bored housewives to incarnate the husbands' wealth and success. It is a means to externalize women's self-worth (Lury, 1996). However, unlike Ms. Kang and Ms. Ko, other participants had a clearly set limit in clothes shopping for themselves (such as one suit a year), and they would purchase inexpensive items on impulse while shopping for children's clothes. In addition, they buy clothes when they are upset by their husbands, or when they suspect infidelity by their husband:

"I either drink or buy a whole set of clothes when I am severely depressed because of my husband, or when I am really angry I want to die." (Ms. Yang)



“It was about three years ago.... Whenever my husband behaved badly (*sago chigo geureomyeon*) I would go out and buy clothes.” (Ms. Choi)

“When I suspected that my husband met an attractive woman at work, the next day I would go clothes shopping or suddenly start something intelligent, such as calligraphy lessons.” (Ms. Yi Jongmin)

“The day after my husband had gone to a prostitute (*suljip yeojaillo sogoul sseogin*), I bought an expensive suit worth 700,000 won (US\$630.00) for the first time in my life.” (Ms. Yun)

When the housewives bought clothes after a clash with their husbands, it worked as a form of rebellion as well as affirmation of self-worth. As Ms. Choi says, “I did so as revenge for my husband’s betrayal.” It can be wives’ revenge only because the husbands have an overall control over expenditure. That is, the housewife who was degraded by her husband can get back at the husband by spending the money he made.

Unlike the employed married women who have their own money to buy clothes and for whom the buying of new clothes is easily justified since everyone knows she needs work clothes, a housewife’s excessive expenditure on clothes is seen both by herself and others as unnecessary and even deviant. The participants seem to feel the tension between their desire to be a good frugal housewife and their spending on clothes. For example, Ms. Kang, while saying that she buys clothes often and goes to department stores everyday, added defensively, “But I only buy items on sale.” Also, in her daily schedule chart that the interviewer requested her to fill out for a week, she put in shopping only once in one morning. Ms. Shim Heegyong stated: “Now [that I am a housewife] I can’t buy my own stuff freely if it is too expensive.... Sometimes I can’t buy what I want.... I hate it the most when I can’t buy something that I crave for.... Once I bought something that I really wanted and my husband called me crazy (*gani bueottago*)...”

Investing in the maintenance of health and physical beauty is important for housewives in that it allows them

to affirm their self-worth as individuals. This strategy, however, fundamentally clash with other roles of housewives because it requires allocation of time and money.

### 3. Justification of housewifedom

The participants often justified their life-style by rationalizing that their life experiences as a housewife helped build a positive self-identity. Such justification typically appeared at the end of their narratives-the narratives that did not represent housewifedom in a positive way. It seems to be a form of defense mechanism used to procure an overall sense of self-esteem. Three different forms of justification were found in the narratives. First, they said that being a housewife was always that they had desired, and it was beneficial for the children. Second, they portrayed themselves as important, irreplaceable persons who perform the highly valuable labor of love at home. Third, they would emphasize anything positive that they have accomplished within the limits of life as a housewife and minimize the negative aspects.

Many participants identified with their own mothers, and implied their choice to stay at home was both voluntary and inevitable-voluntary in the sense that they ultimately would choose such a life style, and inevitable because the choice either reproduced their mother’s life, or it is the best for the children. A few of them said their mothers worked outside home, and they chose to stay home so that their children would not replicate their own lonely childhood. Ms. So Jinhwa said: “I didn’t like it that mother was busy helping my father’s business all the time. I wished my mother had been on my side when I needed her. (...) Especially during my senior year in high school, I wished my mother had guided more strongly. So I thought I would like to take care of my children.”

When the participants insisted that they have always wanted to be housewives, it implied that they are consistent and truthful, which reinforced their positive

self-image. Many participants emphasized how important it is for the children to have a mother at home. On the one hand, they say that being a housewife is the best way to be a good mother; while on the other hand, they say an employed mother cannot but “abandon and neglect” the children and hence such a woman is not a good mother. Still it is hard to take the claim that they always wanted to be housewives at the face value, because Ms. Kang actually tried to get a job but failed to land one, and Ms. So once was employed but quit her job because of a negative experience at work.

It is a commonly found narrative that housework is highly valuable and important, because it is a labor of love. To the question how she feels about being a housewife now since her children are all grown up, Ms. So replied:

Now that the kids are all grown, just as a housewife... how do I say this... if I go out [to work] then someone else would have to manage our home, and I would do better than the person... so I am feel at ease [knowing that I am at the right place]. My family will be more comfortable if I stayed home and.... I think I can do better than some outsider.

The above is a good example of how housewives always compare themselves with employed married women, when they talk about positive aspect of being a housewife. She also added how she has the time and heart that she can extend her care to the children of employed mothers:

Some kids used to come to our house after school [with my children] because their mothers work outside and they can't go home... I could welcome them warmly because I stayed home. If all mothers worked outside, where would the kids go? So I thought, ah this is really a precious thing that I can offer as a housewife. A lot of kids used to come to our house because their mothers were not home... I used to let them watch videos, play together or have snacks. I thought only a housewife could do that-give them warmth and

affection...not that employed mothers are cold-hearted but they just can't do this....

Ms. So has never sought employment and her family did not need additional income because her husband made more than enough money. She believes that making money is a man's job anyway, and is not envious about employed women. In contrast, some housewives put down employed mothers in order to justify their own lifestyle. Ms. Ko emphasizes the freedom of being a housewife: “I don't need to please anybody [because I am a housewife]... that's what I hate the most, having to look out for someone else's mood. I can go shopping any time I want and I can eat whenever I'd like to.” She has constructed a defense argument on what the opportunity cost would be like if she worked outside:

I have a friend who has a first grader and a second child one year younger than my kid. She works at a semi-conductor company, and her ultimate goal is.... Well, her take-home income is about 2,000,000 won (US\$1,800.00) [a month], and she has to spend it all on childcare and stuff. Car maintenance and stuff. So I asked her, why the heck do you go out and work, girl? What for? It's only you who suffer. You even have to clean the house when you come home! To this she said, I would die if I quit and stayed home. She said, my only joy is driving to and from work and listening to music in the car. And the dinner parties [with colleagues], they sometimes have those, those are her joy of life, she said.

Thus Ms. Ko thinks that working outside the home is not rewarding in the end because of the double burden and cost of childcare, which would eat up a large part of her wages. Ms. Ko calls herself a failure, “I have nowhere to go when I leave home, and I have accomplished nothing and I am a nobody.” Still she chooses not to explore an alternative to her current situation, and instead is settled in her present lifestyle. She thinks her unhappy situation is only the inevitable result of marrying the wrong man.

The participants who believe that being a housewife can be a positive experience are those who reaped conspicuous success in *jae-tech* or their children's education. Ms. Yang Sonhee and Ms. Yun Misuk are the perfect examples that show how housewifedom is completely justified within an academic pedigreeist society. Ms. Yang does not regret having quit a teaching job because she continued to live as an educator:

I am not saying that being a housewife is really great, but I have no regrets... I could take up a profession now, and I could have gone to a graduate school... but as I look back I think I lived my life fully and I did my best. I focused on the education of my children more than other things like cooking... [my children did well] because I really thought hard how to educate them well. I did not simply want for my children to be the top of their classes; I wanted them to be good persons, too. I had a perspective as an educator. So I think I was an educator for my two children.

Ms. Yang considers herself a successful housewife because her two children are "head and shoulders above other students" at school. She believes that mothers can do a lot for the children's education, and children's accomplishment is the result of the mother's efforts. Ms. Yun is similar with Ms. Yang, in that she identifies with the children, and considers the children's success as her own. Ms. Yun could not go to college because her family was poor, but she thinks her children who are currently enrolled in private art schools inherited her artistic talents.

Ms. Yi Jongmin and Ms. Shim Heegyong are married to ordinary white color workers, but they were successful in *jae-tech* and procured a condominium. Both women had the insight and will power to save the down payment money and to make wise decisions about housing purchase and rental. They believe that they contributed more than the husband in accumulating the family property. Ms. So and Ms. Yun also managed the husband's income very well by investing wisely. The participants who have contributed to the family

financially through *jae-tech* all had a positive identity as mothers and wives, because they believed they "made it possible for the loved ones to enjoy stable and comfortable lifestyle."

However, what the participants refer to as "successful *jae-tech*" means "having procured a small condo so that the family does not need to move around all the time [according to the landlord's whim or rental price fluctuations]." The accomplishment of Ms. Shim and Ms. Yi was to contribute to their current two-bedroom condos. Ms. Yi has a son and a daughter, and they needed separate bedrooms. (Ms. Shim's daughters share one room.) Ms. Yi and her husband are forced to use the living room as their bedroom. Since her husband has no space to work at home, he has to stay till late at the office. Ms. So, who owns a nine-ok won (US\$ 810,000.00) condo south of Han River in Seoul is not too different. Ms. So and her husband's lifetime savings and investment were just enough to buy a four-bedroom condo that is comfortable for two grown children and the couple. This reflects that the tremendous effort to secure a family house by the housewives and the families is not much more than a form of survival strategy. Popular discourses on housewives often ignore such reality and instead label all housewives as "*bokbuin*" (real-estate housewife); blaming them as the main culprits in real-estate speculation. Such discourses turn people's attention from the real sources of skyrocketing housing price and instead scapegoat a socially weak group. Moreover, this accusation compounds the marginalization of those housewives who have failed in *jae-tech*; first, by damning them for being a potential *bokbuin*; and second, by damning them for failing to be a "successful contributor" to the family's financial assets.

#### **4. Dreaming about or attempting employment**

Those participants who think being a housewife is overall a negative experience considered employment as

an alternative. But some women resisted changing their lifestyle: Ms. Ko Hyonjong and Ms. Kang Hyonson devalued the alternative of employment and convinced themselves that there is no real alternative to housewifedom. A career was never important for Ms. Ko's identity, and Ms. Kang's short-lived career was damaging to her self-esteem. Neither of them needs additional income and they are very involved with children. In contrast, some participants always had employment possibility on mind, and considered it *The Road Not Taken*. They value employment highly because they believe employment can provide women with elevated social status and economic independence. The other side of this narrative reveals the limits of housewifedom: Being a housewife deprives a woman of an identity as a member of society, and fosters economic dependency.

Among those who considered employment, some were simply hopeful of getting a job, while others made efforts to embark upon a career. Ms. Choi Hyonji and Ms. Kim Mihyon were among the former. For both, employment was always the-road-not-taken but their "life as housewives precluded the chances for employment and reduced the skills necessary for employment." The employment opportunities available for them were either domestic helper jobs or cashier positions; both of which were too degrading for middle-class housewives. The lack of a diverse and dynamic job market for married women makes it hard for the housewives to develop a new identity.

Ms. Kim Mihyon has given up trying to develop a real career and is now working part-time for nominal remuneration for the local government district office. Although she holds a teacher's license and would rather take a 'real' job, her current work does provide her with some psychological and financial rewards. Unlike Ms. Choi Hyonji, Ms. Kim chose to lower her standards and accept what was available for her. What is common between the two women is that they both gave up pursuing a career because of their self-doubt and insecurity. Their husbands also contributed to their

insecurity by frequent criticism and a pronounced lack of respect for them and their abilities.

In contrast, Ms. Shim Heegyong, Ms. Yi Jongmin, and Ms. Yi Yujae have work experience and consider their status as housewives as transitory. They think that there is a stage of life when staying home and raising young children can be more productive. But after that stage, staying home becomes "sitting around doing nothing" (*noneungeot*) as stated by Ms. Yi Jongmin. Ms. Shim said, "Housewives have too much time on their hands, that's why they are unhappy with their husbands, hang out playing golf, or engage in lazy chatting." Ms. Yi Yujae plans to go back to work soon and says, "The life of a housewife with a young child is not easy; you have to hang around the house all day, and the everyday routine is grinding." She still connects her returning to work with her mothering. She is worried that her last child might be embarrassed about having an old mother (she is forty-three, and her daughter is four years old); but she thinks when she goes back to being a script writer at a TV network, it would make her daughter proud of her. Ms. Yi Jongmin and Ms. Shim, on the other hand, want to find a job primarily to have an additional income so as to pay back the housing loans and fund the children's after school programs. Because both have worked outside home before, they have little fear and assess the job market in a more realistic fashion. Their planning and preparation for employment is therefore concrete and well informed. Also, they both have a supportive husband and have a positive relationship with him. For Ms. Yi Yujae, a social identity is an important part of the self. While Ms. Yi Yujae actively searches for a career-woman identity and is reflective about such an inner process, Ms. Yi Jongmin and Ms. Shim did not go through such an active internal interrogation and are not as thoughtful about their identity process. For the latter two women, taking up a job does not challenge their identity as a housewife; it only corroborates their self-identity as a good housewife.

In summary, employment is an alternative for housewives to work out a positive identity, by allowing

them to actualize individual talents, to lessen the dependency on the husband, and to provide a greater sense of social belonging. However, whether employment is a realistic alternative or not depends on the particular situation of the housewife, such as having young children, necessity for additional income, conditions of the available jobs.

## 5. Participating in outside-home activities

“There is something that cannot be gained from family life alone, isn’t there?” asked Ms. So Jinhwa, and many participants generally agreed on this view. Many housewives sought outside-home activities in order to find “something that cannot be obtained at home.” Such activities included private gatherings and religious activities. None of the participants were involved in volunteer work or civic activism. Social activities ranged from calling a friend on the phone or having a next-door neighbor over to have a chat, to gatherings of mothers connected at children’s schools and private educational programs. Some went to alumni gatherings or church gatherings regularly. Ms. Yi Yujae does not go to any meetings nor does she belong to any organization, but often spends time talking with a neighbor-friend who has a similar background. Ms. So belongs to a group that was formed among mothers of elementary school students when her first child was attending that school. The members have become good friends over time. Ms. Kang Hyonson does not want to get deeply involved in the parents associations at her children’s school, but she makes a point of appearing at the meetings well-dressed. Her stated purpose is to “collect information.” When her children are commended at the school, she feels good about herself; but sometimes she feels jealous of other mothers who are good looking or dressed in even finer clothes than she is. Many participants knew or made friends with other mothers whom they met at the children’s after school programs. The mothers would exchange information, make up a team of children to do educational activities together, or give birthday parties

together for the children.

Generally, the groups that housewives organize among themselves tend to be monitored by the husbands. Ms. So can freely go to such gatherings two or three times a month because her children are all grown, but Ms. Kim Mihyon can only go if her husband agrees to take care of the children. Ms. Kim’s husband dislikes her going to such gatherings and thus she goes only once a year. Ms. Yang Sonhee is very outgoing and enjoys meeting people, and wishes to go for a trip for a few days with friends, but her husband does not like her friends and detests her going out with them.

Out of eleven participants, eight of them followed some religion. Ms. Choi Hyonji identifies herself as Buddhist but does not participate in any religious activity. The remaining seven women belong to a Protestant or Roman Catholic church, and regularly attend Sunday service (or mass) and actively participate in small groups and prayer meetings. Ms. So says, “I feel that my existence is meaningful when I think of my relationship with God. Otherwise, I am not a special person.” Religion provides her a space where she affirms her self-worth as an individual. Also, since she began taking significant roles at the church, she could feel better about herself. Church also provides a place for the housewives to talk about difficulties in life and render support to one another. Ms. Kim Mihyon told the interviewer that she had been going to a prayer meeting at a Protestant church, without revealing that she is a Roman Catholic. She likes the prayer group because it is a safe place to discuss the problems of her handicapped son. In addition, church can be one of those few places where married couples go together and do things together. Ms. Yang intends to use the church to revive her alienated marriage. Ms. Yang does not want to go back to the “obedient wife” that she had been in the past, and thinks that the church teachings can guide the couple to build a more democratic marriage.

Overall, next to the children’s education, religious involvement takes up a significant portion of the participants’ time. Indeed, these two activities appear to

be the two main axes of housewives' life: The axis of children's education is their obligation, and the axis of religion is their source of self-worth and energy. Ms. Yun Misuk says that her faith saved her from the emptiness she felt all the time, strengthened her marriage, and helped her raise the children well. Ms. So similarly states how her faith gives her a different perspective, and she does not fret much over her son's low achievement at school:

If I had raised my children without faith, I would have only wanted them to succeed in this world in a material sense. But since I raised my children with faith I thought about how to raise the children to become good people. (. . . .) Now that I have faith I know how precious every child is, and I believe that each and every creature of God has the ability to survive.

Religion does seem to help housewives develop a more positive identity. However, religion cannot serve as an alternative for every woman. Religious involvement is only possible when a person has taken a spiritual plunge and accepted the dogma held by a particular church. Also, many churches are still very patriarchal; thus housewives who seek a more egalitarian marriage might reject these churches altogether.

#### **IV. Within the Limits of Immediate Circumstances**

What it means to be a housewife in the contemporary Korean society can be summarized in five words: "unbearable pressures and insatiable desires (*gamdanghagi eoryeoun apryeokkwa chaewojjianmun yokmang*).” This characteristics come from their other oriented identity composed of mainly mother role and wife role. As they have no occupational identity, these other oriented multiple identities intermediate their individual identity.

In order to bear the unbearable pressures and satisfy the insatiable desires, the housewives employ a range of identity strategies. Each woman uses a different combi-

nation of these strategies in response to the situations that challenge their overall self-esteem and sense of self-worth. In this article, we analyzed which strategies are used in which situations. Our intention is to highlight the individual differences among women who are often seen as a homogenous group of middle-class housewives, who are expected to do so much, yet are portrayed as "sitting around doing nothing" in popular discourses. By listening to the narratives of the women, we delved into the subjective processes of the housewives and illustrated how they as strategic thinkers defined their problems and dealt with contradictions in their lives.

However, this does not mean that housewives are always capable of working toward a well-integrated, healthy and positive identity. Most of all, the strategies that housewives employ are inherently limited and imperfect. For example, resisting social and cultural pressures often comes back at the women and damages their self-esteem. Investing in fitness and beauty inevitably creates dependency on commodities and clashes with other obligations as a housewife. The participants who mainly used this strategy were also embarrassed about their shopping addiction and its implicit vanity. Justifying their choice to be housewives is also limited because such narrative is hopelessly akin to the famous patriarchal narrative that confines women's life within the family. There are still too many barriers for the housewives who are seeking employment. Married women are considered as industrial reserve force and candidates for low-paying and degrading jobs. A large part of the labor market is simply closed to married women. Even if married women successfully land a decent job, they still have to do most of the housework at home. Aside from religious activities, there are not many options for housewives to become involved in organizations outside home. Participating in religious activities can be rewarding to many women, but several participants pointed it out that the church is also organized according to patriarchal principles and the church often deliberately exploits women's free labor. In addition, religion is obviously not

for everybody, because some women would not choose to swallow the religious teachings and take the necessary leap of faith.

None of the participants offered a social and structural explanation for their life and identity. Nor did they seek a radical solution that can realign and redefine their family and intimate environments. They wanted to keep their loved ones happy, and wanted to feel better about themselves. However, what we found in this study has larger implications. Housewives are neither revolutionaries nor the source of social problems. The problem is the overall social and cultural processes that created the larger contexts for the women; such as children's education as an industry rather than a social service, homicidal housing prices, the labor market structure maintained by a large reservoir of cheap female (especially married women's) labor, and insufficient child care services and facilities, to name a few.

No matter how "developed" a society will be, and no matter how sufficient the social welfare system and social services will be, there will be some women who will choose to be housewives, either for life or for a while. Housewife may become a name without a problem, when such choice is both voluntary and viable. But being a housewife can be a genuine choice for women only in a society that does not set up such impossible conditions as the Korean housewives face today.

## Acknowledgment

The authors would like to thank the participants who shared their experiences and everyday struggles. We also are thankful to our own families, who have shared our burdens, and to our mothers who gave us life and the strength to live it. The first and second authors contributed equally to this manuscript. Thus the order of first and second authorship was determined randomly.

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Received October 27, 2006

Revised November 25, 2007

Accepted November 25, 2007