HATEFUL AND HEARTWARMING BONDS: THE SENSES AS STRATEGY IN THE SOUTH KOREAN FAMILY [1]


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This dissertation investigates women's strategizing around the senses in South Korea, tracing the ways that women move between sensory experience as an ideal and as an object to put into motion. I argue that the language of the sensory is invoked to stand up to state or societal pressures regarding family-making, child-rearing, and maternal subjectivity. The senses, affect, and emotions are employed to carve out space for individual and family-well-being within neoliberal logics of productivity, but these new areas of sensory possibility are too often colonized by the same neoliberal logics. Utilizing multi-sited ethnography, media analysis, and an interdisciplinary feminist perspective, I followed the language of sensory development and sensory experience in practice through participant-observation at community spaces, and through ethnographic interviews. The main issues of this dissertation include: first, the ways that the extended family in South Korea is structured through visual culture and watching/being seen, resulting in ambivalence, particularly in the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationship. Second, how touch and other senses are conceived of as avenues for emotional and psychological fortification for young children, and how this cultivation of sensory education is extended not just to the mother-child bond, but also to national healing. Third, how sensory fields of sound (in the form of "K-pop" music) and taste (as part of global Korean cuisine) have become spaces of opportunity but also anxiety for teenagers, youth, and their parents. Finally, how "odor" operates metaphorically in constructing the South Korean nation and regions in general, and regionalism and "regional sentiment" in the Chŏlla (southwest) in particular, with implications for restricted access to resources on the one hand but greater yöyu (space, leisure) for cultivating the senses on the other. While recognizing that the senses are easily appropriated by the state to promote efficient care of the self according to neoliberal logics, this dissertation investigates small spaces in which the various senses might open up possibilities for more egalitarian, communitarian living in contemporary South Korea.

Status of Research or Work: Completed/published

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