

Book Review

Oh, D. C. (2022). *Mediating the South Korean Other: Representations and Discourses of Difference in the Post/Neocolonial Nation-State*. University of Michigan Press

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Is the idea of racism enough to understand ways in which people perceive, experience, and talk about race and ethnicity in South Korea (hereafter Korea)? The book *Mediating the South Korean Other: Representations and Discourses of Difference in the Post/Neocolonial Nation-State* would firmly say, “No. It is not.” Then what do we have to fully comprehend the Korean system of othering as “a process whereby individuals and groups are treated and marked as different and inferior from the dominant social group” and discrimination related to race and ethnicity (Griffin, 2017)? When cultural logic refers to “a process of people collectively using effectively identical assumptions in interpreting each other’s actions,” this book argues that we must consider at least two intersecting cultural logics (Enfield, 2000, p. 35). One is the Western racist logic that situates Whites as superior and desirable, which is, however, subject to adaptation and modification in the local terrain of Korea as a non-White nation. A weak and superficial investment in Whiteness makes sense, especially when Koreans are not the direct beneficiaries of White supremacy. This helps us understand why the same racist logic that regards Blacks as inferior and undesirable can be halted in Korea, especially when the other cultural logic – that of Koreanness – intervenes. Rooted in the modern Korean history saturated with Japanese imperialism, authoritarian developmentalism, and the legacy of the Cold War, the cultural logic about Koreanness incorporates a more complex set of dimensions. Thus, the normative boundary of being Korean is demarcated by multiple differences in terms of race, ethnicity, region, status of national development, and Korean ethnicity combined with otherness (e.g., North Korean refugees).

Composed of Part I: Mediating the Racial and Ethnic Other and Part

II: Mediating the Co-ethnic Other, this edited volume demonstrates various ways in which these cultural logics intersect with one another across vivid case studies about representation in South Korean media. For instance, Benjamin M. Han (Chapter 2) shows that the portrayals of blackness on variety TV shows are shaped and conditioned by Black entertainers' constant performance and validation of their Korean cultural identity for the audience at the price of rendering their blackness illegible. Han acutely points out that such an instrumental and strategic use of blackness by the media as a means to promote an image of multicultural, global Korea does not translate into the social empowerment of Black entertainers; but rather subjects them to the goals of the Korean media industry such as "content diversification and expansion into other national markets" (p. 63). On a similar note, Ji-Hyun Ahn (Chapter 3) examines the fragile inclusion of ethnic Korean Chinese (*Joseonjok*) by unpacking ways in which the reality competition show *Star Audition: The Great Birth* dramatizes the victory of Cheonggang Baek as his realization of the Korean Dream, which primarily serves to create "the fantasy that Korea is becoming a pseudo-cultural empire in the region" (p. 79). Alice Nahyeon Kim and Sherry S. Yu (Chapter 10) explore the double-marginalization of Korean diasporas along the media discourse about a singer called Steve Yoo or Yoo Seung-Jun. His hybrid identity as a Korean American was interpreted by Korean newspapers as a reason for the public not to perceive him as a 'real' Korean who performs one's Korean duties, like military service.

The book also leads readers to explore how racial or ethnic hierarchies reinforce their cultural logics through various combinations with heteropatriarchal orders. For example, Eunbi Lee and Colby Y. Miyose (Chapter 4) investigate how migrant women – migrant workers and marriage migrants – are othered and oppressed as sexualized and domesticated objects consumed in sustaining the hegemony of heteronormative

patriarchy through the analysis of two independent films, *Rosa* and *Thuy*. Referring to a limited sense of agency assigned to the Uzbekistan woman and the Vietnamese one in each film, whose stories end with their objectification or death, Lee & Miyose diagnose that the two films failed to challenge the cultural status quo and offer a voice for the dispossessed. Russell Edwards (Chapter 5) emphasizes the continued legacy of Japanese colonialism, but with weakened and complexified binary notions of good Korean and bad Japanese in the Korean cultural landscape, by interrogating *The Wailing*, a horror film depicting the character of a Japanese intruder as a source of fear; and *Anarchist from Colony*, a biopic/romantic comedy portraying the romance between Korean poet Park Yeol and his lover, Kaneko Fumiko, a Japanese anarchist. Edwards's point, that Kaneko's otherness as Japanese has been almost completely erased, reminds readers that dissolving previously threatening Japanese otherness is enabled by the patriarchal logic of feminizing such otherness. Myoung-Sun Song (Chapter 6) analyzes the film *The Bacchus Lady*, which portrays a 65-year-old female sex worker and her housemates consisting of a transgender performer, a miniature figurine artist with an amputated leg, and a young Black woman who works in the neighborhood's National Foods Mart. Examining the notion of marginalized otherness, Song highlights how "Korean society has prioritized younger productive heterosexual able-bodied Korean men as desirable and belonging to its nation" (p. 124).

If readers are interested in understanding the place of North Koreans in the changing "multicultural" landscape of South Korea, they can turn to Miseong Woo (Chapter 7)'s chapter analyzing North Korean defector narratives in two plays, Eun-Sung Kim's *Sister Mok-rahn* and Mia Chung's *You for Me for You*. Woo stresses the critical issues of mediating co-ethnic others' sense of disorientation, border-crossing experience, and struggling subjectivity in the Korean society filled with neoliberal individualism. JongHwa

Lee (Chapter 8) examines how the rhetoric of two films – *The Spy Gone North* and *Confidential Assignment*, which feature North Koreans as main protagonists/antagonists – challenges the previous positioning of North Korea as the “main enemy” of the state and the “hypocrisy and the hollowness/groundlessness of the binary Cold War logic/politics” (p. 173). Min Wha Han (Chapter 9) exposes the notion of considering Zainichi Koreans, Koreans who reside in Japan, as a national other due to their associations with Japan and North Korea through the analysis of the documentary film, *Uri-Hakkyo* (Our School), which aspires to redefine and include the stories of Korean diasporas in Japan as South Korea’s “forgotten history” (p. 192).

The strength of this edited volume is that it offers a more refined lens through which to understand racial, ethnic, and co-ethnic otherness in Korea than the framework of racism, which is more tuned into grasping “a Western cultural logic that is less meaningful in a Korea context” (p. 1). According to David C. Oh, the editor of the book, this lens is composed of at least two dimensions: 1) a hierarchical dimension that constitutes the notion of superiority and inferiority in alignment with Western racist logic, and 2) a horizontal one shaped in multiple concentric circles whose different distances from the center indicate the different degrees of belonging and normality within the nation-state (p. 220). This lens can be helpful in the sense that it sophisticates our understanding of the phenomenon of othering in Korea, not by cancelling the prior prism of racism but by complementing it with another compelling cultural logic about Koreanness. This multi-dimensional framework opens up a new space for exploration where we can examine how race and ethnicity intersect with other dimensions of the power relations that form identity and normality. This idea is well-proven, for example, in the chapter by Min Joo Lee who (Chapter 1) investigates intersections between race and gender through the media representation that celebrates

European White women dating or marrying Korean men as desirable “others” and portrays these men as successful cosmopolitans.

The weakness of the book lies in the ambiguity of the term “anthrocategorism” suggested by David C. Oh as equivalent to the Korean word *Injongchabyeol* (인종차별) and used to name the lens I described above. He defines the term as “a system of discrimination based on perceived human groupings” (p. 7). While recognizing his genuine intention of “developing locally meaningful theory, concepts, and language” (p. 1), the term is less convincing, especially when its definition is too comprehensive to be equivalent to the local meaning of *Injongchabyeol* which combines two words: *injong* (translated as “race”) and *chabyeol* (translated as “discrimination”). In other words, the current definition of anthrocategorism is loose enough to include any human differences based on other categories than race and ethnicity (e.g., gender, sexuality, class, age, physical ability), which makes the need for this concept questionable. This ambiguity is not well-clarified throughout the volume, as there is little vibrant discussion about anthrocategorism across the chapters. In short, I found the attempt to encapsulate the two dimensions of viewing race and ethnicity into the single term anthrocategorism hasty at best and unnecessary at worst. Leaving the two dimensions open without such a conceptual closure appears much more promising in terms of inviting future research that explores various intersections among race, ethnicity, and other dimensions of othering and discrimination.

Altogether, the book makes a notable contribution to the multiple fields of communication, media studies, film studies, race and ethnic studies, postcolonial studies, and Korean studies based on its various analyses on Korean media representations and cultural discourses about race and ethnicity. The book especially will be an interesting guide for students who want to improve their understanding of Korean popular

culture in which they are exposed to a TV program that applauds a Korean actress who married a super-rich Thai man or a webtoon that portrays a White male YouTuber who specializes in glorifying Korean content to appeal to a Korean audience. This volume also makes a meaningful stride and offers an intriguing invitation for scholars who want to examine race and ethnicity in the media in a post-neocolonial state by effectively equipping them with its advanced tools and insightful perspectives.

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