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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Who are the Real Insiders? Ambivalent Dynamics between a Korean Man and Immigrant Labourers in *He's on Duty*

Sina Kim

Yonsei University

Corresponding author: Sina Kim, English Language and Literature, Yonsei University, 50 Yonsei-ro Seodaemun-gu, Seoul, 03722, Republic of Korea. bellanotte1026@gmail.com

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Abstract

This article explores the possibilities and the limits of immigrant workers' struggle for coexistence by analysing the ambivalent representation of migrant workers in the Korean film, *He's on Duty* (2010), about Taesik Bang, a Korean man who pretends to be an illegal worker from Bhutan to get a job. While many media representations of immigrant labourers reinforce stereotypical concepts of them, this film captures the dynamics between the domestic poor and the migrant labour force with more complexity than previously displayed. The article shows how the film asks the audience to redefine Korean identity and multicultural society by focusing on the struggles of the Korean protagonist as well as immigrant labourers.

Keywords

***He's on Duty*, Banga? Banga!; immigrant labour; representation; globalisation; sub-empire, performative identity; multiculturalism**

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Introduction

As the numbers of immigrant labourers in South Korean society have skyrocketed, many media works dealing with the issue of multiculturalism have been produced. Films such as *Failan* (파이란, dir. Song, 2001), *Innocent Steps* (댄서의 순정, dir. Park, 2005), and *Punch* (완득이, dir. Lee, 2011), and television programs such as *Love in Asia* (러브인아시아, prod. Choi, 2005–2015) explore the current state of immigrant labourers and seek ways to improve the harsh treatment they face.¹ Jung Heo, a Korean literature scholar, criticises the limited tendency of Korean intellectuals to represent these people as going no further than reporting workers' suffering through events such as industrial accidents, rape and deportation. This representation is problematic in that it ends up in either 'condescendingly victimising immigrant workers' or 'mystifying them as the one who obey reality without any complaint and desire'.² Heo's argument is indebted to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's seminal work, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', where Spivak argues that dominance is maintained through silencing; that is, intellectuals appropriate the subaltern to constitute them as the Other, as the Self's shadow. In other words, the representation of immigrant labourers by Korean intellectuals runs the risk of paternalism. The representation not only reinforces immigrant workers' position as the minority in Korean society, but also deprives them of their subjectivity. The media representation may then be an elite colonialist's inappropriate representation that silences the workers' own voices and sees Korean intellectuals consuming worker resistance as an ingredient for discourse.

Such criticism provides a reason to scrutinise the portrayal of immigrant labourers in *He's on Duty* (방가방가, dir. Yook, 2010).³ In a press preview of the film, director Sanghyo Yook, clarifies his intention to provide a view of immigrant workers that differs from traditional representations. He states that he tried to depict them as people 'who are not that different from us' rather than as passive victims. He adds that the lightness of the storyline is partly to avoid focusing only on the tragic plight of immigrant workers in Korea, where they are exploited.⁴ How immigrant workers are portrayed in this film requires scrutiny to understand whether it follows the director's intention or if, instead, it consolidates and disseminates the usual stereotypes about immigrant workers. It is especially useful to look at how the film influenced the public. *He's on Duty* achieved a stronger popular reception and commercial success than most films which cover the lives of immigrant labourers in South Korea. These films tend not to be screened in commercial theatres and have been paid little attention. *He's on Duty* is also a low-budget film, in which 800 million Korean won was invested

1 *Failan*, motion picture, Tube Entertainment, 2001, directed by Hae-sung Song, starring Min-sik Choi and Cecilia Cheung; *Innocent Steps*, motion picture, Show East, 2005, directed by Young-hoon Park, starring Geun-young Moon and Gun-hyung Park; *Punch*, motion picture, CJ E&M Pictures, 2011, directed by Han Lee, starring Ah-in Yoo and Yoon-seok Kim; *Love in Asia*, television series, KBS, 2005–2015, produced by Seok-soon Choi.

2 Jung Heo, 'A Literary Representation of the Migrant from the Perspective of Subaltern Theory', *Journal of North-east Asian Cultures*, vol. 29, 2011, p. 707.

3 *He's on Duty*, motion picture, 2010, directed by Sanghyo Yook, produced by Kim Bok-Geun, Lee Si-Youngstarring In-kwon Kim. While *He's on Duty* is the official English title, the transliteration of the Korean title is 'Banga? Banga!'. The reason I also introduce the Korean title is that the word 'Banga' itself has critical significance. For the discussion of the word, see below in this article.

4 Sanghyo Yook, in Conan Internet BS PD (uploader), 'Inkwon Kim's First Title Role: The Press Preview of Brand-new Comedy Banga? Banga! [2]', 30 September 2010, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y96X7eJ5y9g>

(approximately US\$700,000), but 970,000 people watched it.⁵ In addition, the film was awarded 'Best Screenplay' and Hyunbeen Shin, who played the role of Jangmi in the film, was awarded 'Best New Actress' at Korea's prestigious Baeksang Arts Awards in 2011.⁶ These records demonstrate both the film's critical acclaim and its popularity with the public.

The varied responses of audiences to the film demonstrate the ambivalence of immigrant labourers represented in this film. Four hundred and forty people evaluated the film for *Watcha*, a website where film buffs share their opinion on movies and rate public confidence. *Watcha* evaluations of *He's on Duty* are almost equally positive and negative. Half the audience praise the movie for portraying immigrant workers not as mere victims but as leading characters, with the aid of comedy. On the other hand, the other half criticises the film mainly for three reasons: they are sceptical that migrants' independence is not as clear compared to Banga's, a Korean worker; the ending appeals to the audience's paternalism, which tarnishes the film's awakening of the status of immigrant workers; the film romanticises immigrant workers' hardship and resistance.⁷ Despite the divergent opinions, the Korean National Assembly and many NGOs showed this movie to raise the issue of foreign labourers' rights in national discourse. This indicates that Korean society accepted how migrants were portrayed in this film and found aspects of it insightful. The comments on *Watcha*, however, do bring up some important points about how immigrant labourers are represented—not only in this film but in general. As well as highlighting the ambivalence of this representation within the film, this article also investigates the contributions the film made to representing immigrant workers. It provides a reading that tries to break away from the binaries found in the audience's responses to the film, to complicate the issue and apply Spivak's question of who has the right to speak in representing the subaltern to Korean society, where globalisation and capitalism have created new victims in its own caste system.

That is, this article argues *He's on Duty* suggests an ambivalent representation of immigrant labourers in the era of globalised neoliberalism. The film deals with the conflict and friendship between Taesik Bang, a Korean man pretending to be Banga, an illegal worker from Bhutan, to get a job, and his immigrant co-workers from underdeveloped Asian countries. On one hand, the economic equivalence implied between Banga and his co-workers shows the creation of a transnational proletariat under the globalised neoliberal system; the poorest populations of 'developed' countries do not necessarily enjoy a better social position in their own society than those from developing countries. This character setting could relegate the issue of immigrant labourers to the background. Banga's identification with his migrant co-workers could suggest the impact of capitalism has spread all over the world. This blurs the specific context of the immigrant labourers' difficulty in Korean society. Thus, the film appropriates immigrant labourers' lives to diagnose the aftermath of global capitalism specifically in Korea.

At the same time, this article argues, *He's on Duty* captures the moment when the neoliberal system's dependence on the globalised proletariat for its functioning destabilises national formations and national identities. Immigrant workers' cheap labour supports

5 Jin-Hee Cho, 'Representing Migrated Women in Korean Popular Films, From <Fairan> to <Wandeuk-ii>', *Journalism & Communication*, vol. 16, no. 1, 2012, p. 382.

6 Baeksang Arts Awards, or Paeksang Arts Awards, is a prestigious award ceremony in South Korea. It aims to honour outstanding accomplishments in South Korean films, television, and theater, and to garner public attention upon Korean entertainment industry. Baeksang Arts Awards, <http://isplus.live.joins.com/100sang>

7 *Watcha*, <https://watcha.net/mv/bangga-bangga-2010/mkwyh3>

modern South Korea, and this reliance on ‘outsiders’ prompts Korea to reconsider long-held notions of nationhood. For example, Korea’s working class may sympathise more with ‘foreigners’ than people with whom they share a common ‘blood’. The fluid and performative identity represented in the film attests to the weakening notion of shared nationhood. Banga’s double identity of Korean and Bhutanese challenges the assumption of identity based on biological essentialism. The unconventional concept of identity underlies immigrant workers’ resistance to monolithic national identity on which the discrimination against them is usually founded. Further, as this article examines, they express their claim for coexistence by translating Korean culture, especially songs, into their own language, and by multiplying cultures visible in Korea.

South Korea, a new destination for Asian immigrant labourers

Before analysing the film, I will outline Spivak’s view on how neoliberal ideology is linked to ‘otherisation’, the discourse that colonialism mobilised to construct its authority in the past. In ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’, she contends:

In the face of the possibility that the intellectual is complicit in the persistent constitution of Other as the Self’s shadow, a possibility of political practice for the intellectual would be to put the economic ‘under erasure’, to see the economic factor as irreducible as it reinscribes the social text, even as it is erased, however imperfectly, when it claims to be the final determinant or the transcendental signified.⁸

Spivak points out that the intellectual is complicit in concealing the multiple erasures neoliberal ideology has attempted through its rhetorical smokescreen of internationalism based on transnational trade and deregulated markets. However, unfamiliar lands that have not yet adopted neoliberalism become the Other persistently, to provide a powerful discursive space for the promotion of free market ideas. Simon Springer, a geography scholar, expounds Spivak’s insight that ‘the neoliberal want their economic ideals to become so deeply entrenched in society that they would become like oxygen; only then could transcendence to a utopian ‘global village’ be properly signified’.⁹ Thus, neoliberalism should be located at the core of society and cannot be blamed for any social harm. Nevertheless, growing recognition of neoliberalisation’s role in social problems, such as rising inequality and continuing poverty, hints at controversies and contradictions behind its smokescreen. The same discourse has created the Other inside Korean society in a similar manner. Here, I clarify two key terms in understanding the context: ‘neoliberalism’ and ‘multiculturalism’. Since the latter is based on the former, I first outline the historical context and discourse around neoliberalism in Korea.

He’s on Duty takes place in 2010, but the origin of neoliberalism in South Korea goes back to 1997. Jesook Song, an expert on neoliberal social governing, points out that the combination of the end of military dictatorship in 1987 and the full implementation of neoliberal governing tactics following the Asian financial crisis in 1997 consolidated financial capital (merchant

8 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’, in *Marxism and the Interpretations of Culture*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg and Cary Nelson, Macmillan Education, Basingstoke, 1988, p. 280.

9 Simon Springer, ‘Neoliberalism’, in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Critical Geopolitics*, ed. Klaus Dodds, Merje Kuus and Joanne Sharp, Routledge, New York, 2016, p. 157.

and money capital) as a dominant capitalist force over industrial capital.¹⁰ The amplification of neoliberalism in South Korea entailed ‘rendering job/education markets and labour power precarious, putting the burden on the individual, and providing little social protection, thus producing extreme polarisation and social inequality’.¹¹ In the process of opening the country’s markets to free trade and restructuring its industrial and financial systems, many manufacturing companies closed down and an information technology-based service industry and financial markets were established.¹² Keith B. Wagner adds, ‘any cooperation between workers and capitalists ended by the late 1990s, as the strident but tenuous connection that labour and the middle classes once shared with the privately run companies known as *chaebols* was eviscerated in 1997–98’.¹³ This attests to the widening gap between the poor and the rich. Market-induced competition during the process of neoliberalisation in South Korea has disrupted existing social systems and changed social order.

Meanwhile, South Korea takes the position of sub-empire or semi-periphery to the Third World, such as developing Asian countries. Jin-kyung Lee, a Korean diasporic cultures expert, elaborates the ambivalent position of South Korea as a neocolony of the United States since its trusteeship rule following independence from Japan. From 1990, the position of South Korea shifted to ‘sub-empire’, or ‘semi-periphery’, which refers to an intermediate state between a developed country and the Third World.¹⁴ While South Korea is still less developed than the United States, it is relatively more advanced in the market economy system than some neighbouring Asian nation-states and has therefore become a new locus of labour import, attracting workers mostly from Southeast Asia and South Asia. As a result, South Korea mimics imperial practices in other late-developing countries by ‘promulgating economic development expertise, exploiting low-wage labour, enjoying vast markets for Korean commodities, and dispatching overseas Christian missionaries’.¹⁵ This fact alerts us to consider the action taken by South Korean society to those changes.

Multiculturalism is a state-led response to such global changes, as the government needs to institute policies that attract foreign, low-wage workers for the development of South Korea’s economy. As South Korea started to accommodate immigrant labourers, the country entered a period of transition from being uniraical to becoming a multiracial country. However, the multiculturalism promoted by the South Korean government arouses controversy. Iain Watson astutely points out the contradiction of multiculturalism and the duplicity of multicultural policies enacted by the South Korean government. He argues that ‘multiculturalism is no more than loyal to secular republican ideals rather than to minority cultural and group

10 Jesook Song, ‘Introduction’, in *New Millennium South Korea: Neoliberal Capitalism and Transnational Movements*, ed. Jesook Song, Routledge, NY, 2010, p. 2.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 2.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 3

13 Keith B. Wagner, ‘Fragments of Labor: Neoliberal Attitudes and Architectures in Contemporary South Korean Cinema’, in *Neoliberalism and Global Cinema: Capital, Culture, and Marxist Critique*, ed. Jyotsna Kapur and Keith B. Wagner, Routledge, New York, 2011, p. 219.

14 Jin-kyung Lee, ‘Nation, Subimperialism and Transnational Labor: Immigrant Laborers in South Korea and Korean Immigrants in US,’ *Hwanghae Review*, vol. 50, 2006, pp. 286–7.

15 Song, p. 2.

rights *per se*.¹⁶ Within this context, multiculturalism that states respect towards the differences between cultures has a risk of stereotyping those cultures. In the case of multicultural policies pursued by the South Korean government, there is a problem in that they are directly tied to South Korea's position in the global economy. Watson argues that multiculturalism might be an expedient response to global migration patterns and labour shortages rather than an attempt to bring about substantive change in national treatment of foreigners.¹⁷ There exists a tension when a government that aspires to liberal democratic republicanism with equality between cultures simultaneously wants to preserve cultural purity and superiority. Indeed, in South Korea some immigrants and NGOs criticise the multiculturalism espoused by the government as no more than 'tokenism', expressing scepticism about the motivation and logic behind words like 'inclusivity' and 'diversity' that the government spreads.¹⁸ They claim that the multiculturalism promoted by the government means assimilation and cultural homogenisation into a *privileged* and *homogeneous* Korean society.¹⁹ This would result in the disappearance of cultural diversity. As a consequence, the rhetoric of multiculturalism effaces the continuing and substantive issues of economic, political and cultural inequality for migrants and foreigners.

Such controversial multicultural policies imply that immigrant labourers in South Korea suffer from several problems; generally speaking, the abuse of labourers' rights and the exclusion of their own culture. Immigrant labourers constitute a large proportion of the South Korean population, but South Korean society still hesitates to accept them as Korean. According to the Ministry of Justice, by March 2016 the number of 'resident aliens' in the Republic of Korea reached 1,943,576 and accounted for 3.77 per cent of the national population.²⁰ If we examine their status, the rate of unregistered foreigners accounts for 41.62 per cent—almost half the population of resident aliens.²¹ Even among registered foreigners who were legally permitted to work (610,080), 92 per cent (561,450) work in low-skill, low-wage jobs.²² They engage in jobs such as domestic, farm, and manual work—so-called 3D (dangerous, dirty and difficult) tasks. As the number of foreign labourers has consistently increased, the government of Korea has tried to improve their treatment. In 2007 it abolished the Industrial Trainee System, which had been criticised domestically and internationally for violating labourers' human rights.²³ This system was replaced by the Employment Permit System, which authorises corporations to hire a certain number of foreign workers if they

16 Iain Watson, 'Multiculturalism in South Korea: A Critical Assessment', *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, vol. 40, no. 2, 2010, p. 339.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 338.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 340.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 342.

20 Ministry of Justice, *Monthly Report on Immigration and Foreign Policy Statistics*, March 2016, p. 4, http://www.immigration.go.kr/doc_html/attach/imm/f2016//20160428254369_1_1.hwp.files/Sections1.html

21 Ministry of Justice, p. 18.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 25.

23 Yoon-Cheol Choi, 'A Study on the Changing and Prospective of Migration Law in Korea', *Ilkam Law Review*, vol. 33, 2016, p. 510.

could not hire domestic labourers.²⁴ The new law has been judged an improvement. Under the former system, private organisations took charge of managing the workforce and abused their authority; with the new law the government became responsible for introducing and managing foreign labourers, and for ridding the new system of corruption. Nonetheless, the new system sticks to the principle of rotational work, which hampers the ability of foreign labourers to settle in South Korea. Furthermore, it focuses on meeting the demands of employers, and restricts labourers in a numbers of ways including their ability to change workplace.²⁵ Gil-Soo Han outlines the most common predicaments immigrant labourers have faced:

Undocumented migrant workers are particularly vulnerable to a tactic of delayed salary payment as the employers abuse the workers' undocumented status, which may lead to deporting the undocumented at any moment if reported by their employer or found by an immigration officer. Other types of discrimination and problems that migrant workers experience include inadequate protection from industrial injuries and consequential treatment, violence, murder, passport confiscation and strict surveillance of their personal lives. At a societal level, 'racial discrimination' in everyday life is experienced, as well as a lack of opportunities for employment and education for foreigners.²⁶

The status of immigrant workers in South Korea, then, remains unstable.

South Korea has enacted policies with strong nationalistic and disciplinary approaches to maintain order and attractiveness to global capital, and to stop capital flight. This is paradoxical in the age of a global free market that weakens the borders between nations and nationalism. Haksoon Yim contends that such a paradox stems from the historical fact that one of Korea's most noticeable characteristics is its long and continuous existence as a racially unified country.²⁷ In spite of numerous invasions and occupation, Koreans have remained remarkably homogenous. The consciousness constructed by ethnic oneness has remained even though Korea was divided into two countries. This characteristic has become an essential basis for modern Korean nationalism, developing as it did in reaction to foreign imperialism and occupation during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This cultural nationalism has indeed provided a significant background to Korean cultural identity policy since.²⁸ This explains the way cultural policies in South Korea are intertwined with strengthening cultural (national) identity. Since the 2008 global credit crunch, states across the world have confronted increasing grassroots resistance to globalisation. This has taken the form of strikes and social and ethnic unrest.²⁹ In Korea, the globalisation of South Korea is running towards its peak, and resistance against it has proportionately become more prominent. Watson asserts, 'the protests are responding to the unequal nature of but also focusing attention on the issue of what kind

24 Ibid., p. 517.

25 Ibid., p. 518.

26 Gil-Soo Han, 'Migrant Workers: The Modern Slavery', *Nouveau-riche Nationalism and Multiculturalism in Korea: A Media Narrative Analysis*, Routledge, NY, 2016, p. 67.

27 Haksoon Yim, 'Cultural Identity and Cultural Policy in South Korea', *The International Journal of Cultural Policy*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2002, p. 38.

28 Ibid., p. 38.

29 Watson, p. 342.

of nationalism South Korea should have'.³⁰ The film *He's on Duty* is situated in this context. By analysing the ambivalent representation of migrant workers in the film, this article will examine the possibility and the limit of immigrant workers' challenge to Korean nationalist-chauvinism and their struggle for coexistence.

Ambivalent representation of immigrant labourers in *He's on Duty*

Taesik Bang, the main character in the film, is a Korean low-class worker. He has a hard time getting a job because of his poor qualifications and humble education. One day, while sitting beside a group of immigrant workers, he is mistaken for one of them because of his appearance and an employer pays him a daily wage. After that, he pretends to be a Bhutanese illegal worker named Banga and succeeds in getting a job. His co-workers at first treat him with apprehension, but as he helps them work and fight for improving their rights, sometimes intentionally and sometimes accidentally, they become sincere friends. Though Banga cheats them and flees with their money, he goes back to them and participates in a singing contest for foreigners. In the end, they win first prize and reconcile.

The film effectively conveys Banga's and immigrant labourers' poor economic situations and working environment through visual settings. Since film is a visual media, *mise-en-scene* elements including the location selection, costume and make-up, and lighting contribute to the impact of representation on the audience. Yoon Hee Kang stresses the importance of analysing visual elements when studying film:

Filmmakers put much effort in visual elements to make a scene connote their status towards certain issues. Even though they do not intend anything special in characters' look but just set them verisimilarly, society and culture influence people's appearance. Hence, the audience can figure out the social attitude towards certain issues through analysing visual aspects of the film.³¹

He's on Duty starts by displaying factory roofs, emitting smoke to a cloudy sky (see Figure 1). The opening scene concisely shows that factory workers are at risk of being exposed to hazardous and noxious substances. The inner structure of a factory where Banga and the migrants work also contributes to depicting the oppressive working environment. A supervisor, who ceaselessly uses violent language towards the immigrants and sexually harasses female labourers, works on a deck located higher than the migrant workers' workplace. From the deck, the supervisor can see them working at a single glance and give orders (see Figure 2). This spatial setting visually displays the vertical hierarchy between a Korean employer and migrant workers. In addition to the site, the workers' appearance highlights their marginalised status. Their clothes and hairstyle are shabby and outdated, as if they had no time or money to care for their look. Their appearance contrasts with that of the Korean workers in the same factory; though the difference is not that striking, at least Korean workers are dressed in tidy black jackets and up-to-date attire. The cold weather and dim lighting correspond to the immigrant workers' arduous lives. The setting emphasises that Banga and the immigrant labourers share a poor economic situation and working environment, and their similar economic status inspires several controversies.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Yoon Hee Kang, 'A Study on Representation of Immigrants in Multicultural Films—Focused on <Bang-Ga? Bang-Ga!>,' *Global Studies Education*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2014, pp. 71–2.



Figure 1 Factories emitting smoke in the opening scene of *He's on Duty*
Source: *He's on Duty*, 2010, dir. S. Yook, prod. K. Bok-Geun; screenshot 2:51



Figure 2 A supervisor overseeing labourers from a higher deck
Source: *He's on Duty*, 2010, dir. S. Yook, prod. K. Bok-Geun; screenshot 49:16



Figures 3–4 The contrast in clothing worn by Korean workers (left) and immigrant labourers (right)

Source: *He's on Duty*, 2010, dir. S. Yook, prod. K. Bok-Geun; screenshots 50:30 and 52:29



Figures 5–7 Southeast Asian immigrant workers introduce themselves to Banga

Source: *He's on Duty*, 2010, dir. S. Yook, prod. K. Bok-Geun; screenshots, 1:00–2:17

The fact that Banga and the immigrant labourers share a common economic background shows that victims of global capitalism in South Korea are not only ethnic South Koreans. Globalisation in South Korea increased the rate of domestic youth unemployment. The movie shows that Banga comes to Seoul from Geumsan, a small farming village, to make money. This illustrates the economic gap between the country and the city. Furthermore, the main reason Banga fails to get a job is that his qualifications are meagre compared to other applicants who received an international education. The film criticises a capitalised Korea where the gap between the rich and the poor is aggravated. For example, Banga's phone call with his mother uncovers the dark side of global capitalism in Korean society using sarcasm. To appease his mother, he lies that he got a job in an international corporation, thus satirising his work in the guise of a Bhutanese immigrant worker. The satire culminates in Banga's bluster when he says: 'global neoliberalism chose me as an advance guard for upholding it!' This irony amplifies his sadness and at the same time intensifies the criticism of the aftermath of globalisation in neoliberal Korea.

The way Banga is represented emphasises that he is an economic and regional minority in Korean society as well as among his immigrant labourer co-workers. Byungchul Na sharply mentions that '[b]oth Banga and his immigrant coworkers belong to the marginal group in Korean society; both of them are aliens in Seoul who left their hometown to escape poverty'.³² Banga's singing 'For Five-Hundred Years', a traditional Korean folksong, evokes the nostalgia he and his co-workers share and leads each immigrant worker to call their families in their own language. This mode of representation reoccurs in the conversation between Banga and Jangmi about their hometowns. Describing their

32 Byung Chul Na, 'Postcolonial in the Globalized Age and Transnational Solidarity', *The Journal of Literary Theory*, vol. 49, 2012, p. 47.

hometowns, Banga forgets to pretend and speaks in Chungcheong dialect, and Jangmi translates his 'smoke from cooking rice' to 'fog', a Vietnamese expression, and reveals her Vietnamese name. Nostalgia hovers among Banga and his co-workers and help them sympathise with one another. This scene develops into the scene where Banga regrets his betrayal of the immigrant workers after he sees the smoke from chimneys over a village during his flight. These scenes suggest that their companionship stems from their common backstories in which they had to leave their hometown for the developed world (Seoul or South Korea), in accordance with the occasional exchange of human capital in the world of globalisation.

The camera angle and movement in this film captures the hierarchy between characters. It efficiently visualises the economic equivalence between Banga and his immigrant co-workers. For instance, the camera angle is noticeable in the opening scene where the immigrant workers and Banga introduce themselves one by one (see Figures 5, 6 and 7). All their postures are the same within the fixed camera focus. This arrangement leads the audience to perceive Banga as one of the workers, not distinct from them. Hence, the constant and horizontal angle in this scene implies that Banga's social position is not much different from those of immigrant workers in Korea.

To take another notable instance, the forementioned scene of immigrant workers calling their home is shot by panning, which refers to turning horizontally on a vertical axis. As a result, the screen shows the workers' faces in line (see Figures 8 and 9). This visual effect emphasises that Banga's song elicits the same emotion from Banga and the other immigrant labourers, because their situation is the same.

Besides the technique of panning, the camera angle and movement is used to capture the changing power dynamics between the labourers and their supervisor. At first, Banga and his fellow labourers have to look up to the supervisor, which positions them as the weaker parties. As the story develops, they go up to the deck and demand the supervisor return their deposit. In this scene, there is no height difference between the labourers' eyes and the supervisor's, and the camera captures them in one shot (see Figures 10, 11 and 12). When police officers investigate the supervisor as a result of the protest, Banga and Ali even look down on the supervisor. Consequently, the film prominently presents horizontal and vertical power relations between characters through the use of camera techniques.

On the one hand, locating Banga and immigrant labourers on the same rung within Korean society might cover the issue of immigrant labourers. In the foreground lies the domestic problem of economic inequality in the vicissitudes of capitalisation. The film presents Banga



Figures 8–9 Immigrant workers call home

Source: *He's on Duty*, 2010, dir. S. Yook, prod. K. Bok-Geun; screenshot 31:10–31:14



Figures 10–12 Height differences between labourers and supervisor, shifting with changing power dynamics

Source: *He's on Duty*, 2010, dir. S. Yook, prod. K. Bok-Geun; screenshot 49:16; 75:55; 79:29

speaking actively on behalf of immigrant labourers, which intimates that he and his immigrant co-workers are getting closer to each other. Such portrayals of Banga shed light on elements of his character, like his courage against injustice, which are often overlooked as competencies required by global capitalist systems. This discloses that capitalism generates 'losers' according to the uniform standard in South Korea. However, such a method of disclosure silences immigrant labourers. Jin-Hee Cho points out that 'while the film deserves credit for reporting the mistreatment of migrants, it reiterates the paternalistic representation of them'.³³ To be more specific, the film portrays migrants as innocent and unable to help their dependence on Koreans' charity. Ironically, while Banga's identification with his migrant co-workers unveils the status of Korean poor in their own society as not always any better than those from developing countries, it may conflate the immigrant labourers' difficulty in Korean society as a general shortcoming of capitalisation which is spread all over the world. It blurs the specific context of the immigrant labourers' plight in Korean society.³⁴ To sum up Kang's claim, the movie uses the immigrant labourers' lives as the material to examine the domestic aftermath of global capitalisation.

On the other hand, the film reveals how neoliberal countries' reliance on globalised human capital to function undermines the preconceived notion of nationhood. The existence of foreign labourers who participate in maintaining neoliberal South Korea requires Koreans to reassess their assumptions about what it means to be Korean, which is mostly based on sharing the same blood. Banga and the immigrant labourers share the same emotions and form a close bond despite their ethnic and cultural differences, as we examined above. The film deals with unstable national identity more concretely as it displays the fluidity and performativity of identity itself. Given the overarching idea of fluid identity, it may not do justice to this film if we dismiss its struggle to re-evaluate immigrant labourers as members of Korea. Therefore, Banga's identification with immigrant labourers who are a marginal community within Korea broadens the audience's eyes to the situations that result from the seamy side of capitalism in Korea. The film sheds light on circumstances of immigrant workers that had been more darkly enveloped in the shadows than that of nationals.

Banga's disguise demonstrates the performativity of identity and allows the director to ask the question: 'Is identity solely determined by biological factors such as a man's appearance?' Spivak redefines identity by positing that 'we "write" a running biography with life-language rather than only word-language in order to "be"'.³⁵ Although Banga's nationality is Korean,

³³ Cho, p. 394.

³⁴ Kang, p. 89.

³⁵ Spivak, 'In a Word: Interview'. p. 4.

when he names himself 'Banga' and performs this identity with an awkward tone and innocent grin he is treated the same as other immigrant workers. In other words, performance is inscribed on the body and constitutes a person's identity. In the context of the film, the body is the unsound ground of discrimination against immigrant workers. People conventionally think that the inherent otherness of the Other manifests itself through appearance and action, but actually it is the other way around. We project the concept of otherness onto a person's actions, identify them as the Other and finally decide our attitudes toward them. More specifically, when Banga acts like a Bhutanese person, high school boys tease and insult him, yelling at him to 'go back to your country, you bastard!' or stating that 'we need to have pity for him, because he came from a poor country'. However, as soon as Banga stops acting and confronts them with fluent Korean, they apologise to him with polite Korean. This demonstrates that the characteristics of the immigrant labourers can be acquired through acting. Another example is that although his appearance is similar to that of a South Asian, when he presents himself as a Korean, he has trouble in his work because of his incompetence and lack of qualifications. When he works as a Bhutanese worker, however, he is discriminated against not because of his incompetence, but because of his nationality. This illustrates that makes a man 'Other' is social treatment to his action.

The performativity of identity suggests the possibility that multiple identities can coexist. In fact, the name 'Banga' itself reveals that the character simultaneously practices multiple identities. On one hand, he uses the name to disguise himself as a Bhutanese worker, but on the other hand, in Korean it literally means that he is from the family of Bang, which speaks to his Korean origin. To take another instance, he identifies with other immigrant workers despite his different nationality. During the climax of the film, it is Banga who starts to sing a Bangladeshi song in the singing contest for foreigners, which other workers join in and end up singing together. In the end, Banga completes his identification with immigrant workers. Banga nullifies the solidity of identity by crossing between two identities, the result of recognising that identity is coded and constituted within society.

In addition, the immigrant workers' translation of Korean culture multiplies cultures in Korea. Kang criticises the film for tucking the immigrant labourers into a generalised group under the name of 'immigrant labourers', writing:

The immigrant labourers have diverse nationalities, but the film dismisses the confusion, conflict and negotiation between them which is likely to happen because of their all different cultural backgrounds. In addition to it, though the film captures their personalities to some extent, it elides their lives other than their work in the factory and practice for the singing contest. This representation promotes the image of immigrant labourers as a mass, obscuring their individualities.³⁶

However, sporadically but unremittingly throughout the film the audience is shown that the immigrant workers have different cultural backgrounds. The film equally represents each workers' culture with Korean culture as they express the same sentiment in their unique languages in the scene where Banga sings 'For Five-Hundred Years': Bangladeshi, Indonesian, Nepali, Uzbek and Vietnamese. This scene refuses to homogenise immigrant labourers. Although the scene is dominated by nostalgia, it catches the characters' different desires and emotions. Michael is angry with his fiancée, not merely missing her; Charlie does not call his family but instead looks at a Korean girl. The distinct portrayal of each character does

36 Kang, pp. 79–80.

not subvert the hierarchy between cultures, but presents the horizontal coexistence of the cultures.³⁷ This is where this film differentiates itself from multiculturalism, or pluralism, which Spivak criticises. She calls pluralism, ‘repressive tolerance without interest in changing social relations’; in other words, patronising favour.³⁸ In contrast, the film acknowledges cultural differences but denies any stratification between them.

The film consistently tries to highlight individual and cultural differences between the immigrant workers. It presents the marked differences between the products and traditions of each immigrant’s culture. For example, Jangmi becomes angry when Banga gives her pants as a gift, because in Vietnam that would mean a sort of flirting. Further, when Ali and Michael have an argument, Ali curses him: ‘You Uzbek jerk!’ (see Figure 13). Right before this, the camera intentionally focuses on the cover of Jangmi’s book on which Vietnamese words are written (see Figure 14).

Another scene that underlines cultural difference in a positive manner is the Vietnamese gathering. Here, Jangmi wears tidy traditional Vietnamese clothes, contrary to her tattered work clothes from her daily life. The scene uses more light than other scenes, which are mostly dim and dark. The brighter screen helps the audience form a positive impression of Vietnamese culture. This arrangement of scenes not only stresses the diversity among the immigrant workers’ identities, but also suggests to the audience that the labourers themselves are conscious of the diversity. The film pays more attention to the equal representation between Korean and other Asian cultures, but still it accentuates the diversity among immigrant labourers’ culture sufficiently to prevent them from being labelled, together simply as ‘immigrant labourers’. Such representation evades de-individualising their cultural identities, thus avoiding the risk of essentialism.

The film also deals with each immigrant worker’s personal background. Ali married his wife, who is in Bangladesh, over the phone because he was working in Korea; he



Figure 13 The camera focuses on Jangmi’s book, written in Vietnamese
Source: *He’s on Duty*, 2010, dir. S. Yook, prod. K. Bok-Geun; screenshot 21:39

37 More examples found in the film represent immigrant workers’ culture equally respectable as that of Korea: a policeman’s recognition that his name is as difficult for an immigrant worker to pronounce as the worker’s is for him; Charlie’s protest to police officers that Nepal has electricity and television; and when the workers call out their original name as well as the name they use Korea in the singing contest.

38 Spivak, ‘In a Word: Interview’, pp. 18–19.



Figure 14 Ali and Michael argue

Source: *He's on Duty*, 2010, dir. S. Yook, prod. K. Bok-Geun; screenshot 21:41

wants to bring her to Korea. Jangmi raises her Vietnamese son on her own and wants to get married to a Korean man, so her son will get Korean nationality. Charlie came to Korea to support his big family in Nepal. As Kang points out, they all have backgrounds that epitomises immigrant workers and that sound familiar, even banal, to Koreans.³⁹ Nevertheless, their typical backstories make them more rounded characters. Moreover, their stories introduce the controversies that have formed around multiculturalism in Korea. Jangmi's story reflects the exclusiveness of the multicultural policy that means at least one family member has to be Korean if the family is to be considered multicultural, a policy that hinders the settlement in Korea of the immigrant workers and their families.⁴⁰ The film is saved from essentialism by portraying the cultural and personal diversity of the immigrant workers. It also avoids the sort of pluralism where diverse minority cultures are portrayed with condescending charity, in that the film asserts the equality between cultures as it represents identity as a product of social coding. While the film offers an ambivalent representation of immigrant labourers, it makes prominent efforts to defy the solidity of essential identity. The following discussion elaborates the active gesture of this film towards establishing immigrant labourers as the agents of their own culture, in lieu of forcibly assimilating them into Korean culture.

³⁹ Kang, p. 80.

⁴⁰ Geon-soo Han, 'Korea's Transition into Multicultural Society and the Immigrant Laborers', *Philosophy & Reality*, vol. 91, 2011, p. 29. According to Han, although immigrant labourers had led the discourse of multiculturalism in South Korea, the government's concern shifted to marriage immigrants. Although the government judged it necessary to systemise the policy on immigrants in the era of globalisation, they felt the need to institute policy on immigrant laborers because many of them were unregistered. In contrast, the government deemed marriage immigrants less offensive to social homogeneity because their spouses were legally Koreans. Opponents claim the government's attitude demonstrates the contradiction of Korean multicultural policy.

Challenge to monolithic national culture and exercising liberty

Immigrant workers appropriate songs and insist that freedom and equality are the foundations for coexistence between cultures. Judith Butler and Gayatri Spivak analyse the way former US President George W. Bush's claim that 'the national anthem can only be sung in English' restricts the nation to a linguistic majority. It is this moment, they assert, that the national majority defines the nation with their own standards and activates the norm of exclusion, deciding who has a right to exercise freedom, because that exercise depends upon certain acts of language.⁴¹ In this context, Mexican labourers singing the US national anthem in Spanish not only ask how just the standard of defining the nation is, but also declare their right for equal liberty. These labourers actually voice themselves even though they do not have the legal right to do so. To be more specific, the labourers' presence in the United States is illegal, they have no right of free speech under the law; still, they are speaking (or singing) freely and in doing so they unveil the distance between the language in which the anthem was originally intended to be sung and that which they are using.⁴² In this way, the labourers demand acknowledgement of the difference between people who sing the same national anthem. In the same way, *He's on Duty* throws light on immigrant workers' culture as opposed to the dominant Korean culture—not to subvert the hierarchy, but to argue for the possibility cultures can coexist.

Butler and Spivak's analysis can also be applied to *He's On Duty*, when Banga and immigrant workers practice the song 'Chan Chan Chan' for the 'singing contest for foreigners in Korea', Because 'Chan Chan Chan' is a pop song, it could be argued it does not represent nationality as a national anthem does, despite its popularity. However, the film elevates this song to the status of a national song through Yongchul's explanation that 'Trot music [the genre of this song] is Korean's soul, Korean's life and "Chan Chan Chan" is the epitome of it'. The song manifests Koreanness through producing a kind of Korean sentiment and asserting that Korean people naturally feel it. The song delimits the quality of Koreanness. Immigrant workers translate the lyrics and participate in the Korean sentiment of the song, which leads to emphasising plurality without homogenising difference. They refuse to accept the assumed universal 'Koreanness' of the song. They keep interfering with Yongchul's lesson about the lyrics and raise objections to the Korean sentiment and how it is expressed in the song. For instance, when discussing the line 'when the sadness billows as if smoke', Charlie comments, 'but my mom said people keep their sadness in their hearts, so it does not rise up'. Such comments by immigrant labourers undermine the presumed universality of Koreanness which is essential to the single, uniform identity of Korean nation(alism). The universal national identity Korea promotes implies that Korean society does not approve of heterogeneity among 'aliens'; so the Korean policy towards aliens centres on assimilating them into the majority culture. Accordingly, the immigrant workers' challenge to the naturalness of Korean

41 Judith Butler and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Who Sings the Nation-state?: Language, Politics, Belonging*, Seagull Books, London and New York, 2007, pp. 59–60.

42 *Ibid.*, p. 62.

identity exposes the Procrustean aspect of Korean multicultural policy. However, the immigrant workers in this film construe the sentiment of the song in their own way, rather than choosing between the extremes of assimilation or exclusion. After intervening in Yongchul's lesson several times, the immigrant workers even translate the line '*jululuk*'—Korean onomatopoeia of the sound of falling rain—into each of their mother tongues. They share the sentiment of the song by inserting translated lines. Hence, they multiply the definition of Koreanness and challenge the hidebound national culture. Their translation is comparable to Mexican labourers singing the US national anthem in Spanish. Reminiscent of Butler and Spivak's argument, the immigrant workers' demand for linguistic differences to be accepted opens the way for their right to exercise freedom, given that certain verbal acts enable that exercise.⁴³ Ultimately, both Banga's co-workers and Mexican labourers question whether it is just to define a nation and nationhood only on the basis of people having the same blood or, in this case, the same language.

When the immigrant labourers sing their own version of the song in jail, with translated lyrics and Rajah's beatbox added, the effect of their dissent is amplified. When Banga and Yongchul misappropriate the immigrant labourers' money, Yongchul reports their illegal immigration to the police. As a result, they are imprisoned and fear they might be deported. Here, the prison embodies the state of immigrant workers as non-legitimate but still vulnerable to the power of the Korean government. In this place, deprived of all kinds of rights, their singing is already the exercise of freedom against deprivation. Moreover, they undermine the justification for their imprisonment by pointing to the discordance between the legal realisation of freedom and the practical exercise of it, which the Korean government was not aware of or which it chose to ignore.

'Camilla's Song', a Bangladeshi song, performs the same function as the translated version of 'Chan Chan Chan'. Though the immigrant workers practised 'Chan Chan Chan' for the contest, after being silent on the stage for a while they sing 'Camilla's Song' instead. In fact, the singing contest is South Korea's strategy to encourage cultural assimilation and mitigate conflicts arising from cultural differences. The contest promotes the immigrant workers' surrender to the superior Korean culture, and implies their heterogeneity cannot be accepted in Korean society. In this fashion, Korea constructs an exclusive and identical culture. When Banga says 'of thirteen contests, twelve gave a prize to teams who sung Trot' clarifies that the contests aims not so much to respect the immigrants' own culture as to advertise unitary Korean culture to the others. Hence, the initial silence of Banga and his co-workers indicates their awareness that the subaltern cannot be represented in this Korean frame of representation. Then, they try to voice themselves and call for plurality in the nation more actively by singing 'Camilla's song'. That they perform a Bangladeshi song despite the tacit rule that participants should sing a Korean song signifies the translation of Korean culture into their own language. They dismantle the authority of the single dominant culture and simultaneously claim equality and freedom.

The spatial setting, *noraebang* (Korean karaoke room), is also significant in considering how the immigrant workers use songs as resistance. Yongchul's *noraebang* functions as a location of temporary liberation for the marginalised. It is the place through which Banga

43 Ibid., pp. 59–60.



Figure 15 Immigrant labourers enjoy themselves in *noraebang*
Source: *He's on Duty*, 2010, dir. S. Yook, prod. K. Bok-Geun; screenshot 46:03

and Yongchul want to fulfil their dream of making a lot of money and returning to their hometown. *Noraebang* even embraces immigrant labourers' wishes as they start practicing for the contest there. How they sing and eat there satires company dinners, a common work culture for Korean businessmen. Given that *noraebang* is the most common place for company dinners, the scene of immigrant workers enjoying their time in *noraebang* indicates that they need to be treated the same as Korean workers. Thus, it is ironic that Yongchul plots to embezzle money from immigrant workers in *noraebang*. However, as Banga and his co-workers sing 'Camilla's Song' instead of 'Chan Chan Chan'—as a more active form of resistance—they truly sympathise with one another and form a tighter friendship out of *noraebang*.

The camera captures *noraebang* as a horizontal place. As discussed earlier, the film noticeably uses camera angles and movements to show the different social status of characters. The director uses panning to display the horizontal relationship between Banga and his immigrant co-workers. When capturing *noraebang*, the camera is mostly located at the corner so that it sees the aisle obliquely. This set up underscores the flat arrangement of rooms along the aisle. This horizontal place provides a stark contrast to the factory, which symbolises a vertical hierarchy. The way the film displays *noraebang* accentuates its function as the place of liberation.

The ending of the film reinforces the ambivalent attitude it has towards immigrant labourers. Despite portraying immigrant workers' culture as without hierarchy while showing their resistance throughout the film, the ending does not directly suggest the workers have improved lives. Instead, it portrays them enjoying riding motorcycles together after winning the contest. This dreamlike ending confirms the film's position towards the issue of immigrant labourers and expresses to the audience how difficult it is for immigrant workers' situation in Korean society to be improved. Still, the ending does suggest it is possible for a transnational bond to occur between proletariat in the era of global neoliberalism.

Conclusion

He's on Duty provides an ambivalent representation of immigrant labourers in South Korea. The film points out that from an economic point of view, both the domestic poor and migrant labourers are located in the same stratum in society. This portrayal can obscure the immigrant workers' hardship and instead highlight how Koreans have suffered from rapid globalisation. At the same time, the cross-cultural camaraderie between Banga and his migrant co-workers,

which originated from their similar situations, asks the audience to redefine Koreanness. This question challenges the concept of a predetermined and solid national identity. Banga's double identity of Korean and Bhutanese shows how identity is a performance. The performativity of identity suggests the possibility that multiple identities can coexist. Immigrant workers under this mobilising identity declare their cultures as coexisting with the dominant Korean culture by translating common sentiments in each of their own languages. In addition to the agency of culture, this film restores immigrant workers' voice of resistance, as they strive for equality and freedom by translating Korean songs in their own languages. Thus, this film captures the reality of neoliberal Korean society, while also exploring the possibility of the coexistence within it of multiple identities and cultures.

If we remind ourselves of Butler and Spivak's argument that freedom is performative, an effect is produced by declaring freedom against authority's preclusion.⁴⁴ This performative act in a public sphere identifies a gap between the legal realisation of freedom and its practical exercise into public discourse in such a way the gap can be mobilised. In this manner, the film explores the possibility and necessity exercising freedom and equality in new ways.⁴⁵ Considering the public nature and the popularity of film as a medium, this movie also inserts this gap into public discourse. Therefore, *He's on Duty* participates in exploring the possibility that immigrant workers can be accepted and coexist with ethnic Koreans in Korean society.

About the author

Sina Kim received her Master's degree in English Language and Literature from Yonsei University, Republic of Korea, in 2016.

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