

## Chapter-3 Death of A School Principal: Transition of Gender Ideology in Tea Service in Korea

Eunju Hwang

### Abstract

The chapter closely follows the 2003 Posŏng Elementary School incident in Korea, where its Principal committed suicide after he was confronted by a young female teacher. The school was located in a small village and had only 61 students in 2003. Whereas the tea service was quickly disappearing in large cities in 2003, the Principal and the Deputy Principal expected a newly hired contracted teacher to serve tea. While the chapter examines why the tragic incident occurred in the geographical location and the temporal background, it will unearth the hidden gender hierarchy of female workers' tea service and the implications of tea service. This chapter uses Norbert Elias's theory of the civilisation process and shows how Elias's concepts of shame and delicacy played a role in the 2003 incident. The chapter also compares coffee protests in the US in 1977 with the 2003 incident in Korea to draw the cultural implications of tea/coffee service in the US and Korea.

Keywords: coffee protests, tea revolt, tea service, civilisation process, secretaries, female office worker

### Introduction

A 57-year-old man, Mr Sŭngmok Sŏ, was found dead by his wife after hanging himself on a ginkgo tree behind his elderly mother's home on 4 April 2003 (Sim, 2003). Mr Sŏ was the Principal of Posŏng Elementary School, a small school with only 61 students. The school was located in a village in Sapkyo-eup in Yesan-gun, Ch'ungch'ŏngnamdo. Mr Sŏ's wife said that he had not slept for days before committing suicide after the "tea service confrontation" with a new female teacher in his school. "Tea" in the Korean context broadly includes hot beverages such as coffee and green tea; therefore, in this chapter, tea also means coffee, especially instant coffee mixed with sugar and creamer.

This chapter follows the microhistorical approach, looking into the daily records of the incident with Norbert Elias's theory of the civilisation process.

The detailed daily records of the incident are mainly from Sanghŭn I's May 2003 news magazine article in *Monthly Chosun* (I, 2003) unless cited otherwise. The records of the Posŏng Elementary School incident are as follows.

### Timeline of the Incident

- In February 2003, after quitting her teaching job at a private institute (*hagwŏn*), the 28-year-old Ms Hagŏng Chin was looking for a teaching job at a school, and she was shortlisted by Mr Gyubok Han, the Principal of Sinam Elementary School, which was located near Posŏng Elementary School. Instead of hiring her, Mr Han introduced her to the Deputy Principal of Posŏng Elementary School, Mr Sŭngman

Hong. The Principal was not involved in the hiring process due to his father's funeral but approved Ms Chin's employment. She was immediately hired.

- On 24 February 2003, the Deputy Principal and Ms Chin met for the first time. On this day, Ms Chin voluntarily offered tea to Mr Hong by saying that she would like to have tea as well.
- On 27 February 2003, the Principal and the Deputy Principal met with Ms Chin. Here, Ms Chin asked if the Deputy Principal would like to have tea, and he answered yes, adding it would be good if she could make tea for the Principal as well. According to the Deputy Principal, it was the first and the last tea that Ms Chin served for the Principal.
- On 3 March, Ms Chin began her work as a contracted teacher at the school.
- According to the internal school record written by the Deputy Principal on 5 March 2003, Ms Chin's teaching and class management were dissatisfactory.
- On 7 March 2003, the issue of tea service was first mentioned in the internal school record. The Deputy Principal suggested Ms Chin serve tea for the Principal in the morning. She tried to figure out what he meant and thought he might have meant to serve tea every morning.
- On 8 March 2003, Ms Chin said to the Deputy Principal that she would not want to serve tea for the Principal every morning. On the same day, Ms Chin also met the Principal. According to Ms Chin's own written record, the Principal mentioned four things on the day; (1) he heard from Mr Hong, the Deputy Principal, that she would not want to serve tea, (2) if she would be willing to serve, how far she could serve; (3) it would be very important to serve the superintendent of education when he visited the school; and (4) it would be rude if she refused to follow the order from her senior. He also added anyone who refuses the order from one's senior would be considered a member of *Chŏn'gyojo* (The Korean Teachers and Educational Workers' Union, KTU) and asked if she was indeed a member of the KTU.

However, the Deputy Principal denied that he forced Ms Chin to serve tea. On the contrary, Mr Hong insisted that Ms Chin refused to serve tea which was within her job descriptions. Looking after the supply of green tea and coffee and cleaning glasses and cups were included in her job descriptions. He also added that although Ms Chin insisted that the Principal emphasised the importance of serving the superintendent of education, the superintendent of education had, in fact never visited the school since the school was founded.

- On 18 March 2003, Ms Chin was absent from her work without leave notice and wrote on the websites of the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family that she was forced to serve tea every morning. In her writing titled "Is A Female Teacher a Plaything of the Principal? (Yŏgyosanŭn kyojangŭi

norigaetkamin'ga?)". She insisted that when she refused this, the Principal and the Deputy Principal often came to her class and scolded her in front of her students (Nam, 2012).

- On 20 March 2003, Ms Chin submitted her resignation in the morning and uploaded similar writing on the websites of the Ministry of Education Human Resources Development (Kyoyuginjŏkchawŏnbu), Chungcheongnamdo Office of Education (Ch'unghnam kyoyukch'ŏng) and the KTU.
- On 20 March 2003, Mr Kyŏnghun I, a School Inspector from the Yesan Office of Education, visited the school to inspect the incident. He concluded the incident was caused by problems of job assignment and miscommunication and ordered corrective actions.
- On 21 March 2003, the Principal submitted his explanatory letter to the Yesan Office of Education. Mr Hwangjin Sŏng from the Yesan Branch of the KTU visited the school and met the Principal for 30 minutes.
- On 22 March 2003, according to the Principal's diary, Mr Chaesun Ko, the Head of the Ch'unghnam Province branch of the KTU, called the Principal, and the call was threatening and intimidating, but Mr Ko denied that he called the Principal. In the meantime, Mr Chinhaŏng I, another person from the Ch'unghnam Province branch of the KTU, admitted that he called the Principal, but he said it was a polite conversation with the Principal.
- On 24 March 2003, Mr Chinhaŏng I and Mr Ilsang Yu, members of the Ch'unghnam Province branch of the KTU, visited the school to investigate the incident. They demanded reinstating Ms Chin, removing the tea service completely and recommending her to another school.
- On 24 March 2003, the KTU demanded a written apology from the Principal, further investigation of the incident, and the reinstatement of Ms Chin by 27 March 2003. In the meantime, many online forums were heated up if coffee serving was acceptable for young female workers such as secretaries or teachers.
- On 25 March 2003, the Principal was called to the Yesan Office of Education, and he defended there that it was himself who usually served visitors with beverages as there was a fridge and a heating cabinet in his office.
- On 25 March 2003, Mr Chonghak I from the Yesan Office of Education met Ms Chin, and he recommended her work at another school, Yedŏk Elementary School, which was about 15 km away from Posŏng Elementary School, but she said she would need more time to think about the option.
- On 26 March 2003, Ms Chin contacted Mr Chonghak I and said that Yedŏk Elementary School was too far and did not wish to work there. She called the Deputy Principal, Mr Hong, and said that she would like to go back to the school.

The Deputy Principal discussed this with the Principal and the Deputy Principal also insisted that if she would be reinstated in the school, it would be admitting their wrongdoings. At 3 pm, there was a meeting between the Principal, Ms Chin and people from the Office of Education and the KTU. Ms Chin demanded her reinstatement and a written apology from the Principal.

- On 27 March 2003, Ms Chin called the Principal and notified her that she would like to work from 1 April 2003. Ms Chin and the KTU demanded a written apology by 28 March 2003.
- On 28 March 2003, the Ch'unghnam Province branch of the KTU said that the Principal visited the KTU office in the morning and agreed to give a written apology, but he did not submit his written apology. However, the Principal's diary did not record his visit to the KTU office.
- On 31 March 2003, around 20 people from the KTU visited the Yesan Office of Education (Yesan'gyoyukch'öng) to protest. The Ch'unghnam branch of the KTU sent the Principal their protest plan by fax, which they would implement in case they did not receive any written apology. It included more protests, publicising the incident via media, and reporting the Deputy Principal to the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family. Ms Kyöngsil Ch'oe and Ms Hyesil Chöng, two teachers from the same school who were members of the KTU, joined a protest. When they left work early for the reason of going to a bank and see an eye doctor respectively, they had an argument with the Deputy Principal, who suspected them of joining the protest. The Principal recorded this incident in his diary. After the Principal's death, the two teachers and two members of the KTU were sued by the Principal's family. The case was tried at the Supreme Court on 10 July 2008 (The Supreme Court, 2008).
- It was later known that Mr Ch'oe from the Korean Federation of Teachers' Association (KFTA), a conservative organisation often considered against the KTU, visited the School (Yun, 2003) on 31 March 2003.
- On 1 April 2003, Ms Seo returned to the school, but the Principal and the Deputy Principal still refused to give a written apology.
- On 2 April 2003, Daejon Ilbo, a local newspaper, reported the tea service incident, titled "A contracted female teacher was forced to serve tea – reinstated after public criticism". After this article, other local newspapers also released similar articles, such as "Asking a female teacher to serve tea – gender discrimination". On this day, teachers of Posöng Elementary School, including the Principal and Ms Chin, gathered at a local restaurant after a school's sports competition, and the Principal made a positive speech there. In the evening, the KTU faxed a statement to principals at local schools to prevent similar gender discrimination as the tea incident at Posöng Elementary School.

- On 2 April 2003, local principals met in the Yesan Office of Education. It was said they stopped the Principal from giving any written apology as this would ruin their reputation and authority as a principal. However, according to Sanghŭn I's investigation, the principals who attended the meeting denied that they forced the Principal not to give a written apology.
- On 2 April 2003, the KFTA spoke with the Principal. Although it was assumed that the KFTA forced the Principal not to give a written apology, the contents of the conversation were not known (Yun, 2003).
- On 3 April 2003, the Principal saw the faxed statement sent by the KTU on 2 April and signed it. Administrative workers and teachers at Posŏng Elementary School witnessed the Principal smoking all day, although he quit smoking.
- On 4 April 2003, the Principal did not go to school. He was found dead around 10 am. The Police assumed that he committed suicide around 5-6 am on the day. The Principal chose to commit suicide on the hill near the place where his father was buried without leaving any written apology or will.
- On 5 April 2003, the Principal's family sued Ms Chin and the two teachers who joined the protest for libel and two KTU members for menaces (Chŏn'gukkyojigwŏnnodongjohap Chŏnnamjibu (Ch'unghnam branch, KTU., 2003a).
- On 7 April 2003, the parents did not send their children to the School to protest against Ms Chin and the two teachers who were the KTU members.
- Between 14 and 17 April 2003, students studied at a local church or a village hall.
- On 18 April 2003, students attended the school as usual.

This tragic incident leaves many questions; Why did Ms Chin and the KTU members vehemently react to the principal's request to serve coffee? Why was serving coffee such a big deal for them to drive a respected man to death? Why didn't the Principal give a written apology?

By answering these questions, this chapter looks at what was hidden behind serving coffee, in the geographical and temporal contexts, along with the changes of female status in Korean society. To explore why this tragic incident happened, it should understand the significance of the temporal and geographical location; and what coffee service tacitly meant to female workers, including female teachers in a small village such as Sapkyo-eup in 2003.

### **Shame and delicacy: connotations in tea service**

Mr Sŏ, the Principal, had an excellent reputation in the village as an educator, a neighbour, a son and a father. He was awarded the first educational grand prize from the

Chungcheongnamdo Office of Education. Ironically, although the cause of his suicide started from tea service, according to Mr Chang, a teacher of the same school and another teacher from Ungsan Elementary School testified that the Principal did not enjoy coffee or tea and he only occasionally drank green tea (I, 2003). After Mr Sö passed away, media interviews with other teachers, local residents and parents were saddened as he was truly loved by many people. Mr Sö's wife, Ms Sunhui Kim, mentioned those days as the wife of a teacher were challenging but beautiful. She recounted that around 23:30 on 3 April 2003, Mr Sö walked around his garden and came in around 1 am while she was taking care of her grandson in the living room. Around 2 am on 4 April 2003, his wife noticed Mr Sö was still awake and asked him not to worry and take care of his health. Around 5 am, his wife woke up, but her husband was not there. Soon his body was found behind his mother's house (Cho, 2005).

When the conflict with the coffee service began, no one could predict that it could end up with someone's death. He did not tell even his wife about his problems at the beginning. Just some days before the principal's suicide, his wife, who learned about the conflict through the media, consoled him not to worry because the problem was "such as trivial thing" and it would end soon (Cho, 2005). The incident, starting with tea service, as time went by, was degenerated into vehement political conflicts between the rightist Korean Federation of Teachers' Association (KFTA) and the leftist KTU, and the whole nation joined the political war. The conservative media attacked members of the KTU as disrespectful and immoral, therefore disqualified as educators. The KFTA was a conservative organisation supported by principals and deputy principals, and conservative media supported the KFTA. Between the KFTA and the KTU, gender issues were often ignored in media, although the public discourse outside the mainstream media was developed into the tea/coffee services as gender discrimination.

On 13 April 2003, KBS2 (Korean Broadcasting System) broadcasted a live debate programme on TV called *One Hundred People's Debate (Paegin T'oron)* on the incident of Posöng Elementary School and female teachers' tea service. After the debate in each show, the live TV programme usually conducts a poll among the audience. KBS, being a national broadcaster, usually had a conservative stance on social issues. On 13 April 2003, there was also a poll on female teachers' tea service, but to the presenter's surprise, the result of the poll took the young female teacher's side. The presenter hastily finished the TV programme saying the result of the poll was unreliable. The audience after the TV programmes, demonstrated and demanded another poll, which did not take place. The audience was mainly from the Seoul metropolitan area, and many of them were university students who would be future teachers.

However, in the village, after the Principal's death, the parents protested by not sending their children to the School, saying they could not allow the murderous teachers to teach their children (Chön'gukkyojigwönnodongjohap Chönnamjibu (Ch'unghnam branch, KTU., 2003a). Later, it was known that the Principal was Ms Chin's teacher when she was an elementary school student and the discourse among local people developed into the Confucian ideology of "respect for a teacher and the elder". In parents' interviews with several newspapers, they asked, "What is the big deal about serving tea? It is a beautiful virtue to serve the senior." Interestingly, female village residents and mothers took the patriarchy as a norm rather than taking the young female teacher's side. This is supported by Luce Irigaray, who divides women into three symbolic categories: the mother, the virgin and the prostitute (Irigaray, 1985). According to her, the symbolic virgin, after she is exchanged by men (from her father to her husband), becomes the mother. The symbolic mother has no

exchange value and joins the patriarchal system to become part of the male-dominant system. This is why mothers are praised by men (Irigaray, 1985). In this sense, the principal hanged himself at the back of her mother's house. In his choice of suicide, the classical dichotomy of women is clearly revealed; for patriarchal men, the virgin becomes either a mother who is part of the patriarchy or a prostitute who is against the patriarchy.

Where is the discrepancy between the urban public discourse and the villagers' view? How does a "modern" urban view reach "traditional" villages? Norbert Elias's research notes that "shame" and "delicacy" play a crucial role in the civilisation process.

[T]he manner in which the individual behaves and feels slowly changes. This change is in the direction of a gradual "civilisation", but only historical experience makes clearer what this word actually means. It shows, for example, the decisive role played in this civilising process by a very specific change in the feelings of shame and delicacy. The standard of what society demands and prohibits changes; in conjunction with this, the threshold of socially instilled displeasure and fear moves; and the question of sociogenic fears thus emerges as one of the central problems of the civilising process. (Elias, 1998, p. 41)

As Elias notes, shame and delicacy play are the main keywords to understand what is hidden behind what is known in the incident at Posŏng Elementary School. A conservative journalist, Gabje Cho, criticises Ms Chin and the KTU, saying they intentionally misused the term *chŏp tae* (Cho, 2005) to direct the discourse into sex discrimination. Female workers' tea service is often translated into Korean as *chŏp tae* (接待), but if the same letters are arranged in a different order, *tae chŏp* (待接), it has a different nuance, more related to males. *Tae chŏp* is a treatment usually associated with male behaviour, especially buying a big meal for someone such as the elder or business partner, whereas *chŏp tae* is associated with female service, which has a sexual connotation (Cho, 2005). Therefore, a woman who offers *chŏp tae* (*chŏptaebu*) is a bar hostess or even a prostitute. When Ms Chin was asked to serve tea, she used the word *chŏp tae*, saying she would not want to do it. But, after the Principal's suicide, the parents protested against Ms Chin and other KTU teachers, asking what was the big deal about doing *tae chŏp* as treating the elder is the Confucian virtue. It seems that the Principal, as people described him as a naïve yet hard-working and exemplary man, was too insensitive to notice the delicate nuance of tea service for female workers and might not have distinguished *chŏp tae* from *tae chŏp*; for someone insensitive, both could mean treating others with respect. He was a man of traditional values, such as good deeds for his neighbours and students, and he cared for his parents with great filial piety as people remembered him. He was a principal of a small school in a rural area with only 61 students. However, as the title of Ms Chin's writing, "A Female Teacher is a Plaything of a Principal?" says, she felt sexually humiliated by the idea (as she actually did not serve tea) of serving beverages. A plaything (*norigaetkam*) is usually used in the Korean language to refer to a prostitute or sexually abused victims.

In the incident at Posŏng Elementary School, related people and the media describe the incident using either *tae chŏp* or *chŏp tae*, in order to emphasise or avoid the sexual connotation. Ms Chin, the KTU and the progressive media used *chŏp tae*, whereas the local village residents and the parents used *tae chŏp*. The fact that people deliberately chose the word *chŏp tae*, to avoid any sexual implications shows that they felt a sense of shame. Patriarchal Korean society still expects *chŏp tae* from female workers at offices or other

workplaces. It is not uncommon to hear that female workers pour alcohol on male colleagues, especially for bosses at after-work get-togethers called *hoesik* (a meeting accompanied by food and alcohol). Now ordering female workers to serve alcohol at *hoesik* would be considered unacceptable or inappropriate, although it is still witnessed. Here comes the delicate nuance between alcohol and tea/coffee. Asking a female worker to serve alcohol can be recognised as sexual harassment according to the context (Chi, 2014). In a corporate dinner or *hoesik*, if a male employer orders a female employee to sit next to him and asks her to serve alcohol for him, this might be regarded as sexual harassment, although there were several legal cases which ruled sexual harassment could not be established purely based on the grounds that he ordered to serve alcohol. However, in the same setting and the same situation, if the male employer orders a female employee to serve coffee, it is not valid sexual harassment (Chi, 2014). This is the delicacy Elias notes: delicacy between *chöp tae* and *tae chöp*, and between alcohol and tea/coffee.

Then, Elias's concept of shame should be examined. Although many people consider the process of civilisation as completed and view themselves as bearers of a finished civilisation (Elias, 1998, p. 49), Elias asserts that civilisation is not a completed state but a continuously ongoing process (Elias, 1998, p. 47). To be a civilised person, one must understand the changing process and naturally adapt oneself to the manner imposed on one as if the manner is inborn (Elias, 1998, p. 114). Assuming that civilisation is an ongoing process, in times of abrupt transition, it is more difficult for people to follow the sudden change of a specific manner or an attitude because people are expected to behave as if those sudden changes are naturally inherent in their way of thinking to look civilised. If one fails to see the change in society or cannot behave in a specific manner, one is labelled uncivilised. This is when shame kicks in because shame changes people's manner. However, in a small town where the previous patriarchal ideology was relatively well kept, a sudden inflow of urban, democratic culture through the sudden appearance of a young female teacher certainly gave the principal a challenge. Without noticing the social change outside his village, the principal ordered the new-comer to obey his order and the patriarchal ideology backed up by the Deputy Principal, village people such as the parents, and finally, he had to face the reality that a different ideology had dominated the bigger part of Korean society outside his village and his school. The failure to recognise the different ideologies inevitably led the principal to behave differently from what was expected of him, what Elias would have called uncivilised behaviour, then to shame.

Elias examines different types of constraints during the civilisation process to which people are exposed. The brief classification of Elias's four constraints can be summed up as follows:

1. the constraints imposed on people by the characteristics of their animal nature, such as hunger or sexual drive;
2. the constraints arising from dependence upon non-human natural circumstances, such as the need to seek food or protection from the harsh weather;
3. the constraints which people exercise over each other in their social lives. Elias calls these constraints "social constraints" or "external constraints", which occur due to people's interdependence. These constraints are basically constraints by other people; and
4. the fourth type of constraint is "self-control" or "conscience". Elias calls it "self-constraints". (Elias, 1998, pp. 236-237)



In the case of the Principal, it is necessary to take note of a higher level of constraints, such as the third and the fourth types of constraints. Elias argues that people live together and are interdependent on each other; there are always constraints imposed on people. Therefore, if any group do not keep constraints will inevitably have disappointments (Elias, 1998, p. 244). Elias notes that in the process of civilisation, the distribution of power between the generations became more equal through informalisation, and the younger generations demanded more equality with the older generations. Interestingly, among the younger generations, Elias particularly points out that the most evident power re-distribution among different relationships is found between unmarried daughters and their parents and between young women and members of the older generations in general, therefore the growth in power of young, unmarried women is the most remarkable among all groups of people (Elias, 1998, pp. 244-245), just as the tea service between the Principal and Ms Chin. Ms Chin's confrontation was more than a mere generation gap, it was the re-distribution of power that caused the tragic conflict.

Many social regulations on women, which were once laid on parents and family, began to enter the realm of young women's self-regulation. However, Elias warns that people frequently do not see the structure of the change or different social codes caused by a power shift among different social groups (Elias, 1998, p. 245). As a member of the older generation, the Principal failed to see the power shift between the older generation and the young, especially unmarried women. The Principal and the Deputy Principal scolded her and attempted to correct her behaviour by visiting her class after she refused to serve tea, but they did not understand that it was no longer their role or responsibility to remind her of social constraints. Ms Chin's behaviour should have been regulated by her own self-constraint rather than social (external) constraints. Likewise, Ms Chin also imposed social constraints on the Principal and the Deputy Principal. Ms Chin was equally insensitive to what the village culture was like, although she was originally from the region and she used to be the Principal's pupil.

Elias points out that individuals are often thought to be the opposite concept of society, and this misconception distorts the relationship between I and We. Individual "I" is thought to be "we-less" I, without much thought of learning or interacting processes in each individual's formation (Elias, 1998, p. 234). Discussing the balance between I and We, Elias brings up a new term, *homo clausus*. Elias criticises the tradition of classical philosophy from Descartes through Berkeley, Kant to Husserl that they commonly suppose humans who acquires knowledge as an isolated being, therefore an individual remains for ever in doubt, and objects or people exist outside oneself. He names this isolated and closed being *homo clausus* or the we-less (Elias, 1998, p. 232). If one exists as *homo clausus* as an adult without ever having been a child, therefore, has no need or willingness to learn, it can lead to problems in understanding the "I-We" relationship. The "we" that the Principal knew was no longer the same "we", but since he existed as "an adult" without learning about changes of gender roles outside his village, he had no process of learning or interacting with the new "we" or new values accepted by the new "we", which made him isolated.

Although in large cities such as Seoul, tea service quickly disappeared from the office context after the 1997 IMF economic crisis, the change did not reach a small village such as Sapkyo-eup in Yesan-gun. In fact, the Supreme Court judgment on this case on 10 July 2008 stated that there was already a guideline from educational and administrative organisations to ban female teachers' tea service three years before the Posŏng Elementary School incident

(The Supreme Court, 2008). Before Ms Chin joined the school, they also ordered a young school nurse (Ms Kim) to take up tea service in 2001 and 2002 (Chŏn'gukkyojigwŏnnodongjohap Chŏnnamjibu (Ch'ungnam branch, KTU, 2003b). The 57-year-old Principal was well known for his respect for his parents and neighbours but did not understand how to treat young women because of the traditional Confucian moral values which often despise young females. In the meantime, Ms Chin, a 28-year-old city-educated woman, also ignored the traditional values in the village. As most young Korean women in large cities would feel, for Ms Chin, serving coffee was something humiliating rather than respecting the elderly. While men thought serving coffee was a natural female role or kindness, or even part of their job descriptions, young female workers would feel it was a form of "sexual harassment" beyond gender discrimination, which could not be proven because there was no obvious evidence or physical contact when serving coffee, only a "feeling" existed without any hard evidence. This was the truth that female workers knew, but male workers often overlooked or dismissed.

During the Chosŏn Dynasty, when Confucianism was promoted, tea culture was abolished because it was associated with Buddhism. Until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, drinking coffee or tea was not part of life in Korea, and it was somewhat awkward to have something between meals, although instant coffee gradually gained popularity. This is why coffee is more prevalent in Korea than tea. Still, when Koreans refer to "tea", they usually mean "coffee". Coffee was often considered daytime alcohol by Korean men; therefore, it had to be served by women, just as alcohol was served by females such as *kisaeng* (Korean geisha). For women who had professions such as teachers or secretaries, serving coffee meant being under male sexual dominance, and they would feel like a *kisaeng* or even a prostitute at workplaces. There exist several layers of the meaning of tea/coffee associated with females. The first order of understanding of tea/coffee service was having a drink, just a beverage, but the second order of tea/coffee service was involved with some power relations between males and females, such as dominance and obedience. The third order of tea/coffee service involves a female body which serves the beverage for her male employers or guests. Although it might no longer be the case nowadays, women who previously served coffee/tea to male bosses or guests and accompanied them while men drank coffee often felt humiliated by their looks or touch. However, they could not protest because, in the end, as only the first order of understanding, coffee remained, and they were just drinking beverages. Males could simply say they did not harass female workers but they just drank a beverage. In the end, coffee/tea was not alcohol which would be strongly connected to sexual implications. The second and the third orders of coffee/tea would be hidden and underlying. For the same reason, it was more powerfully perceived by both males and females because the different orders of understanding coffee/tea provided a strong weapon for males while functioning as a silent killer for females. Serving coffee/tea was not only humiliating for females, but it also reduced females' education, career experience and professional knowledge into simple emotional labour of pleasing males, which means they are still under male domination and still less recognised at work than male colleagues, which means less chance of promotion. That is, when female workers serve tea, they become a sexual object rather than professional worker. This would explain Ms Chin's refusal to serve tea.

### **The birth of female office work and gender hierarchy**

In order to understand the tacit connotation of female workers' tea service, however, it might sound irrelevant, a brief Korean history of female office work, including teachers' jobs, should be first examined. During the Korean industrial period in the 1960s and 1970s, female workers were hired as "secretaries". Whether their jobs were actually a secretary or not, many of the female office workers were called secretaries. All the traditional secretaries who supported official works prior-1900 were male, and it is necessary to understand how office work was transformed from a male job to a female job.

A secretary in the Korean language is called *pisŏ*, and it was first used in 996, when King Sŏngjong in the Koryŏ Dynasty (918-1392) changed the department of *naesŏ*, which was in charge of documentation, into the department of *pisŏ*. From this time, *pisŏ* began to mean a secretary. During the Chosŏn Dynasty (1392-1897), kings had *sŭngji*, and local officers also had secretaries called *ibangajŏn*. During the Japanese occupation (1910-1945), secretaries or errand service workers in offices were called *sahwan* or *kŭpsa*. From the Koryŏ Dynasty to the Chosŏn Dynasty, then again to the period of the Japanese occupation, these roles were carried out by males.

The first milestone of Korean females' entry into the professional job market started with Ewha School, founded by American missionaries in May 1886. Ewha School gradually grew and began to have departments for professional education in 1910. In 1952, a course on English clerical work was opened at Ewha Busan Campus and in 1964, the first department of secretarial studies was founded at Kyung Hee Women's College, which provided a two-year course. In 1968, Ewha Womans University established the Department of Secretarial Studies, which offered a four-year course. With professional education at colleges and universities, more women began to take over office work in the 1960s. Until the 1960s, most secretaries were males in Korea, but the number of female secretaries had continuously increased, and by the time of 1970, female secretaries took 50.5% of the secretary jobs (Sŏ, 1977, p. 6). However, according to Chinok Sŏ's research which compared Korean companies and foreign companies in Korea in the 1970s, the female secretaries were not expected to take serious office work. During the 1970s, 70% of secretaries in Korean companies were less than 24 years old, and only 7.5% were over 31 years old (Sŏ, 1977). The number is contrasted with foreign companies in Korea during the same period. In foreign companies, 61.7% of secretaries were over 31 years old, and only 11.7% were less than 24 years old. Sŏ's 1977 research shows that foreign companies in Korea preferred experienced secretaries for work efficiency, and Korean companies preferred young females (Sŏ, 1977).

What should be noted in Sŏ's research is that Korean companies in the 1970s, besides their female secretaries, usually hired male secretaries who actually supported business and office work rather than giving secretarial jobs to female secretaries. According to Sŏ, 58.4% of Korean companies hired extra male secretaries for actual office work, while 6.6% of foreign companies in Korea hired male secretaries (Sŏ, 1977, p. 48). This fact evidences that Korean companies did not expect professional secretary work from their female workers. Female secretaries were usually attractive young women who did not marry, and when they married, they were expected to quit their jobs (Sŏ, 1977, p. 61). When Korean companies recruited female secretaries, the most important quality was attractive appearance (77.8%), while foreign companies answered that good typing skill (93.3%) was the most important quality (Sŏ, 1977, p. 45).

Sŏ also noted that it was expected that the head of secretaries was male or there was a separate male secretary who managed female secretaries (Sŏ, 1977, p. 5). Female secretaries dealt with simple chores and tasks. Female secretaries' tasks in Korean companies

during the 1970s included answering the telephone (95%), arranging documents (90%), office cleaning and arranging (82.5%), typing (67.5%), receiving post (67.5%), preparation for meetings (62.5%) and serving beverages (62.5%). During the same period, secretaries in foreign companies in Korea took more types of work including answering telephone (100%), typing (100%), arranging documents (93.3%), receiving post (83.3%), preparation for meetings (66.6%), scheduling (75%), writing letters (70%), helping boss's private work (51.7%) and recording (53.4%) (Sö, 1977, p. 35). This male-oriented idea about female office workers was reflected in verbal treatment as well. There are different speech levels in the Korean language based on the level of formality and politeness, and it is chosen according to the listener's age, profession, and socioeconomic status (Strauss and Eun, 2005). According to Yönsuk Yu's 1978 survey of 500 business managers in Seoul, only 23% of the managers used honorific speech level, 21% talked down using a least polite speech level to their secretaries, and 51% used mixed speech levels to female secretaries (*Dong-A Ilbo*, 1978).

The perception of young and passive female secretaries was not easily changed, and even in the 1990s research, secretaries as flowers of the office were still pointed out as a problem. According to Sang Young Son's 1994 research, he still pointed out that even professional female secretaries were only engaged in answering phone calls, serving beverages and treating guests. He analysed that it was not because secretaries were incapable but the cause was in managers' side who could not accept female workers as equal office staff (Son, 1994, p. 23). Until very recently, female secretaries were viewed as a decorative element of the pleasant environment rather than skilful workers, and their main function was to be the part of office background. Their appearance and kindness were often considered a barometer of the quality and the standard of the companies.

The short 1993 excerpt from *Dong-A Ilbo* shows male workers' attitudes towards female workers' coffee service.

An assistant manager Mr. P at the S branch of D Securities Company likes coffee and drinks three cups a day. Whenever he wants to drink coffee, he orders a female worker at a counter to make coffee for him. "I do not think ordering female workers to make coffee is a bad habit," said he, "at work especially in the service industry, the kindness of female workers is very important, more important than anything else. Respect for their boss is also an extension of professional kindness. In a way, it can also be considered a Confucian value of "respecting the elder and caring for the younger" (*Dong-A Ilbo*, 1993).

Instant coffee has constantly gained popularity since the Korean War. During the 1950s, through American PX, Korean people had their first contact with instant coffee. However, what made Korean-style coffee was in 1974 when Dong Suh Food Company produced "Prima" (a coffee creamer brand) with its own technology. Dong Suh Food Company also produced an individually packed mixture of coffee, sugar and dried cream called "coffee mix" in 1976, and coffee mix had gained continuous growth. However, the biggest popularity of coffee mix came in 1997 when Korea suffered an economic crisis, often called "the IMF crisis". Companies tried to reduce any cost to run the companies, and a number of female workers who were at that time engaged in office chores, mainly serving coffee for male workers, were dismissed. To fill the female workers' service, companies purchased coffee mix and hot water dispensers, and the sales of the coffee mix during the economic crisis surged. Although instant coffee was designed to make coffee more easily than brewed coffee, this

was not the case in Korea. Korean-style instant coffee requires a good balance of dried instant coffee, creamer and sugar, and to find the golden ratio of the three ingredients or to customise individual male worker's taste was the female secretaries' job. However, coffee mix with the golden ratio of the ingredients has made preparing coffee easy even for male workers.

The IMF crisis in the late 1990s made numerous female workers leave their jobs; however, paradoxically, it became a chance to reconsider female workers' functions at work. Female workers who could maintain their work were considered competent and capable workers, and they did not have to serve coffee/tea to male workers since offices during the economic crisis were already equipped with hot water dispensers and coffee mixes. Korean society, after the economic crisis, soon gained back stability and many of the female workers who were hired after the crisis were actual workers, unlike previous female secretaries who were called the "flowers of the office". Therefore, more women who were educated and highly paid refused to serve tea and took more important roles actually to contribute to the increasing company's profit. Many women who were less paid still accepted the role of serving tea and office chores such as cleaning and decorating the office until recently. Ms Chin's refusal to serve tea should be understood in this context as well, as 2003 was just right after the IMF crisis.

Secretaries' coffee serving was a controversial issue even in the West; however, the cultural implications were very different. When a Chicago legal secretary, Iris Rivera, refused to make the coffee for her boss James Geif, she was dismissed from her job, which launched a "coffee protest" in 1977. Geif included making coffee in the duties of his secretary and Rivera protested his request, saying that ordering the secretaries to make coffee was carrying the role of homemaker too far (Scott, 1977). What is notable is that Rivera felt that she carried the role of "homemaker" to the office, while Korean secretaries or young female workers felt sexually harassed about serving coffee. The difference reflects that serving coffee in the US was an extension of the motherly role, whereas, in Korea, it was an extension of the "entertainer's role" in the office.

Coincidentally, there was another coffee protest in 1977 in Waterloo, Iowa. Diana Becker, a secretary in the Waterloo Community School District's administrative offices, refused to make coffee, and she was dismissed. For 10 years, she made coffee, but on 19 September 1977, she refused, saying, "I thought, this is not right... Years ago, the climate was a lot different, you'd just grin and bear it. But I thought now would be a good time (Settle, 1977)". When she confronted Dr Donald E. Hanson, assistant superintendent in charge of personnel, he sent her a dismissal letter addressing her "Ms" Diana Becker, in allusion to her women's rights stand. She filed a sex discrimination complaint with the Iowa Civil Rights Commission, saying, "When I did this, I didn't do it just for myself. I was trying to help everyone (Settle, 1977)". Both coffee protests took place in 1977 in Chicago and Iowa. In Korea, it was 2003 in a small village called Sapkyo-eup in Yesan-gun. The Korean Supreme Court ruled that Ms Chin's act would be considered a libel. However, it was in the public interest, so she was not guilty.

After the death of the Principal, the discourse degenerated into a political debate between the conservative rightists and the leftists, while many raised the gender issues. While many people still lamented the loss of a very respected man, students started to go to School after their parents did not allow them to go to school. In the meantime, the media continuously reported the death of the Principal and the Posŏng Elementary School incident from various perspectives: the political perspective, gender perspective, and the generation

gap perspective. Amid the chaos, a person in his 50s anonymously donated a coffee vending machine to the School (Yonhap News, 2003). It was indeed a far too late solution that the Principal and Ms Chin did not know.

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