

**Ranks & Files: Corporate Hierarchies, Genres of Management,
and Shifting Control in South Korea's Corporate World**

by

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A doctoral program is inexorably linked to the document – this one – that summarizes the education, research, and development of a student and their ideas over the course of many years. The single authorship of such documents is often an aftereffect only once a text is completed. Indeed, while I have written all the words on these pages and am responsible for them, the influences behind the words extend to many people and places over the course of many years whose myriad contributions must be mentioned.

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Preface: Note on Confidentiality

This study was conducted in accordance with the University of Michigan's Institutional Review Board standards for human subject research. Personal names and company names of those who have been a part of the study have been anonymized throughout the dissertation. I have not anonymized company names or public figures where taken from newspapers, reports, academic publications, or common knowledge shared by informants.

Because of the nature of corporate ethnography, even anonymized details can be indirectly traceable and hence jeopardize other attempts to anonymize sources. Furthermore, in South Korea, as in other countries with large corporate cultures, there is considerable interest in information from competitors or even within one's own company. Revealing information could inadvertently risk much of the work conducted by my informants. Protecting such concerns was part of my daily work as an intern at the "Sangdo" Group. I have made considerable attempts to protect this information without sacrificing analytical focus or sociological accuracy.

In this dissertation, I have adopted four stylistic methods to avoid revealing corporate information that would identify the Sangdo Group, its employees, and certain knowledge practices:

1) Anonymization of informants

Example: "Team Manager Jang"

2) Generalization of specifics

Example: "the corporate tower is located in downtown Seoul"

3) Altered figures

Example: "that year's dividend was \$2.00"

4) Avoidance

Example: identification of major events or details of ongoing projects

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments	ii
Preface: Note on Confidentiality	viii
List of Figures.....	xi
Note on Korean Romanization	xii
Note on Terminology	xiii
Abstract.....	xiv
Introduction: Ranks and Files in Conglomerate Life.....	1
Controlling Towers	1
De-stabilizing the South Korean Conglomerate.....	5
Locating Authority	10
The Semiotics of Hierarchy and Authority in South Korea	17
Genres of Office Life	26
Fieldwork and Research Methods	32
Overview of Dissertation	40
Chapter 1: Managerial Translations.....	45
Held by the Market.....	45
Birth of a Control Tower	50
Humble Experts.....	60
Human Resources Planning and the DRIVE System.....	61
Performance Management and Monthly Reports.....	70
Public Relations and Emblems of Group Identity.....	75
Unifying Managerial Worlds: Monthly Manager Meetings	81
Conclusion: Temporal Horizons	88
Chapter 2: Corporate Hierarchies Revisited	93
Locating Hierarchy.....	93
Awkward Introductions.....	97
Surveying Sangdo	102
Confronting an Internal Hierarchy	110
Stratifying Numbers	119
Conclusion: The Rights of Hierarchy.....	128
Chapter 3: Evaluating Office Interactions: From Flat Titles to 360-degree Feedback	134

Introduction: Overturning (Interactional) Hierarchies	134
Ten-thousand-year managers	136
Changing Titles for a Changing Workplace.....	141
Communicating Cultures of Respect.....	149
Beyond Communication: Reforming Social Behaviors	155
Expert Reforms I: Accumulation Problems	161
Expert Reforms II: 360-Degree Feedback	166
Expert Reforms III: Icons Of Managerial Competence	174
Conclusion: Re-thinking Office Interactions	182
Chapter 4: Working through PowerPoint.....	187
From <i>bogoseo</i> to PowerPoint	187
Histories of PowerPoint	192
PowerPoint and Teamwork	197
PowerPoint and Organizational Knowledge	206
PowerPoint and Decision-making.....	214
PowerPoint Subjects.....	222
Conclusion: PowerPoint in/as the corporation	227
Chapter 5: Distributing Emoluments: The Relational Politics of Salaries, Bonuses, and	
Dividends	231
Distributing Corporate Largess	231
Hoarding Wealth	238
The Structures of Distribution.....	243
Salaries: Technical Concealment and Generic Recognition	245
Performance Bonuses: The Ethics of Proportional Distribution.....	254
Dividends: Coordinating Disclosures, Foreclosing Extortion.....	265
Conclusion: Corporations and the Problem of Surplus	274
Afterword	279
Conclusion	280
Institutional (Semiotic) Orders.....	280
Genres of Reform and Reflexive Corporations.....	285
Language and Corporate Realities	288
Bibliography	291

List of Figures

Figure 1.1: Samsung’s Group Financial Structure.....	47
Figure 1.2: List of Teams in Sangdo Holdings.....	59
Figure 1.3. An Example of Gaejosik	86
Figure 2.1: Decision-Making Stamps Example.....	112
Figure 3.1: Depictions of Angry Managers	139
Figure 3.2: Flat-Title Policies Across Conglomerates.....	143
Figure 3.3: Influence of Hiddinke’s Name Policy on Office Work.....	145
Figure 3.4: Cartoon Depicting KT and SK Name Policies.....	147
Figure 3.5: “Mentoring” Promotion Example	153
Figure 3.6: Cartoon Illustrating the 119 Policy	157
Figure 3.7: Representation of the 360-Degree Survey Process	167
Figure 3.8: Four Types of Survey Questions	169
Figure 3.9: Screenshots from <i>Let It Be</i>	172
Figure 3.10: Four Manager Types	176
Figure 3.11: Recreation of Individual Evaluation.....	178
Figure 3.12: Instructions for Reading Evaluations	180
Figure 4.1: Cartoon about <i>bogoseo</i>	187
Figure 4.2: Decision-Making Folder (Gyeoljaepan).....	192
Figure 4.3: Email Text From Assistant Manager Ji-Soon.	198
Figure 4.4: Slide Sequence of a Powerpoint Report.	208
Figure 4.5: Two Examples of Visual Organization	210
Figure 4.6: Narrative Sequence of a Powerpoint Document	211
Figure 4.7: Two Slides Framing an Organizational Decision.....	213
Figure 5.1: Two Types of Payband Structure	251
Figure 5.2: Wage Policies Making Headlines.....	252

Note on Korean Romanization

This dissertation follows the Revised Romanization format of Korean language romanization. There are three generally accepted modes of transcription for Korean into Roman characters: Yale, McCune-Reischauer (MR), and Revised Romanization (RR). Yale and MR have been the most commonly used in English-language publishing across Korean Studies, anthropology, and linguistics. RR was a new standard issued by the South Korean government in 2000 and is generally used for all government renderings of Korean placenames and person names into English. I have elected to use RR for two reasons: 1) for non-Korean-speaking audiences, for whose reading romanization is ultimately intended, RR consonant distinctions better approximates the morphophonological aspects of Korean consonants, whose articulation shifts among initial, final and intervocalic positions; 2) RR is the form of romanization that South Korean corporations conventionally adopt. For example, the LG corporation's "Jeong-Do" management philosophy (<http://www.lg.com/global/about-lg/our-brand>) would be rendered *ceyngto* in Yale, *chǒngdo* in McCune-Reischauer, and *jeongdo* in Revised Romanization. This selection thus creates some intertextual consistency with the broader research field.

Exceptions to the use of RR are the following: *personal names* which have their own spellings (Lee Kun-hee and not *I geunhui*), *company names* (Samsung and not *samseong*), and *legacy terms* found in English dictionaries, including chaebol, hangul, kimchi or the Korean won, that do not require italicization.

Hard to map in any system for native English speakers are vowels. Vowels represented with single characters (*a, e, i, o, u*) map onto basic cardinal vowels. Double-vowel representations are less intuitive, but can be pronounced in the following way:

<i>ae</i>	[ɛ] or "eh"	<i>wi</i>	[wi] or "wee"
<i>eo</i>	[ɘ] or "au"	<i>oe</i>	[we] or "way"
<i>eu</i>	[u] or "uh"	<i>ui</i>	[ui] or "ee"

Note on Terminology

This is a dissertation about South Korean conglomerates and what are conventionally referred to in English as “chaebol” companies. This term is not neutral in its usage in Korean, however. In this dissertation, I adopt the denotationally generic term “conglomerate” instead of chaebol to refer to the thirty-some corporate groups whose institutional features I am describing. I do this for the following reasons: first, the term “chaebol” while frequently used in English academic accounts and news reporting, is not an accurate translation for “conglomerate.” The more common terms are *daegieop* (large corporation), *bokhabgieob* (conglomerate), or *daegyumo gieobjibdan* (large-scale corporate group). Second, while chaebol was useful to describe the political economy of the 1960s-1980s, it is categorically outdated for today’s political economy. Many large conglomerates in South Korea are not actually chaebol, such as former state-led companies like POSCO and KT, new emerging conglomerates like Naver or Kakao, and more complex global organizations like GM Daewoo. Third, usage of chaebol recapitulates an image of conglomerates as family-controlled and top-down organizations, a usage that has embeds a particularly critical stance in Korean. Fourth, for corporate employees of such companies, *daegieop* or simply *hoesa* (company) are more common ways of describing their places of work.

Abstract

This dissertation analyzes changing practices of hierarchy and authority within South Korean business conglomerates. Corporations are often imagined as persons or brands driven by a basic economic goal of profit-seeking. Internally, however, managerial corporations are complex sites of competing modes of control. This is a salient issue among the leviathan-like conglomerates of South Korea where their economic clout pervades social and political life but is elusive to pin down internally. South Korean business conglomerates, commonly referred to as chaebol, are depicted as pyramids of control mediated by military-like hierarchies. This dissertation gathers empirical evidence from the headquarters of one conglomerate, the Sangdo Group (a pseudonym), to understand how hierarchy and authority within top-level management operate, through salient political symbols, genres of management, documents, and other office technologies.

Taking an ethnographic perspective on managerial practices reveals that ideas about corporate control are changing in contemporary South Korea. Old political symbols of top-down authority from strong leaders are being devalued, new management techniques implemented, and friendlier work places promoted. These changes do not signal the absence of corporate control, however, but changing sites and modalities through which it operates. The dissertation depicts how within one conglomerate, centralized management was not a given state of affairs but something that had to be created. This was done by creating new forms of expertise in human resources, strategy, public relations, and other departments. The dissertation traces how managers sought to establish their own authorities via their professional knowledge while

navigating complex political terrains internally. Expert managers attempted to embed this authority in scientific analyses, friendly office policies, modern branding, common values, and standardized processes, efforts that redirected authority from other actors or politely concealed their own intents. Key to these efforts was the need to manage how projects themselves were read as authoritative or not. At the same time, new projects generated unexpected outcomes, subjecting expert managers to their own forms of control, creating awkward office interactions, and inadvertently re-instantiating forms of hierarchy old and new. In the broader landscape of South Korean conglomerates, this study suggests that we see corporate management projects as embedded within complex internal encounters often not visible to outsiders.

Ultimately, conglomerate reform remains an elusive goal for regulators, shareholders, owners, employees, and citizens, in South Korea and abroad. Reform is difficult even for managers themselves who often find themselves negotiating their authority within a stream of ongoing discursive activities, from reporting to PowerPointing. Rather than reducing conglomerates to fixed ownership links, organizational structures, or governance mechanisms, this dissertation suggests that manager-based corporations are always marked by concerns over competing sites and modes of control.

Introduction: Ranks and Files in Conglomerate Life

Controlling Towers

From afar, the hundreds of steel and glass corporate buildings that line the Seoul cityscape resemble the towers of a medieval Italian city-state: physical manifestations of private power rendered into vertical symbols of surveillance and status. From up close, they recapitulate a dual sense of public visibility and private enclosure. Walking into the lobbies of these buildings, one finds friendly greeters, grand murals, and streams of employees constantly flowing in and out. In some, you can sip coffee at company cafes alongside sharply dressed employees, peruse company museums, company shops, or libraries, or visit a nearby Starbucks or attached mall, architectural tropes redolent of consumer spaces or public institutions. Such pseudo-public spaces abut, but are hermetically sealed off from, the offices within. Employee ID cards, tapped at the lobby entrances, mark insiders from outsiders, and certain insiders from other insiders. For temporary visitors, polite hostesses at lobby entrances scrupulously keep track of personal information and entrance and exit times. Security guards stand stoically like airport agents monitoring potential intruders while subtly scanning for phone cameras or USB drives, getting in, and leaking out.

Corporate towers can give the impression of a shell encasing a singular corporate entity separating the public domain from a private one. Their pronounced isolation amidst architectural

tropes of visibility and publicity depict them as distinct social actors. Towers embody our images of corporations: ever present, but inaccessible; public gestures but private interests; multiple parts but a singular order. The apparent singularity often assumed to corporate towers in the West has a different valence in South Korea, where buildings may be designed by Western architects, but encode a different kind of actor. Corporate towers do not house single, homogeneous corporate entities; rather they house the nation's conglomerates, whose internal orders are highly stratified. South Korean conglomerates may have singular group names like Samsung or Hyundai, but they are composite phenomena of multiple affiliate or subsidiary companies. Looking closely at the stratification of vertical and horizontal spaces, one gains a greater appreciation for the way these groups are organized: the vertical arrangement of floors organizes administrative units via altitude: a chairman's office is usually on top, followed by a central planning or holding company, then proceeding in a descending order of significance of affiliates. At the Sangdo Group (a pseudonym), the South Korean steel conglomerate at the center of this study, the forty-story Sangdo Tower in downtown Seoul was organized in this way. Even though the outside of the building sported a single "Sangdo" logo visible from afar, the stratification of the floors told a story of an internal order across a dozen subsidiaries. At the top of building was the chairman's office, which sat above Sangdo Holdings, the financial holding company that owns the rest of the subsidiaries. Below the holding company, the subsidiaries were arranged in order of organizational rank, largely according to revenue. The largest subsidiaries at the top occupied multiple floors, followed by subsidiaries that needed just one floor, and finally the smaller subsidiaries that shared floors. At the bottom of this corporate hierarchy was an IT subsidiary unceremoniously tucked on the fifth of the tower, symbolic of its ancillary role within a conglomerate of steel businesses. To enforce this order, the names of each

subsidiary were etched, in a descending list, into the marble in the grand front lobby. To visitor and employee alike, these etchings provided a directional indication of their respective floors as well as a social diagram of their respective positions in the conglomerate's scheme.

One can also read the horizontal arrangement of office space in Korean corporate towers as a matter of rank-based stratification. On any given floor, one can find a social hierarchy of ranks distributed across horizontal space: team units (or departments) are commonly organized into rows or semi-circles overseen by team managers at the edges. Junior-most employees sit the closest to corridors and passersby, managers the furthest. Even though team units have no formal hierarchy internally, employees typically sit in ascending order of individual rank. Outside of team spaces, private offices of executives and directors line outer walls. And higher-up executives may have larger spaces or private secretaries to further offset their position relative to others. At the Sangdo Tower, differences in office rank were translated into a hierarchy of descending transparency: executives had glass walls revealing their internal spaces to other employees, the CEO's office had semi-frosted walls that partially hid his movements, and the owner-CEO Ahn had solid walls that afforded no view inside. The chairman's office was most elaborate in this regard: his "office" occupied its own floor with two separate rooms, one for his own work and another for meeting guests or subsidiary representatives. This kind of office design is less about the efficiency of office design as a model of a factory and coordinated production,¹ and more about the *political* arrangement of ranked employees, managers, and executives mediated by spatial and visual gradations.

¹ C. Wright Mills in his classic work *White Collar* largely envisioned the office as a productive extension of the factory, a site of a singular *productive* order: "the minimum function of an office is to direct and co-ordinate the activities of an enterprise. For every business enterprise, every factory, is tied to some office and, by virtue of what happens there, is linked to other businesses and to the rest of the people. Scattered throughout the political economy, each office is the peak of a pyramid of work and money and decision" (Mills 1971, 190).

Conglomerates like Sangdo can appear to the outsider as bounded entities, seemingly isomorphic with the architectural monoliths that enclose them. To South Koreans who are familiar with conglomerate life, tower formations are highly legible signs of an internal order, like the arrangement of military units in formation. In such arrangements, everything has its relative position, either in an organizational hierarchy of companies or a rank hierarchy of persons. Indeed, these kinds of stratifications seem to have always been as they are. A closer look at office towers, however, reveals some holes among the carefully organized order. The forty-story Sangdo Tower, for example, was constructed only in the early 2010s. Before then, each of the subsidiaries was located at different sites across the South Korean peninsula in their own headquarters buildings. The companies were connected by name and financial ownership, but they were largely autonomous in administration, production, and sales. While most of the subsidiaries now call Sangdo Tower their home, not all the Sangdo subsidiaries have fully relocated to the tower – some maintain core office functions at their regional factories and some CEOs switch between two offices. Only about eight-hundred of the conglomerate’s nearly ten-thousand workforce works in Sangdo Tower, with the large majority working out of Seoul in regional sales offices, research and development centers, or overseas factories. A few of the subsidiaries in the tower, in fact, are not even owned by the group itself: one, Sangdo First is partially owned, but nevertheless occupies a top floor position in the corporate tower. A joint venture is jointly owned with a European manufacturing company. Sangdo and the European company had debates about whether the joint venture should even be called Sangdo JV or JV Sangdo. Looking down the building it turns out that the Sangdo Tower houses more than just Sangdo. The bottom half of the tower houses other conglomerates’ offices who rent office space from Sangdo Holdings as a way to fund the tower itself.

If the steel-encased tower of Sangdo, projecting a clean and stable internal order, is not as stable as it appears, then where or by what means can we locate the conglomerate as an object of analysis? And if corporate towers cannot tell us about the limits of a conglomerate, what role do they play as signs of corporate authority?

De-stabilizing the South Korean Conglomerate

The stability of the South Korean conglomerate has been equally enduring as an image in academic discussions as it has been in monolithic skyscrapers. South Korean conglomerates have long been described as a “stable” institutional forms, both as individual conglomerates and as an organizational type. Conglomerates as a class have been a constant presence in the economic miracle that South Korea witnessed over the course of the late twentieth century. It was precisely their sudden instability in the late 1990s during the financial crisis of 1997 that led to drastic measures to re-stabilize them (and Korean society more broadly (see Song 2009). But this stability extends across modern Korean history. The historian Karl Moskowitz (1989) has traced how elite land-holding families have continuously adapted to different economic forms along shifting political regimes since the end of the Joseon dynasty and through the twentieth century. The organizational type of family-run conglomerates has been a stable piece of the developmental era in the Park Chung-hee dictatorship. The particular kind of conglomerate, or chaebol, form can be said to be the stereotypical economic form of capitalist South Korea, comprised of a core set of features² that differentiate them from other national-organizational

² Kim and Hahn (1989) in a review note that two of the basic features of chaebol are family ownership and diversified business operations, with other common features including: “quantum growth,” monopolistic position in

types such as the *zaibatsu* of Japan (Amsden 1992, Jones and Il 1980, cf. Granovetter 1995) on large business groups cross-culturally}. Accounts for *where* this organizational or institutional stability comes from vary, however. It has been explained by different phenomena: capital control, government control, political capture, kin or regional obligations, elite marriage networks, ideological control, and even cultural predispositions to hierarchy and collectivization. Many accounts simply add these factors together to account for their stability, despite the fact that the seeming institutional stability across forms (“the conglomerate” in the abstract) belies changing dynamics among and within conglomerates (see Chung and Lee 1989).

For the analyst of any singular South Korean conglomerate, one is confronted with a problem: what appear to be quite a stable form are difficult to bound as units of analysis. If a conglomerate does not lie within the bounds of a corporate tower, where might one find “it” and its various components. One might look at financial ownership, office hierarchies, spatial distribution, family management, founder personality, brand image, kin patterns, company values, employment contracts, or industry as representative qualities that link conglomerate units together. However, even these basic choices yield vastly different objects of analysis, not unlike the difficulty of identifying a biological species by genealogical descent, ecological niche, or capacity for co-breeding. Even choosing among comparable terms like “conglomerate” and “chaebol” specifies two different categories, with some group falling into one but not the other.³ Focusing on a single conglomerate group as a case study poses problems: the Samsung Group, for instance, has over seventy affiliate companies with the brand name Samsung, but some are

the market, close relations to the government, centralized structure with top-down decisions, low formalization and standardization, flexible lifetime employment practices, and paternalistic leadership. See also Yoo and Lee (1987).

³ POSCO, the world’s fourth biggest steel corporation, for instance, and one of the country’s largest conglomerates, could not by definition be considered a chaebol, because it has never had family control and has had strong connections to the state.

wholly-owned subsidiaries and some are not, such as Renault Samsung. Formerly Samsung Motors, Renault Samsung was acquired by the French carmaker in 1998 who now owns more than two-thirds of the “Samsung”-branded company. Samsung also has “related” companies like Cheil Industries and Shilla Hotels that are wholly distinct conglomerate groups, but as former spin-offs of Samsung, still have some agnatic and collaborative connections back to the Samsung Group. The tentacles of Samsung extend into so many domains – politics, news media, entertainment, and education – such that that its “organization” as such has been re-labelled a “power web” by one scholar (Kim 2016). Comparing Samsung with the Sangdo Group, which has only a dozen affiliates, would seem to be a simpler case. Yet nailing down who or what the Sangdo Group is also poses problems: one of the group’s major subsidiaries, was an acquisition, renamed Sangdo South, in the mid-2000s, which had previously been part of two other conglomerate groups. Sangdo South is a wholly-owned subsidiary of Sangdo Holdings, but its own organizational history and particular office culture lies in sharp relief to that of other Sangdo subsidiaries. While top managers at the holding company worked to make the group appear as a shared or integrated entity, through branding, group business strategy, human resources policies, shared company values, and even a group mascot, such efforts suggest that the conglomerate group itself was something that *needed* considerable effort to be stabilized – much like the image of the corporate tower.

The problem of organizational boundaries poses large difficulties for considering dimensions of interest, control, or normativity located within, performed by, or traceable back to a single organization or its actors. One solution to thinking about the distributed nature of the corporation is to consider it as materially distributed across multiple sites, a sum of its various functions from production to administration (Rogers 2012, Welker 2014, 5, Ferguson 2005, see

also, Tsoukas 1996). This approach parallels Marilyn Strathern's (1988) insights into the ways that persons are themselves distributed, or "dividual." That is, composite and distributed through gift and exchange practices with others.⁴ Treating the corporation or the conglomerate as distributed, however, reaffirms that disbursed entities, like a headquarters and an overseas subsidiary, are part of the "same" entity, both ontologically coherent and comprised of a shared will or identity. In this view, even as the corporation is enacted differently at different sites by different actors, it still has a self-interest in, say, maintaining power or making profit. While this is useful for understanding how some corporations utilize multiple sites for control (in the form of tax havens or off-shore production) whose actors may have a general sense of creating profit, we cannot be certain that it is the *same* will or interest. Conglomerates make this issue very apparent. They are not themselves legal persons in the same way an individual corporation is⁵ – they are business groups or "super"-corporations that incorporate multiple distinct corporate entities (some publicly traded, some not, some managed, some not). In some cases, these links are formed through direct owning relations, such as a holding company (that owns its subsidiaries) and in other cases through integration, such as by mutual shareholding. Even if we can pinpoint a headquarters, holding company, secretariat, or other kind of central planning office as the core of a conglomerate, it becomes difficult to parse where economic interests in making profits and administrative interests in reducing risk, handling political relations, and managing property are actually situated.

⁴ This approach interestingly has some resemblance to Ronald Coase's famous adage that a corporation is "nexus of contracts"(Coase 1937).

⁵ There is often confusion over what basis, social or juridical to conceptualize corporate persons (cf. Welker 2015). Political philosopher David Ciepley describes the business corporation as a legal person that has four specific rights granted by the state: "(1) the right to own property, make contracts, and sue and be sued, as a unitary entity (a legal 'person'); (2) the right to centralized management of this property; and (3) the right to establish and enforce rules within its jurisdiction *beyond* those of the laws of the land—such as the monastic *Regula Benedicti*, town ordinances, bylaws, and work rules...(4) the right to turn this governing authority and property to the pursuit of private profit" (Ciepley 2013, 141).

But sheer scale is not the only reason a distributed approach to thinking about conglomerates does not suffice. First, any approach that treats corporations as trans-cultural, rational economic actors risks porting over a common economic interest that anthropologists have long been wary of (see Yanagisako [2002:12-14]). Orientations to profit and economic rationality should be treated as historically and culturally diverse (Hirschman 1977). Second, focusing on the material distribution of conglomerates means that the analyst is responsible for assembling the corporation at different sites and different ways of categorizing. This can ignore the fact that individual and collective actors, too, are heavily involved in thinking about what their entities are, how they “scale,” and by what metrics that scale occurs. The scale of a corporation, or a conglomerate is “something that actors make for others” (Latour 2005, 184-85, cited in Oppenheim 2008, 14), not something to be reconstructed by the analyst. Lastly, thinking about corporations as trans-cultural “economic” entities may obscure cultural or sociohistorical attitudes to political authority or political order. Corporations present themselves as intertextually legible as models of the “same” form through common roles such as “vice president” or “chairman,” common textual genres like “consolidated financial statements” as well as common organizational units like the corporate legal person that can be directly translated across languages and legal codes, putatively as tokens of the same type (in much the way we think about states too, cf. Kelly [2001]). Taking this class of lexical items as legible forms of governance, however, ignores what understandings of political membership, authority, and control mean in contemporary South Korea where organizations have been shaped by longer institutional histories dating back to the Joseon dynasty’s bureaucratic regime (1392-1897), the Japanese colonial period (1905-1945), the two dictatorships (1961-1987), and the Asian Financial Crisis (1997-1998). Thus, even as something akin to the same organizational type has

existed for more than half a century, where and how authority within that type has shifted over time.

Locating Authority

Even as conglomerates have had a relatively stable identity as economic actors since the 1960s, we can nevertheless see shifting conceptions of authority over time. In classic corporate theory, South Korean conglomerates have not faced the principle-agent problem (i.e. the separation of ownership and management – see Berle & Means [2007]) (Berle and Means 2007) because of continuous family control and ownership. However, this does not mean there has been a unitary integration of political and economic authority. Indeed, aristocratic families have maintained key positions as owners and figureheads of conglomerates since the colonial period, but they have often been seen as “under” the authority of other powers, such as Japanese development authorities during the colonial period (Eckert 1991, McNamara 1990) or the corrupt comprador politics of the Syngman Rhee era (1948-1960). In the 1960s, business entities came under the scope of dictator Park Chung-hee (1961-1979) who sought to reign in the crony capitalism of the 1950s. Park controlled licenses and capital loans through his Economic Planning Board, while also using various disciplinary mechanisms against conglomerate leaders for profiteering (Kim and Park, Woo-Cumings 1991). South Korea was even labelled “Korea, Inc” (Jones and Il 1980) a riff on “Japan, Inc,” and the heavy role played by bureaucratic planners in controlling industrial policy (cf. Johnson 1982). Under the Chun Do-hwan presidential dictatorship of the 1980s, the large conglomerates encountered a more financially liberalized economy than in the Park era. However, control over them by the state saw a

diminished emphasis on credit allocation and a heavier emphasis on the stock market and interest rate as modalities of control (Lee, Lee, and Lee 2002) (though Chun became known for extorting bribes in the form of political donations from business groups). The late 1990s witnessed the Asian Financial Crisis in which the International Monetary Fund along with institutional investors, activist shareholders, foreign/US capital funds, and domestic regulatory agencies sought to take control over the management of the large conglomerates through debt controls, transparency regulations, weakening of labor unions, and governance reforms (Son 2002, Haggard, Lim, and Kim 2003). Since the 2000s, conglomerates have largely converted to holding company forms, a corporate structure promoted by the government as a proper vessel of financial transparency into subsidiary management for outside viewers. In this way, they came to be partially “managed by the market” in Gerald Davis’s term, at least in terms of their organizational structures (Davis 2009).

More recently, scholars have pointed to how corporate power in South Korea operates not through top-down control but through more diffuse Foucauldian mechanisms. In the neoliberal era, labor populations manage their *own* skills and “specs” navigating the corporate ladder as applicants and employees in a cutthroat labor market (cf. Song 2009, Abelmann, Park, and Kim 2009, Seo 2011). In this sense, corporate power is not so much exerted from the top through military-like controls, but produced as an effect from below by those captured by limited economic opportunity or desired subjectivities to be ideal corporate workers. (See for instance Park [2010].) Across historical cases then, *the site of and modalities by which* corporate power or management is exercised has shifted.

Implicit in views of the state-led developmental or IMF-imposed neoliberalism has been an idea that authority over the conglomerates is imposed from *external* authorities. That is, a

battle between capital on one side, and market on the other, with the government playing a shifting role. The conglomerates, if left to their own devices, would be “unsupervised” – a common narrative of the liberalized financial era of the early 1990s when many of the conglomerates took on high debt-to-equity ratios. This view recapitulates a certain image of the South Korean conglomerate as a *homo economicus*, greedy in its quest for economic capture or profiteering if left uncontrolled. However, this image ignores the ways that conglomerates themselves are sites of *internal* power struggles. The sites and modalities of internal control are a frequent object of concern. In the news, this often plays out in the form of battles among family ownership, with high-profile cases of family disputes about who is controlling and by which means. For instance, the Hyundai Group, once the largest in South Korea, split into four separate groups in the early 2000s, after a bitter battle among eight brothers over who would succeed the late founder Chung Ju-yung. To this day, minor changes in shareholding proportions among owning family members across the groups threaten to tip the scales of group control in favor of one side or another. In a recent high-profile case, the Lotte Group recently witnessed a complicated feud unfurl between the chairman and his two sons. The second son, aligned with the board of directors, attempted to oust his older brother and aging father in a powerplay involving hastily arranged board votes, executive allegiances, and now courtroom battles over mental fitness.

Ongoing internal battles at Hyundai or Lotte involving family ownership grab significant public attention. They are not the only site for conflict or change within conglomerate groups however. Internal sites of control, like planning offices, subsidiary offices, regional factories, and overseas affiliates are a common cause for concern internally. The Sangdo Group is hardly a household name in South Korea and has not had any public scandals associated with its

businesses or owning family. But the stability and relative harmony of family ownership, now shifting to its third generation, does not mean that the group has been “stable” internally. The view of the conglomerate hierarchy neatly stacked within the Sangdo Tower is not a reflection of an existing order, but an attempt to project a *new* one. The conglomerate had long had a philosophy of “autonomous management” (*jayul gyeong-yeong*) in which affiliates largely managed themselves and in which there was little central administration. Even a split into a holding company structure in the early 2000s did little to change the self-management approach of the subsidiaries, who maintained separate buildings, product lines, production processes, union membership, administrative functions and systems, corporate cultures, and organizational structures. A move to the Sangdo Tower coincided with the rise of third generation heir and the growth of the holding company as a central coordinator of group activities, leading to the creation of centralized planning functions such as public relations, legal, and Human Resources for the first time. Attempts to centralize many of the group’s activities have been met with various degrees of integration and resistance. Some subsidiaries have maintained their own planning departments and administrative technologies, while cooperating with certain programs or integrations from the centralizing holding company. These administrative battles have little to do with reference to ownership links among the subsidiaries. One subsidiary’s HR team might object to a centralized HR project, but the same subsidiary’s strategy team might collaborate with a group strategy project to align strategic initiatives. Just as one cannot read any given conglomerate from its organizational type, so too do intra-conglomerate relations become difficult to extrapolate from an organizational culture.

How can we categorize sites where control, conflict, or collaboration play out within the conglomerate? Finding the basic or contrastive units of a conglomerate (size of teams,

personality of managers, aggressiveness of stakeholders, subjectivity of modern workers, etc.) who engage in figurative battles of control or resistance may not prove fruitful for two reasons: in one sense, internal units are numerous organizational (team vs. team), rank (executive/managerial vs. non-managerial), generational (“older” vs. “younger”), work-functional (line/staff/manufacturing), contract (regular, irregular, temporary), or subsidiary status (original member vs. acquired member). They are also nested such that any individual or unit can also claim identity within a larger unit. Breaking down the conglomerate into component parts reveals what Ira Bashkow has suggested is a tendency to view corporations as composed of basic units – be they contracts, bounded rationalities, shares, or branded experiences – that are both independent and homogeneous from which organizational entities can be explained (Bashkow 2014). In a second sense, viewing organizational authority as a struggle of either cooperation and resistance between different units with mutually exclusive interests recapitulates an image of power as a binary phenomenon of control and obedience (Weber 1986). Authority, to the degree which it is mediated across documents and meetings, policies and computer systems, engenders different forms of participation that complicate our views of top-down authority or bottom-up resistance, even though such glosses are common ways of interpreting corporate or organizational moves. (In South Korea, it is common to refer to high ranking officials as communicating in a “top-down” [*hahyang*] manner). But outside of common shibboleths of authoritative speaking, we can think about it like communication more generally, which is not a back-and-forth movement between two equal speaker-hearers, but involves different kinds of participatory structures, both co-present and non-present, allowing for multiple roles, responsibilities, and affordances (Goffman 1981, see also Irvine 1996). This complicates a binary of dominated-dominating power relations that inheres in iconically asymmetrical

communication (Gal 1995). Seen in the way, authority is a mediated phenomenon carried out by other kinds of actors or artifacts in complex formations.

Authority, thus, becomes read out of the way it is mediated in certain kinds of activities – according to their own structures and sociohistorical conventions around such activities. Thus, even as a mediated activity, authority as a set of conventions or familiar genres is legible within a given society or political order, such as the speech of royalty (see Yankah 1991) or the rankings within a corporation. Such conventions may involve representations in space (the executives get the bigger offices), the command of oral performances (junior employees perform for senior ones), or gradated barriers to accessing sensitive files (each rank has differentiated access). An authoritative figure may be someone that employs arcane and difficult performance skills (Kuipers 1990), someone who draws on established scientific reasoning in an impersonal way (Goodwin 1994), or someone who merely initials a document after people below have signed it first (Hull 2003).

As I discussed above, modalities of authority in South Korean conglomerates present a particularly fraught area within which debates over corporate control play out – who is in control after all? This dissertation focuses on how corporate control shifts – or is seen to shift – and the activities through which that happens. Reforming corporate governance standards after the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997 by including outside directors and more detailed financial statements was one way of shifting control through Western tropes of impersonal oversight and documentary transparency. Moving the Sangdo Group subsidiaries and their planning offices into the Sangdo Tower was an attempt at re-organizing the group along a (new) modality of space, meant to integrate the group, an integration that put the holding company on new administrative footing “above” its subsidiaries, so to speak. But concretizing a corporate order in

such a way did not necessarily guarantee all modes of authority in the conglomerate followed suit. As I discuss in Chapter One of this dissertation, building the authority of the holding company via expert departments did not directly translate: expert managers found themselves translating the new vision of organizing the Sangdo Group from the top down into the genres of their own work activity. They had to translate a spatialized authority into expert authority, processes that did not always go according to plan.

A broader conception of authority is not limited to what we consider the boundaries or functions of a firm or conglomerate itself. Just as conglomerates can be seen to be managed from the top like political figures, like a dictator Park under an imagined conception of “Korea, Inc.” or they can be seen to be managed by an imaginary actor like the “market,” authority is not limited to the formal organizational roles of a company. For foreign observers, the unit of focus on the conglomerates has been formal mechanisms of corporate governance who see reforming directorships and transparency requirements as paramount. For many in South Korea more broadly, the problem was one of monopolization and concentration, not efficiency or oversight. What was needed was a different solution, one that followed a familiar Korean trope of institutional reform: economic democratization (*gyeongje minjuhwa*). For many inside the conglomerate world, there are other sociologically-imagined phenomena that explain who or what “controls” conglomerate life. In the eyes of younger managers who I worked with, it was precisely the culture of older male managers that plagued corporate social life, business performance, and individual freedoms across South Korea.

This dissertation traces how political authority surrounding South Korean conglomerates is changing, the modalities by which such changes occur, and the interpretative schema by which they are “legible” to corporate insiders. My focus is on my ethnographic material which concerns

the role of the holdings company at the Sangdo Group and its changing relations to the Sangdo Group which it putatively “owned.” (The ethnographic context is described later in this introduction.) The central argument of this dissertation is that new modes of authority operate through new forms of expertise which explicitly attempt to minimize explicit representations of its own authority. Such modalities of authority however, were embedded within a complex organizational setting of competing authorities and conventions for displaying authority. These expert skills had to be translated into new modalities, like new forms of representing organizational knowledge and changes to existing circuits. With this shift, other forms of authority also came under attack, like the culture of older male managers of a previous generation. As a mediated phenomenon, then, this dimension of authority requires looking at how actors draw on spaces, numbers, meetings, PowerPoints, and other practices to establish (or conceal) these forms of authority. In a country where authority seems to naturally inhere in powerful ranks or institutions, this dissertation reveals how much effort goes into establishing and maintaining such authority across different modalities. But such shifts did not happen easily or all at once: for experts in the holding company, it depended on making convincing arguments using data, receiving files from suspicious subsidiaries, and keeping people happy. Thus, many of these ways of establishing this authority were meant to be *illegible* and discreet to people in the Sangdo Group. Before we can understand the modalities through which these new forms of authority were mediated, it is necessary to situate them within conventions around hierarchy and authority in South Korea more generally.

The Semiotics of Hierarchy and Authority in South Korea

To understand how different modalities of hierarchy and authority operate in South Korea, it is necessary to understand how they are socioculturally constituted. Images like corporate towers as well as things like organizational charts, ownership diagrams, and organizational titles present legible images of well-defined, hierarchically stratified orders, arrayed by corporate unit and rank. Each are examples of “diagrammatic icons” (Peirce 1955 [1902], cf. Mannheim 1999, Parmentier 1985) of political orders embedded into spatial and material distinctions.⁶ Even for common diagrammatic genres, like floor plans or ownership relations, social conventions vary for how these relations are interpreted. A South Korean office worker “reads” an office chart in a very different way than an American one might, as indexing different kinds of authority within the conglomerate.⁷

In contrast to Western organizations which typically present a *singular* entity, such as through a brand, public image, or corporate social responsibility programs (Shever 2010, Welker 2014, Moore 2003, Marchand 1998), conglomerate cultures in South Korea appears as stratified orders. This occurs across various dimensions of corporate life: in the ordinal rankings of individuals (*sawon*, *daeri*, *chajang*, etc.), the administrative organization of offices, and the financial organization of subsidiaries (“mother-“, “child-“, “grandchild” companies). It occurs through the circulation of documents, which flow “up” or “down” ranks in their sequencing. Rankings are another common idiom for sorting among conglomerate groups, either by prestige,

⁶ Generally speaking, icons present a natural relation between a sign and its object, like a smiley face icon that appears to represent a facial expression. Diagrammatic icons are a subset of icons that depict relations *among* a set of signs, like lines on a blueprint.

⁷ Organizational charts that mapped reporting relations were some of the first formal managerial genres developed in the 1850s as described in Chandler’s early work on George McCallum (Chandler 1956). Bill Maurer and Sylvia Martin have described how organizational relations are not just generic diagrams of authority and subordination but provide narrative clues about an individual company’s history of off-shore investments (Maurer and Martin 2012).

total revenues, or other metric.⁸ Annual worker evaluations stratify workers by performance grade on a scale of S, A, B, C, or D. Most conglomerate workers also carry implicit hierarchies about the most prestigious places to work or even the most representative “South Korean” corporate office to work for, lists that usually starts with Samsung. (Sangdo is usually much lower on the list.) Lastly, stratification is a common way of conceptualizing conglomerates within a wider *international* field of corporate life, where the South Korean economy can be compared across various scales and metrics (cf. Carr and Lempert 2016). International rankings, like brand values, dividend rates, friendly office places, or market position, represent common ways of knowing the country’s relative place in the “world economy” and for directing political momentum.⁹ These phenomena are no doubt familiar to those outside of corporate life too: rankings are a common mode for organizing people across South Korean society, such as schools and universities, where student rankings are publicly posted and where English test scores become a way of differentiating marketability, to the military where young men are socialized into institutions marked by formal role designations (Moon 2005).

Hierarchical relations are not only an explicit dimension of organizing institutions or representing relations, but an implicit dimension of language socialization as well. Junehee Ahn (2016) has shown that asymmetry in face-to-face interactions is a common feature in South Korean children’s socialization. Young children learn to situate face-to-face interactions as consisting of asymmetrical roles (older sibling/younger sibling, adult/child, teacher/student) that

⁸ While not as diagrammatically elaborate as rank and organizational order, conglomerate rankings also extend to ranks between groups, repeated in national news ranking conglomerates by sheer revenue, or other prestigious metric, such as most recognizable brand, wealthiest ownership, or the most desired places to work.

⁹ For example, the South Korean trade association, KITA, publishes a list of products that the country is number one in the world in, such as certain kinds of steel and chemical products. Even within this listing of rankings of market position, the report also concludes that South Korea ranks fourteenth among countries that have market-leading products. See (Institute for International Trade 2017).

have different participant roles, marked linguistic features, and different affect. Socialization to these forms of dyadic asymmetry is not just a passive mode of learning one's fixed role in relative sociological positions. Children learn to use asymmetry in interaction as a discursive resource that can be metapragmatically invoked, especially in competition with other children (see also Lo 2009). Nicholas Harkness (2015) has also shown within the context of Korean Christianity that fictive sibling tropes are a common mode of organizing friend or personal relations within the clergy. Such tropes designate an older sibling and a younger one who may speak to each other in contrastive linguistic patterns as a way of establishing friendly intimacy. This private mode of organizing relations contrasts a church context that explicitly stresses that all members are equally children under God and therefore equally siblings to each other. Ahn similarly notes that socialization routines that implicitly code for interpersonal asymmetries also exist within an educational context that has adopted explicitly Westernized pedagogies. Both cases highlight the ways that South Korean interactional routines implicitly (and hence metapragmatically) regiment hierarchy between individuals even within a context of explicit Westernization.¹⁰

The sense of how hierarchy can be an interactional resource bears true in office settings as well: Roger Janelli in his study of a South Korean conglomerate in the 1980s noted how office relations between older managers and younger employees troped on particular routines of father-son pattern that he had previously encountered in rural villages (Janelli and Yim 1993). Similarly, Choong-soon Kim's ethnography of the Poongsan Corporation (Kim 1992) revealed how the chairman, a descendent of a noble lineage, saw his company not as a scheme for making

¹⁰ Indeed, this is redolent even of Brown and Gilman's classic study of symmetrical address terms (*tu-tu/vous-vous*), in which they note that latent tendencies for authoritarian behavior pervade interactional routines, despite egalitarian (or "solidary") surface forms of address (Brown and Gilman 1960).

profit but as part of a long lineage of defenders of the Korean peninsula. In doing so, he was fulfilling his *han* (or vicarious duty) of his ancestral line that had failed to protect Korea generations earlier. In my own research in the corporate world in Korea, many informants have pointed out to me many instances where certain kinds of interaction resemble other forms of hierarchically organized institutional tropes: the office as like a military line, older executives as clan elders (*tobagi*), a holding company like a father (and on a different occasion a step-mother), and certain departments dominating like “*gap*” over other departments who were “*eul*” (terms akin to “alpha” and “beta” to describe unequal relations). In one instance in pre-fieldwork research at a company, a middle manager relayed that he wanted to re-key his relation with his boss as one of fictive brothers when they were out drinking. His boss refused to switch, choosing to maintain a formal register of boss/subordinate across all encounters.

Not all glosses of hierarchical relations are negatively valenced as abusive, outdated, or illegitimate. Even for the younger generation of managers and workers (those under about forty years old), there are numerous axes of sociality that rely on intimate asymmetrical relations. In the office, for instance, two employees on the same team who differ by rank may establish relations of mentorship (*mentoring*) in which an older employee trains a younger employee. This is familiar to kinds of mentoring redolent of university life where students stratify their relations as either *seonbae* (relative senior) or *hubae* (relative junior) to each other. They may also choose to ground their relations as fictive siblings to one another, a mark of a more intimate friendship that can frame their working relations. After work, on the phone or over text messaging, these kinds of relationships may be cued in interaction by older-sibling-directed address terms (*hyeong* in the case of male-male relations or *eonni* in the case of female-female relations). Within company life, a young employee may also try to situate oneself within a “line” (*rain*) whereby

they align themselves to a successful team manager or executive who will “pull” his or her supporters up with them. Lines are invisible within an office space but are pervasive modes through which individuals “see” social relations not reported on an organizational chart.¹¹

Modes of stratification nevertheless inhere in how they are performed in linguistic forms and other meaningful (semiotic) acts, like asymmetrical title address and the gifting of coffee. Linguistic forms highlight that authority is not given but enacted by different actors, who may choose how or when to display authority, exercise control, or create social obligation (and conversely when, how much, and in what way to show deference). Authority in this sense appears less as a stable system of referents or a particularly Korean disposition to hierarchy, but a constantly shifting terrain of how to treat others and what modes of speaking or acting to draw on in doing so. For instance, team managers in South Korea may distinguish their own managerial styles by deciding on whether to speak with formal speech endings to their subordinates (*jondaenmal*) or use informal speech (*banmal*), stances that can index different stances to authority or styles of management.

A pervasive dimension of South Korean authority “register” is the way that it collates a wide variety of linguistic and non-linguistic signs in ways that regiment authoritative statuses cross-modally. This is particularly pervasive in deference indexicals (Goffman 1956). Linguistically, Korean is known for wide deference patterning evident in speech level contrasts, honorific lexical items, verb infixes, honorific suffixes, and occasional object-deference (Wang 1990, Agha 2007, 317-322) such that deference could be extended to a superior’s cup of coffee or even to describe the act of handing a cup of coffee to a superior, both in direct address and

¹¹ Note how the vertical projection of “lines” structurally contrasts with the horizontal notion of “networking” in the US.

indirect reporting. In a wider semiotic register of deferential behavior or deferential signs, conveying respect to status-superiors is regimented across activities. A subordinate who is treated to a coffee by their boss may show deference by ordering the cheapest cup possible (typically, an Americano) as an indexical of concern for the boss's cost burden and a suppression of their individual desire. Showing improper deference to higher-ups may also be a means by which mid-level superiors invoke their own positional authority: I was once scolded by a middle manager for simply handing a document across a table to an executive, instead of walking all the way around the table to deliver it with two hands. Corporate displays of *uijeon* (or “formality”) to higher-ups often are the most elaborate demonstrations in this regard: a chairman's mere presence may beget a standing call-to-attention and focused bodily orientation while he is within visible range, like sunflowers turning with the sun.¹²

It is tempting to view the elements of this register of honorific behavior, like bowing, greeting, kin-trooping, and so on, as separate to, or even detracting from, the “real” dimensions of office life, like setting salary ranges, filing expense reports, or planning a merger. While the elements of interpersonal greetings and other face-to-face deference behavior are highly salient, this does not mean that they are separate from technical dimensions of work itself. In one sense, things like salary bands or expense approvals are based on rank-differences between classes of workers, suggesting that they articulate very closely. Sangdo for example had a detailed sheet listing expense caps and the level of approval needed for categories of office expenses. In another sense, hierarchies are enacted implicitly through participant structures in even seemingly non-hierarchical activities. In Chapter Four, for instance, I discuss how the production of

¹² Friends who worked at Samsung recalled to me that Lee Kun-hee, the former chairman, was known for being welcomed to Samsung headquarters by two flanking lines of young workers extending from his Rolls Royce to the building entrance.

PowerPoint, a single-user centered software platform within a team recapitulates the rank hierarchy of the team. The document passes through stages of production and evaluation by rank. Similarly, company dinners (*hoesik*) are a hierarchically neutral event, but can be exploited by managers who can offer to pay for a meal or drink as a way of inculcating a social debt. By treating younger employees with their own money or deciding on an extravagant meal, managers can create forms of obligation that are transitive to other aspects of work life (such as the obligation to stay afterhours to help on work). Any activity in a way can be an occasion for (i.e. pragmatically framed as) establishing one's own authority or showing deference to another, or conversely, losing authority or not paying deference. The point here is that authoritative relations are not pre-determined by their pre-existing organizational or ownership structure (or what Weber called a "constellation"): authoritative relations must be enacted in practice. Relations between a headquarters and subsidiary or chairman and executives become articulated through different modalities.

Outside of interactional features for demarcating hierarchical relations, it is worth noting how stratified dimensions of hierarchy cross-articulate with different dimensions of office life and social life more generally. As I mentioned above, rank itself articulates with office space location and size. Similarly, it articulates with one's salary, benefits, and vacation time, which are all stratified in order by rank. Promotions move in a lock-step fashion such that one cannot jump two ranks, or conversely fall by the same. At factories, ranks are marked off by insignia and colors on badges and helmets. According to one informant, Korean banks have different interest rates depending on what one's rank is. Thus, beyond just a register of usage, hierarchical differences can articulate in a number of "diagrammatic" ways across South Korean society in a mutually reinforcing manner. To change any of these dimensions, such as the way employees

address each other, a topic I discuss in Chapter Three, often threatens to disarticulate with these other dimensions.

This is not to say that *all* dimensions of office life do. Things like attending a meeting, writing an email, viewing messages on an online portal, or riding an elevator are not clear articulations of office hierarchies. In some occasions, they can explicitly challenge them or create complicated interactional problems. That is, certain kinds of events or texts carry different participatory structures or material interfaces that do not properly translate a perceived background political order into an interactional or textual one. This can lead to pragmatic disalignments that can have various entailments. In certain cases, it is an occasion for interactional awkwardness or avoidance. In Chapter Two, for instance, I discuss how the burden of calling a subsidiary for a file fell onto a junior employee who had to request a higher-ranking employee to send files “up” to him. In other cases, such disalignments can signal attempts at regimenting *new sites* of authority. In the case of the junior employee, the file he was requesting was part of an attempt by the holding company to gain more information about subsidiary labor figures. For the employee sending the file from the subsidiary, this created a dilemma: comply with a new authority, the holding company, or an existing one, his own team manager and CEO.¹³ It is worth noting, that certain forms of stratification create new forms of unwanted responsibilities: the case of team managers who have to decide annual performance evaluations (by grade) for their employees can create hierarchical stratification that is *too* explicit. (Evaluations at the team level can create both a potential disalignment with existing team ranks and potential personal bias by the team manager.)

¹³ One particularly egregious case occurred when one subsidiary CEO ordered his strategy team not to comply with the headquarters on a shared strategy project because he disagreed with their approach and opinion of his key markets.

Certain register signs for deference behavior and the labels of company elements have fixed or habitual qualities to them, like the titles of workers or modes of expressing politeness. The way these become articulated in an organizational environment, however, is more complex. Hierarchical relations between co-workers and between organizational units are always subject to re-evaluation and re-interpretation, some in more explicit ways than others. The way that the group order was articulated in the Sangdo Tower, as I described earlier, was in fact a new way of concretizing the power of both the third-generation ownership and, by extension, the holding company as authorities at the “top” of the group. This kind of authority appeared entirely non-authoritative on the surface, but created new inequalities in practice. Even markedly Western policies that create flat structures or friendly office policies were part of attempts to institute a new sites and modes of authority. One can see the new generation of Korean conglomerate heirs, like the owner-CEO Ahn at Sangdo, who have been educated in the West and tend to adopt more progressive office policies, as attempts to undermine the conventions of the “older” culture of Korean office life. Such activities can be metapragmatically framed as non-authoritative, communal, or progressive. An ethnographic lens reveals how these Westernizing projects indirectly addressed certain target populations while legitimizing the actors and techniques involved in instituting them.

Genres of Office Life

Researchers of modern organizational life acknowledge that office work and office life exists within a complex kaleidoscope of genres. These include phenomena like organizational charts, weekly meetings, human resources evaluations, company magazines, water cooler

conversations, post-it notes, brainstorming sessions, smoking breaks, as well as legal contracts, quarterly reports, financial statements, and surveys. Office life and office work do not boil down to a single register, set of semantic categories, a single authoritative genre, or particular medium or text. Rather, organizational life is a bundle of genres, the kind of “mid-range” phenomena that Bakhtin (1986) identified as the intermediate area between linguistic structure and actual usage and the “drive belts” linking society and language.¹⁴ Using genres to understand workplaces has already been a fruitful approach in the work of organization studies scholars Wanda Orlikowski and Joanne Yates (Yates 1989, Yates and Orlikowski 1992, Orlikowski and Yates 1994) who have analyzed the history of certain office genres (e.g., the “memo”) as ways of tracking institutional change over time as well as the interaction of genres in actual office settings. Genre has been a fruitful site for looking at how particular texts generate different participant structures (such as phone calls or meetings) with obligations around textual categories and features, such as the need to have a subject in an email or the need to have an agenda for a meeting. Genre provides a useful frame of reference for understanding the local organization of work groups (say, around speaking routines, paper work, and computer interaction) as well as the broader ways that organizational structures organize themselves around the production of certain textual genres (such as financial statements, human resources records, and strategic plans). Richard Harper has shown how the IMF, as an organization, is largely structured around the production and evaluation of “country reports” (Harper 1998).

¹⁴ For Bakhtin in his essay “The Problem of Speech Genres” genres were an intermediary point between language structure and usage that governed, if unconsciously, how language forms could be drawn upon and interpreted without appeal to a basic grammar. He was, in many ways, arguing against those who saw a singular mode of mediation or structure that dictated all usage. Interestingly, while corporations may seem to be the mediating actors of the modern economy, with managerial genres as their prime technique, they too are regularly left out of accounts of modern economics (like genres to linguistics).

Linguistic anthropological approaches to genre have tended to emphasize how the meaning of any token genre performance is structured not just through formal properties of texts, but through its intertextual context and its metapragmatic framings within individual performances (Briggs and Bauman 1992, Briggs 1993, Garrett 2005, Kroskrity 2009).

Anthropologists who have focused on genre have tended to look at oral performances, following Bakhtin's description of "speech genres," though written genres have been useful for looking at institutional conventions and relations, such as the church or the bureaucracy (Hanks 1987, Hull 2003). Where organizational scholars look at the textual and functional properties of office genres, say like the categories or styles embedded in a survey, a linguistic anthropological perspective generates insights into how such a survey gains meaning based on its context of use: for instance, a company survey derives meaning from what other instances it resemble (and differs from). Drawing on a survey used by the largest American companies may be a way to bring an instance of a Korean-written survey into intertextual alignment with more prestigious tokens, while distinguishing it from older Korean styles. Furthermore, a survey may be explicitly framed as a chance to "hear the voices" of employees, while being implicitly directed at efforts to establish one team's expertise or use it as the basis for solving organizational problems.

In the context of changing modes of authority in the South Korean conglomerate, a focus on genre reveals how certain modes of controlling and governing play out *through* different genres. Richard Saumarez Smith (1985) has described how the shift from *records* to *reports* in the context of nineteenth-century British rule in India affected modes of organizing the basic units of Indian society (from village to caste). This reflects one view of certain textual genres that they construct different visions of the objects they entextualize (Bauman and Briggs 1990, 72-78). This becomes relevant for considering the ways that expert departments, like Human

Resources, Strategy, or Accounting “see” the corporation or conglomerate through different textual units like HR records, strategy plans, or financial statements. Genres are not just lenses of information, but can engender or re-key existing participant roles. Corporate managers’ roles can be thought of in relation to the genres they produce: managers find themselves in the context of receiving and delivering the reports of others, citing the information produced by subsidiaries and delivering it to other authorities, such as the South Korean SEC or their own chairman. In these cases, it is not necessarily the categories of information engendered in a single perspective, but the way that managers or teams find their own capacities to manage documents embedded within circulatory networks that signal shifts in authority. Rakesh Khurana’s *From Higher Aims to Hired Hands* (Khurana 2007) illustrates how management in the US has shifted from a profession with a moral vision to merely analytic conduits for creating shareholder value.

Organizational genres are useful for seeing how powers and capacities are manifested in specific role functions. Not all genres, however, align with what we might imagine as an organizational function. As historical conventions, some of the specifically do not align with efficiency or even traditional modes of authority. Meetings are a good example. They are a mode of democratic, group-based discussion that minimize interpersonal hierarchies and individualized rational decision-making (Schwartzman 1989, Brown, Reed, and Yarrow 2017). They also have a particular event structure, such as setting an agenda or generating “outputs” (Riles 2017). Significant meetings may also have meeting reports generated to detail agreements or discussions. They are events that corporate employees come to despise, seem to have little purpose or are detrimental to real work, and multiply themselves ad absurdum (i.e., meetings to prepare for meetings). They are a familiar genre of office life which may or may not align with other formal roles. In this way, meetings can be metapragmatically framed in certain ways

through their occasioning (regular Monday meetings) and their discourse structures (formal, sequenced oral reporting) that can translate political roles, like organizational status, into an interactional one. Nevertheless, they still remain subject to risk (see Duranti 1994, on “fono” meetings in Samoa). In Chapter Five, I discuss shareholder meetings (*jeong-gi juju chonghoe*) in South Korea where troublesome minority shareholders disrupt meetings by asking lengthy questions. Because of the right of minority shareholders to ask questions in person, corporate executives find themselves helpless interactionally to those that try to extort them.

Seeing organizational life through genres allows one to recognize that genres do not just happen *in* an office, but they are constitutive of it. Thus, if we consider core aspects of corporate life, like sales, research, human resources, promotions, or bond issuance, each of these dimensions derives meaning from (i.e. is indexically grounded by) sets of genres that are highly conventionalized and legible as gestalt forms. Even one of the most basic dimensions of corporate life, profit-making, is an artifact of accounting procedures that depend on categories of expenses, periodic closing of books, fixed periods for calculations, and mechanisms and events of distribution.

A reflexive activity like profit-making points us not to simple genres like texts or interactions that have fixed structures, but to more complex assemblages of texts and interactions that create an assemblage that can be metapragmatically framed as “profit-making.” The satisfaction survey that I discuss in Chapter Two incorporates a standard survey but also proposals, computer codes, analytic documents, summarizing reports, action-item templates, and meetings to present data. The entire survey took over six months to complete. Considering how genres interact in this way as assemblages that have higher-order labels and conventions is an

ongoing challenge for analysts (Spinuzzi 2004).¹⁵ Whether one considers these assemblages as sets, repertoires, or systems, depends on different analytical goals, such as analyzing the details of office actions in meetings which emphasizes emergent creativity within genres (e.g., Wasson 2006, Wilf 2016), or the ways idealized genres get constrained by their material instantiations, circulation, and mis-appropriation (e.g., Hull 2008). My purposes in this dissertation is to understand how changes in political authority within the conglomerate involve the strategic usage of certain genres as expert projects that attempt to re-arrange actors, circuits, and organizational knowledge. Carrying out these projects, largely by experts at the holding company, involved many kinds of ancillary activities and circuitous efforts. These were motivated by the need to be explicitly respectful towards existing authority figures (such as older male managers or subsidiaries' planning teams) while implicitly trying to redirect planning control and informational visibility towards the holding company. Thus, in some cases additional steps were taken to align the presentation of certain genres towards the understanding of existing political authorities. The way these projects were managed by teams and individual employees differed, however. While there was a certain political motivation to concentrate authority within the holding company, each team or department (HR, finance, strategy) had specific genres as part of their "professional vision" (Goodwin 1994) that created different obstacles in practice. Nevertheless, this approach points towards the way that certain genres can be sites around which political authority change and how other kinds of activities are called upon – in fact directly needed – to manage or mitigate the effects of this change.

¹⁵ Bakhtin did make a distinction between "primary" and "secondary" genres, in which the latter were composites of tokens of the former. For Bakhtin, secondary genres included the kind of polyphonic discourse in the novel, as well as court records, scientific publications, and bureaucratic files (Bakhtin 1986, 72-73).

Fieldwork and Research Methods

This dissertation is based on eighteen months of core fieldwork that took place between 2014 and 2015 in Seoul. Initial months of research involved interviews and networking with managers and executives at different conglomerate groups. Aided by connections, I was led to the Sangdo Group, where the third-generation descendant of the founder and then-executive of the holding company, Sangdo Holdings, allowed me to work as an intern in the group to conduct my research. I refer to him as the owner-CEO Ahn throughout the dissertation. Both company and name are pseudonyms.

The Sangdo Group is a multinational steel conglomerate. The group includes a holding company that owns a dozen subsidiaries, about half of which are involved in various forms of steelmaking, steel parts, or metals. Other companies in the group do logistics and IT that support other companies. The group was founded more than fifty years ago and has maintained family control over that time. While always a conglomerate of steel companies, it has only recently acquired the government designation of a “large corporation” (*daegieop*) based on revenue growth and acquisition of other companies. Sangdo Holdings is owned by members of the Ahn family, some of whom have managerial positions within the group; the chairman from the Ahn family is at the top of the group – and the Sangdo Tower.¹⁶ The group’s companies, factories, and sales offices are geographically dispersed in Seoul, in South Korea, and in more than a dozen countries. Even with a history of more than half a century in Korea, classification as a large conglomerate, and a corporate tower with its logo beaming from top, most of my non-business friends in Seoul had never heard of Sangdo, nor did they remember even after I mentioned it.

¹⁶ Because family structures and roles are highly identifiable even when anonymous, I intentionally elide information about the owners here and throughout the dissertation

The only informants who were familiar were those who worked in heavy manufacturing or had been in the corporate world for a long time. Despite, or perhaps because of, its relative obscurity as a mid-level steel conglomerate, Sangdo was an ideal site to conduct this research: its status as a conglomerate that was large enough to have multiple subsidiaries but small enough to fit inside one tower allowed me to see different parts of the group without being overwhelmed by some of the country's larger conglomerates who have multiple campuses, more complex management structures, and are more sensitive with their public image.

At the Sangdo Group, I worked as an intern in the human resources department in the holding company. In July 2014, I began as an intern with a standard six-month contract, typical to other college-student interns at the company. After working at the company for six months, the owner-CEO Ahn agreed, with the support of Team Manager Jang and the HR executive Executive Cho, to extend my contract for another six months until mid-2015. As a condition of being an intern at the company and carrying out work, the company paid me the standard intern salary which was similar to my monthly research stipend.¹⁷ I commuted to the thirty-eighth floor of the Sangdo Tower every day, clad in suit and tie, five days a week for one consecutive year.

When I joined the HR team of seven people together with the executive, I explained in more detail what the project was, how ethnography worked, and received their written consent to participate. Because I was hired under the aegis of the owner-CEO Ahn, all the employees did not offer any objections to the project or my being there. In Korean terms, I was probably read as a special kind of hire – a “parachuter” (*nakhasan*) – or someone who floats in from above with the help of high-up connections. Outside of the HR department, I encountered other members of

¹⁷ I remitted my monthly salary from Sangdo back to Fulbright during the duration of the fieldwork grant. Because of the structure of my visa from the Fulbright program, I had to change my visa to an overseas guest worker visa to legally work at the company.

the holding company in the hallways, by the water cooler, or even the company gym. I would explain to them what my role at the holding company was and what my PhD research was about in general terms. In only a few of these encounters did I follow up with requests for formal interviews. I generally used these encounters to deepen my knowledge about office life, the group's history, the steel industry, or to get opinions about Korean corporate culture in general. Over the course of one year, I gradually came to know almost all of the employees at the holding company as well as about two dozen employees who worked in the subsidiaries below.

I made a conscious decision in my research to work as an intern together with the other workers rather than merely “shadowing” them in their work or conducting interviews with a varied sample of workers. There were multiple reasons for this: corporations, like other modern workplaces, are very private and have not been conducive for ethnographic observation by outsiders. Working as an intern provided access to ongoing work processes of the HR team, access to deeper subject knowledge, and a chance to build deeper bonding relations with co-workers over the course of a year. At the same time, such as strategy also meant that I would work primarily in one department. And as an intern, I had little access to important decisions or files for both reasons legal and social. But as an intern, I could ask questions, make mistakes, get corrected, and sit on the edges in meetings – also roles that are useful for ethnography. For the purpose of building strong relations and getting to know the world of HR workers and the holding company more broadly, I attended meetings I was invited to, worked on tasks and projects I was given, and tried to get to know my coworkers. I was careful, however, not to overstep by asking about information I, as an intern, would not have access to, nor to interfere into the high-stress projects being carried out by members of the team.¹⁸ On some days, I was

¹⁸ Another reason for maintaining an identity as an intern was the risk of causing unintended worry among informants about my role. Other South Korean academics who have written their theses about corporate culture

wrapped up in developing a PowerPoint or translating a document that I had little chance to talk to the workers next to me who were also busier with their latest report. To complement my work, I made effort to attend as many special events as I could, including company concerts or lectures, company soccer games, the annual shareholders meeting, and at one point the Korean Iron & Steel Association's annual 5K footrace. I attended personal events as well, including weddings of co-workers (there were five in one year), birthday parties, virtual golf outings, informal and formal *hoesik* (or company dinners), and infrequent *noraebang* (karaoke) trips.

Over the course of a year, I integrated myself into the Sangdo Group as much as I could. I worked, travelled, and ate so frequently with the four members of the HR planning team under Team Manager Jang, including Assistant Manager Min-sup, Assistant Manager Ji-soon, and the bottom-ranking Ki-ho, that I too gradually took on the identity of an HR worker. I was close in age with the latter three, who were in their early thirties. With these four employees, I spent most of my working and conversational time over the course of one year – spending every day from eight a.m. to roughly six p.m. together. By spending so much time with this group of employees, it inevitably barricaded me off from other teams with whom I saluted or chatted informally in the hallways. Human Resources departments anywhere have an ambiguous relation to their offices: they are representatives of both employees and management. This particular group had developed a unique team identity that differed from other teams, and in some cases, as I found out, were actively disliked by other teams. (Once, when talking with an employee who left the company, I found out that there was unspoken enmity across many managers and teams, not just the HR workers.)

warned of possible risks. One student had reported being blackballed during her research after she asked a sensitive question of an executive. Another professor reported that during her master's project two people who approved her project had been dismissed after her thesis was published. And a third told me that to receive permission from the company for the research her thesis would have to be embargoed for seven years.

My strategy of working on HR projects as an active member proved successful as I gradually became more exposed to the complex team projects the HR team was working on, even as just an overhearer. Team Manager Jang allowed me to handle, albeit superficially, one project in particular: the 2014 Group Employee Satisfaction Survey, which I worked on for six months. During that time, I also helped translate some marketing materials into English, came up with new performance evaluation questions and metrics, looked up promotion policies in the US, and helped calculate overseas living costs for foreign managers on occasion. These projects were a small fraction of the overall scope of work that the HR planning team did. But being an active member and supporter of the team and cognizant of what projects they were working on allowed for improved relations and a sense of shared responsibility. I became close to the four members of the team, whom I saw again on a return trip in summer 2016.

One of the most useful sites for gathering insights outside of formal occasions was smoking breaks with Team Manager Jang. In what became a daily routine, Team Manager Jang would tap on my shoulder and we would head to the elevator and then down to the smoking area outside of Sangdo Tower—a fifteen-minute excursion. It was at these moments where we would brainstorm ideas about the survey I was working, joke about differences between American and Korean culture, talk about dating and marriage life, and gossip about office politics. Team Manager Jang would often provide the background of a project or explain broader HR issues happening in the company or in the Korean corporate world. On days when there was a tight deadline, these breaks would be the only occasion for me to talk during the day.

After nine months of working with the team, I formally asked, via Team Manager Jang, Executive Cho and the owner-CEO Ahn if I could rotate among the other eight departments in Sangdo Holdings. These included Auditing, Finance, General Affairs, Public Relations,

Performance Management, Strategy, Legal, and Investment. I requested stints in the HR departments of two subsidiaries, which was just reduced to one company because of timing. I identified a handful of executives that I wanted to interview as well, including the outgoing and incoming CEO and HR managers from other subsidiaries, most of whom I was able to interview. For the final three months, between April, May and June of 2015, I rotated among different departments for periods of three to five days each, sitting in their team areas, often just within earshot of my old HR department desk. These little trips met with different degrees of success depending on the teams and timing. With some teams, I was able to participate in meetings, peruse old documents, and have ample time to chat with employees one-on-one about the particular work of their departments. In those occasions, employees seemed to like having someone do informal interviews about their jobs and areas of expertise. In others, the nature of the work proved difficult to share about openly. Some teams were involved in such different kinds of work that they had relatively independent relations from each other. In only one case did both a team manager and team members seem hesitant to go into detail about their work. (The reason, I suspected, was that the team manager saw me as reporting directly to the owner-CEO Ahn; similarly, I suspected the team members did not want to say anything bad in front of their team manager whom I might report to.)

By that point my research interests had narrowed to focusing on how different departments in the holding company constructed discursive relations with those who they were in charge of “managing.” By what license was control permitted, between two entities that might have an ownership relationship but not an administrative one? How did one induce subordination? What genres were being motivated by the headquarters departments? I became interested in certain departments where information from subsidiaries seemed to flow up in a

standard form almost by fiat (Finance and Performance Management), where information from subsidiaries was handled extremely delicately (Human Resources and Strategy), and where new kinds of relations were being established where none existed before (Legal and Public Relations). My time in these departments was enough to gather a loose understanding of the complex professional worlds in which they participated, topics I deal with more directly in Chapter One.

While the opportunity to circulate among departments and travel to one subsidiary was a great boon to the research, there were also considerable issues with access that made understanding the full scope of any given genre, process, or event difficult. As a foreigner and temporary presence, I could become friendly with a majority of the workers in the holding company. Yet the details of their professional worlds were immense and difficult to grasp in short time: in a few weeks, for instance, I travelled a few feet between the legal department which was dealing with contract disputes with suppliers in China, the strategy department which was trying to understand the future of the ball bearings industry, and the investment team which was evaluating proposals for mine developments in Southeast Asia. Similarly, I was limited by the inability to follow information as it bounced from meeting to meeting or decisions were made behind closed doors or how certain genres were closed off via the intranet. On another occasion, I requested examples of emails from co-workers but received only a few examples. Attempts to audio-record meetings were met with looks of anxiety and a general sense of breaking a code between coworkers. Some key topics that I wished to investigate further were curtailed by my impending departure and sense of not being a company member anymore.

Even though the Sangdo Group was more “manageable” in scope than larger conglomerates, occasions to travel to other parts of the group made me realize that different sites

in the company – particularly its steel production, research, and overseas sales offices – were much beyond the scope of what I was researching at the central tower. (In fact, many in the holding company had never been to the group’s plants or overseas offices either). On one occasion, I tagged along with members of the strategy team as they were given a tour of one of the subsidiary’s large forging plants. On another occasion, I went with a Human Resources manager as he conducted a focus group with factory team leaders about changes to office culture at the factory site. It was on these visits, seeing factory offices, worker uniforms, sales sheets, production reports, research labs, control rooms, and steel piled up everywhere, that I realized the social worlds of steel factories and the dynamics of office relations with the holding company were quite separate culturally, not to mention geographically.

This is not to say that these spaces were not linked in other ways however. In the official group magazine “Our Sangdo” that was issued every few months, white- and blue-collar employees encountered themselves as shared members of the “world” of the group. In the Sangdo Tower in Seoul, employees from different subsidiaries and departments encountered each other at company lectures, at the company café, or in the company gym. For internal financial reporting, employees from different accounting departments encountered each other through the internal computer system for submitting financial statements though they might not ever meet in public. The same might be said of the Enterprise Resource Platform (or ERP) software that linked sales and logistics teams together from different offices and companies. They also encountered each other through different work projects, such as the 2014 Group Employee Satisfaction Survey, where individual employee voices and opinions were captured and catalogued, even though they were anonymized. Employees might never meet the employees who conducted the survey or analyzed their opinions. And sometimes employees encountered

each other as team members and team managers in meetings, as examples of “regular” office workers in another, or attendees at a wedding on Saturdays. Managers who differentiated themselves as stern disciplinarians or as hands-off supporters found themselves in similar positions when they had to give performance grades at the end of the year. And CEOs who used to report their companies’ results directly to the chairman could find themselves reporting via a proxy – the experts in a holding company.

Overview of Dissertation

This dissertation spans five chapters that capture different dimensions of how the political changes within the Sangdo Group took place in and through genre’d activities. Each chapter takes up a different topic and analytical lens. Across all five chapters I pay close attention to how basic assumptions about corporate life – ranks, hierarchy, profit, control, and so on – are not fixed or background to activity but constantly subject to re-evaluation as part of changing political orders within the conglomerate.

Chapter One, “Managerial Translations,” shows how two different ideas about political reform have been occurring in the world of conglomerates since the early 2000s. One of them has dealt with increasing corporate transparency and governance, largely brought on by state and foreign investors. The other deals with changes to the political authority *within* the conglomerate, particularly the rise of the third-generation of ownership and management. These two political authorities were manifested into different kinds of control. While financial transparency manifested itself into the regular reporting of financial statements, ownership saw its role shifting into a centralized administrative unit that would guide the group via talented experts at the top.

My main focus is on how this new political authority was “translated” (in Latour’s [1984] sense). Expert departments encountered the conglomerate through different projects that granted them different modes of situational control and risk. I provide ethnographic accounts of three different departments: Human Resources Planning, Performance Management, and Public Relations. Each department found itself embedded within different vectors of organizational politics, talking to different actors in the subsidiaries, drawing on different modes of authorizing themselves that had vastly different consequences to office practice.

Chapter Two, “Corporate Hierarchy Revisited” turns to the topic of hierarchy, an old trope of Korean and Japanese organizational studies. I look at two basic kinds of hierarchy – organizational and status ranking – and how they are made implicit and explicit, respectively, in practice. While rank hierarchy marks relations between status-differentiated people, it often overlaps with organizational hierarchies, like departments or legal corporations. I show how rank hierarchy is made ritually elaborate and explicit in interpersonal behavior and on forms. Threats to rank hierarchy are dealt with particular care. On the other hand, organizational hierarchies are implicitly embedded into documentary procedures in ways that hide their hierarchical nature, such as in the circulation of files or the sites of analysis. I show how actors in the HR department carefully navigated instituting a new organizational hierarchy through the slow collection of information, while also being acutely aware of the rank hierarchies they were potentially upsetting. This chapter focuses analytically on how ancillary genres and metapragmatic frames could appease rank hierarchies interactionally (through kind words or supplicatory presentations) while also instituting new expert genres of surveillance.

Chapter Three, “Re-evaluating Office Interactions,” turns to the ways that certain practices became targeted and vilified as part of the shift in political authority in the

conglomerate, specifically those associated with the older generation of (male) office workers. These were seen as problematic to modern corporate life. In line with theme in the previous chapter, I show how stereotyped behaviors became targets of reform, but in highly indirect ways. I analyze four sets of data that attempted to reform this behavior: title-flattening, two-way communication, after-work socializing, and manager evaluations. Each reform generated different kinds of effects on office sociality, however, from making interactions awkward, to exacerbating problems of hierarchy.

Chapter Four, “Working through PowerPoint,” shifts from the ideological salience of face-to-face interactions in office reforms to one of the most overlooked software platforms in the world, Microsoft PowerPoint. While seen as a textually reductive and functionally ambiguous platform and genre, I show how PowerPoint comes to mediate expert forms of knowledge through the production of expert knowledge via reports. In this sense, they seem to be paragons of the disembodied knowledge of modern capitalism. But at the same time, I show how the production of PowerPoint reports within the team re-instantiates local hierarchies within teams in ways that do not mark individual contributions. As collective products that leave no trace of individual contributions, this allows team relations to operate through implicit forms of hierarchy that divide responsibility among members. Individual responsibility becomes a problem during evaluation season when office workers try to put their mark on otherwise anonymous PowerPoints. I also describe how for senior managers, having strategies to circulate among or capture decision-makers is a key skill that managers develop over their careers and self-narrate.

Chapter Five, “Distributing Emoluments,” picks up on the theme of individual recognition and how it is translated into forms of monetary distribution. South Korea is largely in

the era of “performance management” (*seong-gwajui sidae*) where salary, bonus pay, and dividends should be properly rewarded to individuals. I show how the distribution of these kinds of emoluments are favored by workers and shareholders in an abstract sense, but create problems for those who have to quantify and qualify relations among them. Thus, I show how corporate actors take strategies to avoid, conceal, or reframes these recurring moments of distribution. I focus on three types: salaries, performance bonuses, and dividends. Different emoluments brings different social relations into different axes of comparison. Because money and goods create potentially dangerous correspondences between people in quantitative and qualitative terms, moments of distribution inevitably expose correspondences of radical relationality that become socially and interactionally problematic. I argue that we should see distribution not purely as a matter of monetary calculation but as one of social calculation, in which money can create radical disalignments with everyday expressions of hierarchy and legitimate modes of authority.

In the conclusion, I address the ongoing changes taking place in South Korea’s corporate sector, as once again, calls for “conglomerate reform” resound with a new presidential administration and ongoing scandals from some of the biggest conglomerates. I show how apprehending these kinds of large scale changes under rubrics of “reform” (*gaehyeok*) “structural adjustment” (*gujojojeong*) or “economic democratization” (*gyeongje minjuhwa*) are familiar conventions for re-asserting the public as an authority figure over conglomerate governance. These calls for reform often ignore the fact that corporations themselves are highly reflexive and frequently subject their own members to structural adjustments or “re-orgs.” As modes of reform, public attention tends to see political relations of authority formed around ownership, shareholding, and trade connections. However, they ignore (or cannot see) that corporate

relations become integrated around different modalities of control and authority which permeate office life and office relations.

Chapter 1: Managerial Translations

Held by the Market

On the heels of the Asian Financial Crisis (or IMF Crisis) in 1997, the Korean government instituted a bevy of corporate governance reforms (Haggard, Lim, and Kim 2003, Son 2002, see also Lee, Lee, and Lee 2002). Many of these policies were implicitly and explicitly aimed to make the venerable, but vulnerable, South Korean conglomerates fiscally stable. One of the methods for ensuring this was to give foreign investors more financial stake in the companies, create more transparency into reporting, and update governance measures that aligned with Western standards. Among the specifics of the internal reforms were the election and proportion of outside directors, institution of corporate ethics guidelines, assurance of minority shareholder rights, and prohibitions on conglomerate internal trading. An overlooked piece of this reform involved transforming the very ownership structures of the conglomerates, away from the co-ownership model informally known as “circular shareholding” (*sunhwanchulja*) that had existed since the 1980s. In circular shareholding, subsidiaries act like cooperatives in which they each own hold each other’s stock, with the controlling family holding a slightly more to give it control over the wider ring. One of the problems of this system is that it is very hard to figure out who owns whom. In 2000, the government promoted a new (yet not unfamiliar) form of corporate structure to the large conglomerates: a holding company

(*jijuhoesa*). A holding company, a model of corporate ownership that has existed for more than a hundred years, typically owns other companies or financial interests as assets that it may manage, or simply “hold.”¹ In a twist, the holding company had actually been banned as a legal form in Korea in the 1980s, as it was thought to lead to *too much* economic concentration by conglomerate owners. By the late 1990s, not only was the ban on holding companies in Korea lifted after the financial crisis, the form was being actively promoted and touted as a vehicle for proper corporate governance and fiscal transparency.²

Within the first four years of “promoting” (*chogjin*) holding companies, between 2000 and 2004, nineteen conglomerate groups (and five financial institutions) had changed their ownership structures to a holding company model. The LG Group was one of the first which led to other conglomerates to adopt it as well.³ This was a small change that escaped public attention compared to the larger industrial and labor reforms happening at the time, yet it had a significant impact on the organization and control structures of many of the large manufacturing and trade groups that undertook the change. Up to today, most of the major groups have converted their ownership structures into a holding company. Samsung Group, which has perhaps the most complicated internal-shareholding entanglements in the country, will be among the last of the major conglomerates to “unwind” their corporate structure into a holding company structure.

¹ This reflects two kinds of legally acknowledged form of holding companies in Korea. A “pure” holding company (*sunsujjuhoesa*) is one that does not operate its own businesses and solely owns shares in others (which it may manage); a “business” holding company (*saneob jijuhoesa*) is one that may also conduct its own businesses.

² Holding companies were not unprecedented in East Asia. The pre-World War II Japanese *zaibatsu* were also organized into holding companies, which allowed a founding family to maintain central control. In contrast to today’s holding companies however, subsidiaries and affiliates also owned each other, maintaining ownership within the group (Clark 1979, 42-43). Interestingly, American post-war policy both dismantled holding company structures and promoted foreign investment as a way to weaken Japanese ownership concentration. See Hadley’s *Antitrust in Japan* (Hadley 1970).

³ This explanation is based on a report in the *Corporate Governance Service (Hangukgieobjibaegujowon)* called “*Gungnae jijuhoesa cheje jeonhwan hyeonhwang mit sarye*” (“Current state and cases of domestic holding company system conversion”) (Eom 2014).

Sangdo Group, where this research took place, was one of the earliest adopters. At the time of the split, the former mother company, Sangdo Steel, was split into two functionally distinct units: Sangdo Holdings and Sangdo First. Sangdo Holdings became the vessel for owning the other subsidiaries in the group and Sangdo First was meant to manage the operations of its particular steel products. A key feature of the holding company is that cross-shareholder links between subsidiaries are eliminated and concentrated in the holding company to create a two- or three-tiered pyramidal structure to make ownership links clear and remove worry about cross-reporting of similar capital or debt.

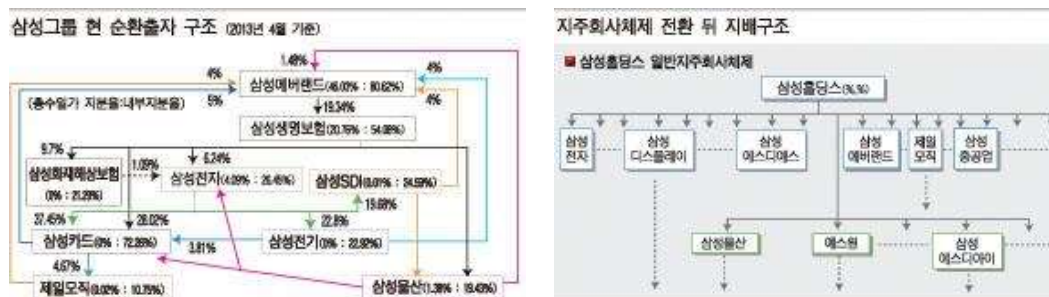


Figure 1.1: Samsung's Group Financial Structure
 Diagrams illustrating “circular shareholding” (L) and a holding company structure (R) for the Samsung Group, from the newspaper Naeil Sinmun, published in 2013. The boxes indicate company units with the arrows indicated direction of ownership. The diagram on the right is merely a simulation of a hypothetical holding company structure because (as of writing) Samsung has not yet unwound its complicated ownership structure. Source: http://www.naeil.com/news_view/?id_art=5740 Accessed March 13, 2017.

As an organizational genre, a holding company is less like a pyramid of central control and more like a glass-bottomed boat for outside investors to look inside. Holding companies are precisely the kind of entity that have become favored by Western capital markets because they ensure investors can see “down” into a group’s holdings via individually separated financial assets. In this sense, a holding company is more than just a centralized management form; it is a *vessel* to create perspectives on the financial status of internal entities. Concurrently, it is meant to

minimize ownership's and top management's unique claims to see the inner sanctum of a company. Under the new kind of holding company, the financial public should be able to analyze and evaluate corporate performance. In turn, holding companies turn management into a "hired hand" (Khurana 2007), present to keep assets productive, visible, and properly valued. This perspective is generated by regularly reported and individuated financial statements that are produced for the view of the "market." Without a holding company structure, individuated internal financial tabulations remain visible to management only and outsiders can see only aggregate results. This invisibility to outsiders was particularly problematic following the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997-8 in Korea, in which conglomerates had debt-equity ratios of five-to-one but lax reporting standards and complicated cross-shareholding links prevented regulators and investors from knowing exactly where corporate assets were located or how to value them properly. A recent turn to holding companies, both in South Korea and in the US (where Google's Alphabet holding company has been the most notable to follow suit), reflects the way corporate structures have become less about consolidating multiple industrial holdings and more about being "managed by the market," (Davis 2009). That is, the particular shape of the corporate form reflects the demands of the market for frequent and accurate valuations of individual units. The holding corporation may generate financial statements in practice, but it is financial statements as a genre that are meant to discipline this particular corporate form in the first place by redirecting the role of manager (as the final evaluator of corporate performance) to the market.

For corporate forms to be managed by the market reflects a change in claim to ownership rights of corporations (as also described by Ho [2009]). These political claims become reified and organized around certain genres of managerial information. In the case of holding

companies, these claims manifest in being able *see* the numbers. Such a claim is enforced through a set of regulations for submission that regularly produce and circulate such information. That is, even as a shift in structure of ownership, market influence is enacted through regularly sequenced releases of specific genres of financial disclosure. (Special regulations in South Korea exist for conglomerates [*bokhapgieop*] that compel them to report consolidated financial statements for all their holdings, not just publicly traded ones.)⁴ Quarterly and annually reported financial statements from the parent company and subsidiaries create a regular opportunity to evaluate individual units, while compelling companies to constantly attend to their financial figures. Around this architecture of financial reporting are technologies for aggregating financial transactions, accountants that are experienced in managerial and financial accounting, certified auditors, and internal processes for transmitting information from subsidiaries out to the market (in this case, the SEC-equivalent in Korea, known as DART), where this transparent information can be consumed by a financial public that adjudicates on managerial performance via changes in stock prices (cf. Zaloom 2003). The holding company in theory shepherds this process, along with external auditors hired to verify the statements, so that information is properly (and accurately) aggregated. It is a wider institutional structure built around a process of verifying numbers (cf. Power 1997), including the elevation of financially oriented CFOs to managerially oriented CEO positions.

Along these lines, we can see how the emphasis on a particularly institutionally reinforced genre, like financial statements, does not dissolve corporations, their overall forms, or the existence of management, but redefines what their roles are as managers. In this perspective,

⁴ Conglomerate groups, while distinct as legal entities, can be designated as “one” if they share a *daeri-in* or a “person responsible,” such as a unified decision-maker like a chairman. This has become complicated as existing conglomerates have split into smaller conglomerates, such as Samsung or Hyundai who are connected, by family members to *other* conglomerates. This is known as *bunga* or “divided families.”

legal forms of the corporation come into play as particular objects of financial control and individuation, but not disconnected from their administration or managerial entities. In this process, management's role has not completely disappeared, but has become encompassed by certain or regulatory market actors who dictate the terms on which organizational information is produced. Thinking along these lines helps situate how certain dimensions of South Korean conglomerates have been reshaped by broader institutional fields since IMF restructuring. It is also helpful for seeing how these kinds of processes operate through the enforcement of producing certain textual genres that simulate the image of transparency, order, and discipline through periodic exposure and evaluation.

But what did the transition to a holding company do to South Korean conglomerates? Did they become managed by the market? Did families lose their entrenched modalities of power? I will argue that holding companies have re-arranged managerial relations in many conglomerates, but broader shifts in political authority has come from other sources, not the imposition of financialized forms. In the case of Sangdo, the holding company structure did impact the structure of the group, but had little impact on corporate *management* after the shift to a holding company in the early 2000s. It was only in the early 2010s with the transition to the centralized corporate tower and the rise of the third-generation owner-CEO Ahn that Sangdo started to shift its modes of authority. While this indeed took place within the space of the holding company, the format it took as an organizational form more closely resembled a common South Korean managerial type: the “future strategy office” (*miraejeollyaksil*). I discuss this in the next section.

Birth of a Control Tower

My focus in this chapter is on the terms by which the internal political order at Sangdo was mediated and channeled through changes in expert-based managerial practices. Thus, I pay attention not to the formalized corporate forms (like holding companies) nor to the source of particular ideas (like American-style managerial knowledge) as templates which usher in new political orders (or maintain old ones). Rather I suggest a focus towards the ways such entities became mobilized for new modalities of management within the conglomerate. This transition was not done in one step – such as the creation of a new brand, the promotion of a new CEO, or the implementation of a new program – but by channeling it through a host of expert managerial practices, that between them represented highly diverse modes of expertise, like Human Resources, Strategy, Legal, and Finance. The transition had to be “translated” (Latour 1984) into expert modes of management. Translating here is not about converting from one language to another, but channeling a political will into numerous technical modalities and managerial techniques. Even without resistance from subsidiaries or labor, translating the desire for a new political order within Sangdo incurred its own form of resistance among the techniques themselves.

Despite its status as an owner, the legal entity Sangdo Holdings had had a limited administrative role in the group, both in terms of personnel size and administrative function, from its founding in the early 2000s until around the 2010s when the company moved into Sangdo Tower. Before that, the management of the group companies was geographically dispersed: the CEOs and main planning units of each subsidiary were attached to the main factories, located around different cities. Management functions based around the subsidiaries had vastly different areas of expertise in their operations, internal cultures, and labor relations. Sangdo First, whose main factory was located in the southeast region of the country, had long

been a steel exporter, with sales offices in a half dozen countries. Sangdo South, in contrast, had its main factory in the southwest region where it primarily made steel products for domestic manufacturers. The holding company was above these two entities – though technically it did not own the majority of Sangdo First. Such ownership distinctions may have made little difference administratively because until the early 2010s, the holding company itself was nothing more than a small office with fewer than ten employees. The office occupied a single floor in the building of Sangdo First’s old headquarters in central Seoul. Employees who worked there at the time described it as a family-like atmosphere where employees with different functions socialized together and helped each other on projects. Their work had little downward impact on the management of the Sangdo companies at the time, outside of certain group-only activities: financial reporting to various regulatory agencies, holding annual events for group employees, publishing the group magazine, running recruitment and on-boarding for new employees, and corporate branding. Many of these services were outsourced to outside services companies as well. Where the holding company did have authorized discretion, such as in the selection of executives or reporting of monthly sales results, they deferred to CEOs themselves. In general, subsidiaries created and controlled their own managerial knowledge, which the CEOs would report to the chairman, orally. Such was the nature of a self-described philosophy of “autonomous management” (*jayul gyeong-yeong*) in which there was little central oversight or management, and subsidiaries had the freedom to operate as independent units.⁵

⁵ Clark’s (1979) monograph *The Japanese Company* notes that relative autonomy of conglomerate units in Japan was also common (80-83). Relative to separate divisions, maintaining autonomous subsidiaries allowed companies greater flexibility in their relations (such as using multiple banks), allowed them to accrue greater capital when subsidiaries were listed, and could hide over potentially unflattering sales reports (at the time, conglomerates did not have to submit consolidated financial statements). It also allowed greater organizational pride and status opportunities (e.g., a director at a subsidiary compared to a manager of a division).

By the time of my fieldwork in 2014, the Sangdo Group had taken its horizontally dispersed network and verticalized it: the entire group – all dozen or so subsidiaries – had moved into the new Sangdo Tower, a forty story glass tower a few miles from the old central office in Seoul. Manufacturing and R&D labor remained at regional factories, but most major staff functions as well as international sales teams moved into the tower, with many employees and their families moving up to Seoul. In the tower, order was stratigraphically conveyed in the floor scheme. The larger subsidiaries were near the top, housing their sales teams and central planning groups. Down the tower, the subsidiaries descended in order of revenue, each occupying their own floors.⁶ At the top of the tower sat the chairman who commanded his own floor. Sandwiched between him and the subsidiaries was the holding company, spatially occupying a position atop the group, a position that until then had only been depicted in organizational charts and on financial statements.

The move also co-occurred at the same time as the next generation of family members who owned the Sangdo Group were reaching the age of middle-manager. Around the corporate world in South Korea, a cohort of heirs was beginning to take over positions within their conglomerate groups to breed them professionally and politically for a future as executives or possible chairperson roles. While much concern is made in the news of the “fast-track” of these heirs, the rate and site of their promotions, though exceptional, are carefully watched as indexes of their potential leadership abilities or inabilities. Certain heirs are given posts in overseas branches or allowed to take on small subsidiary projects to test their mettle, gain experience, and build political connections within the conglomerates. Stories play out in the national media with

⁶ The group did not control the whole forty-story building. In fact it only occupied the top half; the other half was rented to other companies, which included insurance company offices and an IT company.

differing degrees of success, failure, and scandal, such as the sons of the Hanwha Group chairman Kim Seung-yeon. The first son successfully led the bid for a solar panel company in Germany to boost the group's energy holdings while the second son came under investigation for drug possession and a public bar brawl. At Sangdo, the owning family Ahn was far outside the public eye compared to the larger conglomerates, but the succession plan to the third generation followed similar steps. Like other heirs, the owner-CEO Ahn had been educated in the US and worked in other prestige companies in South Korea before coming to Sangdo Holdings as a team manager.

By the time I arrived in July of 2014, the owner-CEO Ahn had become an executive. And by the time I left, he had received a new title that roughly accorded to "CEO" (*jeonmu*) that was positionally above the handful of executives of the company. They all reported to him. When I began at the company, it had roughly forty-five workers, many of whom had traced their hiring to the owner-CEO Ahn himself who had personally scouted or interviewed them. While the owner-CEO Ahn had a major role in new hires to the company, including my own, I cannot say with certainty that the administrative rise of the holding company was *due to* his influence or merely co-occurrent. There were a number of major economic issues facing the group at the time: from fierce domestic competition, to trade regulation, to slumping global steel prices, to labor disputes that may have necessitated greater need for centralized planning and synergy across the group companies. Nevertheless, his thumbprint was clearly felt on the direction of the holding company.) New teams were added and existing ones grew in members.⁷ Across all the

⁷ Sangdo Holdings had nine professional teams: human resources, auditing, finance and accounting, general affairs, public relations, performance management, strategy, legal, and research and investment. Each of these teams had from three to six team members including a team manager. Some caveats are necessary: human resources had two sub-teams: planning and development; research and investment was technically spun off as a separate company for financial reporting purposes; and the permanent IT support team was technically only a contractor from another subsidiary and was not included in formal company activities of Sangdo Holdings.

teams, experienced personnel from bigger conglomerates were being “scouted” as managers and executives. On the Human Resources Planning team, for instance, the holding company long had just two junior employees (one ranked *sawon* and the other *daeri*), representing the two lowest ranks, who were supervised directly by the CEO. In the expansion, the team added another *daeri* (who had been at a consulting company), a junior manager (*chajang*), a team manager (*timjang*), and an executive (*sangmu*). Each of the new employees had different areas of expertise, but shared similar profiles: elite university graduate, study abroad experience, and work experience at either larger Korean or foreign company. This pattern was similar to other teams. Even my unexpected arrival and strange presence as the only non-ethnic Korean in the Sangdo Tower could have fit into this expansionist narrative of a new infusion of “outsiders” at the top.⁸

Beyond hiring a new breed of elite managers into the group, the departments themselves gained new administrative powers, reflective of the scope of the holding company as a mediator, and not merely a conduit, between the chairman and the subsidiaries. Take the legal team for instance. There had never been a formal legal team or general counsel at the Sangdo Group prior to the early 2010s. In the case of legal help, each subsidiary contracted out to specific law firms that were specialized in commercial, maritime, or labor law. The legal team was created to centralize legal outsourcing projects while also bringing on in-house lawyers who could advise on legal issues on an ad-hoc basis. Administratively, this entailed creating a system of legal request templates through the company intranet by which managers or executives in subsidiaries could submit claims for legal aid (say, over a payment dispute with a contractor in China). The

⁸ Semantically, the difference between “insiders” and “outsiders” was marked by a distinction between those who had spent their whole careers at the company known as “old boys” (*oldeu boi*) and those who had jumped between companies known as “career employees” (*gyeok-nyeok sawon*).

designated lawyers generated a brief of advice on the matter and upload it to the portal or contract with an outside firm in cases where formal representation was needed. Part of this process involved inculcating in the subsidiaries a know-how both to recognize legal issues that would affect the group and to make requests to the central legal team and general counsel. The team had also hired a non-lawyer employee to the team to help properly establish this system of requests online and within the Group.

The format of these organizational patterns resembles less the financial monitoring of a holding company and more of a “future strategy office” (*miraejeollyaksil*) or a “secretariat” (*biseosil*). The Samsung Group founder Lee Byung-cheol was famous for his use of a secretariat in the 1970s, an office that came to be renamed the future strategy office in the 1990s. (Semantic niceties aside, these offices can be conventionally referred to as “control towers” (*keonteuroltawo*) to convey their perceived “real” function.)⁹ These “offices” (*sil*) immediately below the chairman are seen as extensions of a chairman’s authority and also a funnel for delivering him information. They are typically not actual legal entities; rather they tend to be offices that have no corporate-legal designation, but maintain a strong organizational or administrative authority over important decision-making and high-level personnel movements. Employees who work in these offices are sometimes officially assigned to and paid by other subsidiaries even though their organizational affiliation is to the head office. While Sangdo was still called a holding company, many indicators suggest that the office was formatted off of it in many ways: the strategy team itself was called the “future strategy team” overseen directly by the owner-CEO Ahn, a number of new employees and executives had come from top

⁹ Source:
http://magazine.hankyung.com/apps/news?popup=0&nid=01&c1=1001&nkey=2016011801051000191&mode=sub_view Accessed September 15, 2016.

conglomerates that also had major planning units, and even in conversation, employees would lament that Sangdo Holdings did not have as much centralized power as companies like Samsung or LG, to whom they were a work in progress.

In one-on-one interviews with employees at the holding company – often one of the few occasions I could talk to them without being overheard in the open office layout – I asked many how they saw their own team’s roles relative to the group as a whole. They each described their roles as part of a new mode of expertise above the subsidiaries and below the chairman, seeing their roles as mediating between the two. These descriptions followed an organizational flow chart model, diagrammed with boxes and lines. In interviews in rooms with whiteboards, they would often pick up a marker and start drawing arrows up and down. While the old model also had a vertical bottom-to-top structure, it was one that flowed from the individual CEOs directly to the chairman. The idea of this model was similar to how the markets viewed conglomerates. Providing aggregate reports to the Chairman provided iconic summaries, but they largely lacked the wider details and bad results could be softened. The chairman, though he was final addressee and symbolically final evaluator, was delimited in many ways by this format of reporting. In one instance, I came across a report from after the 2008 global financial crisis in which the subsidiaries had been mandated with cutting expenses. Like many other conglomerates at the time (that depended on the US market) crisis management (*wigi gyeong-yeong*) targets were put in place to cut costs in anticipation of a global slowdown in the steel trade. The program was handled by the auditing department who collated and summarized the results in a report tabulating the results for each subsidiary. Many of them had not met their targets; to punish them, however, the chairman had only the power of his pen – writing on the cover of the report a short note of stern encouragement to try to achieve goals in the second half of the year.

The new order in the company saw the holding company mediating between the chairman and the subsidiaries with more power than just a pen. When I talked with Junior Manager Kim on the Performance Management Team, for instance, about the changing role of the holding company, he quickly diagrammed out the organizational relationships in communicative terms. He noted that in the old way of doing things on their team, the CEOs of subsidiaries would report orally to the Chairman about monthly, quarterly, or annual results. His team, the Performance Management Team, existed simply to compile information so that the chairman could read the information prior to the meetings. In the new mode of operating, he said that his team would now be actively attempting to re-structure subsidiary businesses to make them more compatible or strategically aligned. He emphasized *downward* arrows from his team to the subsidiaries to indicate this. This marked a shift in their role, from a passive compiler (receiving from below) to an active restructurer (communicating down and even moving around parts).

Junior Manager Kim was careful to distinguish, however, that even though the culture of Sangdo Holdings was changing due to the growing size and increasing influence given to individual teams, each team had a different relationship to their specific objects of knowledge. His team, the Performance Management Team, had access to non-public financial and sales data that was submitted monthly by the subsidiaries. Because these were sensitive data that included detailed sales data for individual product lines, he said, they never emailed the reports they created; they printed them out and hand-delivered them to the chairman. Other departments he noted did not have to be careful in the same manner. For example, the Finance Team was largely in charge of reporting information *not* to the chairman, but filing it to financial regulators, through an online portal. Every piece of data that the Finance Team handled from subsidiaries

would ultimately be made public. He contrasted this with the Human Resources Planning Team which never conveyed any information in reports about human resources records as a matter of personal privacy. Within the team only authorized members were allowed to see information like personnel evaluations.

Junior Manager Kim’s narration points to the ways that these professional experts, even when understanding their organizational status as a general version of a future strategy office or control tower one that could be depicted with arrows up and down on a whiteboard – in practice, each field was different. They experienced their organizational mandates based on different administrative structures, epistemological perspectives, regulatory issues, professional modes of conduct, and expert-specific genres. At a basic level, their professional areas shaped the objects and the domains in which they operate as experts. The figure below sketches out the different teams, objects of control, and the scope of their organizational reach.

Teams at Sangdo Holdings (during 2014-15)			
Korean	English translation	Object	Domain
<i>Injaegaebal</i>	Human Resources Development	Employee skills	All white collar workers in Korea
<i>Insakihwek</i>	Human Resources Planning	Employee records, employment status	Holding co. employees; subsidiary HR management
<i>Gamsa</i>	Auditing	Fraud, internal crime	Every global office & employee
<i>Jaemu</i>	Finance	Assets and debts	All legal entities of group
<i>Gyeong-yeong jiwon</i>	General Affairs	Office equipment; real estate; service contracts	Holding co. office; Sangdo Tower; Group office processes
<i>Hong-bo</i>	Public Relations	Group image	Internal employee audience (incl. families); Industry press
<i>Seong-gwa kwalli</i>	Performance Management	Sales	Six core subsidiaries
<i>Mirae jeollyak</i>	Future Strategy	Supply and buyer markets; competitors	Six core subsidiaries
<i>Jawongaebal</i>	Investment*	Liquid assets	Investment projects
<i>Beom-mu</i>	Legal	Risk	All legal entities of group

Figure 1.2: List of teams in Sangdo Holdings
 This list all of the official work teams at Sangdo Holdings with the objects of expertise and respective domains of control that I observed between 2014-2015.

Humble Experts

While professional differences do indicate the different objects of control or scope of their work, they do not necessarily tell us on what terms managers or teams came to translate a new organizational mandate to central expertise and planning at the top of the group. Many of these sociologically elite managers, who had both highly prestigious backgrounds and high mandates, found themselves with little power themselves. This was based on a range of factors: their lack of organizational knowledge, their lack of expensive IT-based tracking or monitoring systems, and ambivalence or recalcitrance from the subsidiaries to their new roles. In the words of one CEO, they were not “steel men” – that is, not the kind of employee who had worked in the steel industry for many years. Such local claims to authority contrasted with the global claims to authority wielded by the elite managers.

Recognizing these local threats, many employees in the holding company referenced their mandate to be “humble” (*gyeomsonhada*) in their work. This they said came directly from the owner-CEO Ahn who, perhaps because of his privileged status, was aware of how holding company employees might be read against him. Arrogant action from the strategy or HR teams, for instance, might seem (vicariously) like an overreach on *his* part. The necessity to be humble, however, hampered what team managers and executives might have sought to do in their own work – and the norms familiar from their previous companies. According to one team manager, at his old company in his role in the equivalent of the future strategy office, they could just “make a call” and everyone would fall their orders. Being humble of course is a typification of a certain kind of interactional demeanor and aligns with how one might subordinate their own status in front of others. In interactions with subsidiaries, I saw many holding company employees do this: having *hoesik* as equals with other subsidiary teams, going to subsidiary

offices or branches for meetings, or speaking in formal, respectful (*jondenmal*) to everyone from subsidiaries. This even played out in how they rode the elevator together.¹⁰

But humility as a sign that can be read by an interlocutor in relatively legible ways does not translate into the construction of PowerPoint documents, the layout of Excel sheets, the monitoring of expense reports, or other forms of managerial technique. In this sense, managers in the holding company had to “translate” these two competing mandates into the practices of their work, from the conduct of ongoing and existing programs to the launching of new ones. In what follows, I focus on how three teams encountered their own managerial authority within a mandate to display their own expertise while also being “humble.” I focus on one particular project for each team: the Human Resources Planning Team and a new work tracking system called DRIVE, the Performance Management Team and the handling of monthly management reports, and the Public Relations Team and a new emblems of corporate identity.

Human Resources Planning and the DRIVE System

When I went to lunch one day with a junior manager from another team, I asked him what he thought about the new program, DRIVE, that was being rolled out by the Human Resources Planning team. He scoffed slightly at the question, noting that everything the HR team

¹⁰ The Sangdo Tower had been built with too few elevators, resulting in chronic over-crowding. One solution was devised to stagger elevator access, so that elevators would stop at every other floor and employees on skipped floors would take the stairs, up or down. Thus one could get off one floor early and walk up, or get off one floor later and walk down. This created somewhat of an interactional problem in the elevator, as employees could see where other employees chose to get off. Sangdo Holdings was on the 37th floor: they could get off at the 36th floor or the 38th floor. If there were other employees in the elevator, they would often hit the 36 and walk up. If there weren't they would hit 38. And on many occasions, if the employees got off at a lower floor and it was only holding employees remaining, someone would quickly switch from the 36th to the 38th floor before it was too late to change – thanks to a feature of South Korean elevators.

was doing was just “experimental” (*silheomjuuijeok*) and unclear whether it would pan out or not. This was not in reference to its quality – but rather to the fact that he saw it as an attempt by one expert team to put their stamp on a new project. The HR Planning Team had indeed developed this homegrown system for tracking and monitoring work projects called DRIVE (a pseudo-acronym). But to the creators of the system – namely Team Manager Jang, Assistant Manager Ji-soon as well as Executive Cho – DRIVE was meant to solve what they saw as a major managerial problem in South Korea: annual worker evaluations. These evaluations were instrumental in deciding promotions and bonuses. In South Korea, it had been common since the early 2000s to use annual goals that would be tied to “key performance indicators” (or KPIs). Using KPIs for HR evaluations was common around Sangdo subsidiaries and other conglomerates. KPIs, which set specific numerical targets for specific kinds of work, help resolve the Taylorist problem of having to measure different work types and levels across different fields: each worker or each job may have its own categories and metrics of KPIs. As expert practitioners, the Human Resources managers at Sangdo Holdings however, abhorred KPI-based systems. They were highly aware that KPIs could be manipulated to make them easy to attain, that they were not necessarily reflective of the actual work that employees did, and that coming up with them and tracking them was itself a time-consuming task. Furthermore, because KPIs provided only a set of fixed numbers (customers satisfied, and so on) it meant that workers tended to work *towards* the numbers, not the work itself. Fixed numbers provide a snapshot of performance in terms of numbers achieved, but they are not necessarily a good record of that performance over time. The HR managers developed a new program, known as DRIVE, that was meant to connect evaluations to actual work done and create an ongoing record of employees’ performance. This program was originally developed to be used in the Sangdo Holdings

headquarters as a prototype that would eventually be incorporated into the subsidiaries' HR systems. While I was at Sangdo Holdings however, it was in pilot testing. (And pilot testing is only half pun: the HR managers had originally gotten the idea for DRIVE from a case study on evaluations at an international airline.)¹¹

DRIVE worked as a fixed application within the company's ERP system. ERP, or Enterprise Resource Planning, is a conventional name for business software that is most commonly used for supply chain management and accounting. It is a highly customizable database platform that is linked through local company networks. ERP at Sangdo was mostly used for accounting but it could in theory be used for any kind of business process. Though ERP was not frequently used for HR projects, Assistant Manager Ji-soon developed DRIVE with the help of an IT worker from Sangdo IT, the group's IT subsidiary. Any employee and their manager could access the application from within the existing software on their computers.

The basic idea behind DRIVE was linking any given work project with its evaluation, so that annual evaluation was not an end-of-year tally of numbers that had no temporal trace, but one based on a clear record that could be referred back to. Instead of having separate KPIs that stood outside of work, DRIVE would measure projects as they were beginning and finishing. In addition to changing the relation between work and evaluatory forms, DRIVE was also meant to change the relation between employee and manager (or team member and team manager). Through the interface of the system, managers would more closely oversee projects of those under them and employees would have clear ideas about what the goals, output, and expectations were for a given project.

¹¹ The basic idea that inspired them was that after every flight, stewards fill out a form evaluating themselves on that particular flight, keeping a close record of each event recorded close after it.

In theory, DRIVE was meant to be “closer” to the actual work done by employees. However, this meant creating a new kind of world on the ERP system that could represent how they saw work and its evaluation to exist. Assistant Manager Ji-soon worked closely with an IT worker to program a new software that would incorporate all the elements of the new program in an interface that employees could use. This involved literally creating all the elements of the interface from scratch, including basic descriptors like who the manager was, who the employee was, what the project name was, what the start and end dates were. For more substantive information, text boxes were created that would allow textual evidence to be filled in about the project, its goals, the expected outcome of the project, and what was expected of the employee. (This was slightly different than a “form” even though it appeared on the screen as such; what employees saw and what managers saw were different.) Such basic elements for describing work were somewhat radical: it had the effect of casting work in general as sequences of ongoing projects that had very specific kinds of goals and outputs, starts and finishes, completed by one employee and overseen by one manager, with grades given to one employee. (One employee who had two bosses was particularly difficult from a programming angle.)

In addition to redefining the categories of work, DRIVE created new decisions and modes of evaluations for managers. Prior to a project starting, an employee had to fill out the text boxes and work information, which then had to be approved by his or her team manager. At the end of a given project, the team manager had to log back in and fill out grades for the project on four areas: timeliness, quality, importance, and collaboration. These grades were based on an A, B, C, D grading format. Together with a weight attached to each project, the separate grades of each project would tally up at the end of the year to provide an overall grade for employee performance on their work, one of two measures used in determining annual performance

evaluations. (The other measure was adherence to company values.) To the HR managers, this had the benefit over KPIs in which acts of evaluation by a manager might only happen at one time (at the end of the year). With DRIVE, a manager's evaluatory role was divided up over the course of a year, becoming a sum of its parts. This was meant to prevent the cognitive tendency to evaluate based on the latest work done. It was also meant to prevent any kind of social favoritism or equity challenges that might emerge at the end of the year.

One of the unique features of DRIVE was that it had a built-in measure for employees and HR managers to surveil the use of the system and ensure its correct usage. Once a manager had submitted the grades for a given project, there was a box that only the employee could check: whether the manager had met with the employee to discuss the project and the grades or not. In order to submit the grades as an official record, the manager had to defer to the employee to acknowledge a face-to-face meeting took place in which they and the manager discussed the evaluation. The meeting was meant to cover the positive outcomes of the project and so-called "improvement points" (*gaeseonjeom*). Privy to seeing this were the managers from the HR team who had access to the ERP master view. The HR managers could see who was submitting their DRIVE projects and who was not. They could see for instance, that many team members had inputted their projects but certain team managers had not signed off on them. They could also compare certain team managers had grading tendencies (for being too harsh or too soft). As I was leaving the company, Ji-soon was developing a visual dashboard for executives (who were above team managers) so they too could keep monitor their managers' managerial abilities in a kind of double-layered surveillance. Note here that even as DRIVE was meant to replicate work in different terms, it itself became a new kind of modality through which the work was observed and carried out. While this was "closer" to work and improved on KPI system, it also reflected a

particular *view* of work: one related to the individual employees as the producers of work and managers as their singular evaluators. The important point was the evaluation of *people* not of work itself. DRIVE, as close as it was to tracking this process, was not a measurer of work progress, whatever that might be.

Implementing DRIVE program was more than a technical process of creating the right mix of optics, user design, and formulae for calculation. Before launching the program, Ji-soon made separate presentations to all nine teams in the Sangdo Holdings company, explaining to them the logic behind the new initiative, its benefits over a KPI approach, and how team members and managers were meant to fill in each section of the ERP system. She even created a manual downloadable from the intranet. As DRIVE was launched in the second half of 2014, Ji-soon kept active track of how her project was going. She periodically emailed updates to members of the company to show them how many total projects were being input to DRIVE in a given month or quarter while offering tips on how to fill in their sub-projects better. At one point, they decided to create an award called “Best DRIVER” (again, a pseudonym) to highlight which employee had successfully completed the most DRIVE projects (regardless of grades). Privately, however, she would discuss with Team Manager Jang about the state of different teams or problematic team managers and figure out ways to convince them to get them to participate.

One of the larger goals of the project was to eventually create an HR system that the subsidiaries could also implement within their organizations. This was not a matter of forcing the DRIVE system upon them, which they would have little authority to do. (It is worth noting that even if they *did* have such authority, implementing a new program like DRIVE in an organization of more than a thousand employees, scattered all over South Korea and different

countries, whose salaries and career histories are already tied to other kinds of HR systems, companies which have already invested significant money in their own ERP system development, would be no simple task politically or logistically.) Nevertheless, while the DRIVE program was being launched with Sangdo Holdings, Team Manager Jang also began to share details of the program with two of the major subsidiaries, Sangdo First and Sangdo South. In one presentation, which I was permitted to sit in on, Team Manager Jang shared details about the new program with an executive from Sangdo First. Jang took off his normally cynical and joking frame within our team and adopted an obsequiously respectful and cheerful demeanor as he spoke glowingly of the new program's features, careful not to insult Sangdo First's existing KPI program. The executive, who had not worked in HR and didn't seem to care much for it, gave it a luke-warm reception. Later Team Manager Jang told me that the purpose was not to try to sell him on it at that time, but to get them to implement it over time, perhaps after other subsidiaries. Sangdo South, on the other hand, was more receptive to the program and began to implement their own version of the program. It was not a direct copy, but adapted to their organization and managed by their own IT people. In this way, they were running a "parallel" system that was not a citation of DRIVE. Team Manager Jang acknowledged to me that by letting them adapt it on their own, it would not be the same as the holding company forcing it upon them directly. Sangdo South even made improvements in the execution of the program which they shared with Sangdo Holdings.

How do we understand DRIVE within the context of a control tower-in-waiting like Sangdo Holdings? In some sense, it demonstrates the ways that expert teams sought to create marketable projects that would reflect well on themselves as a matter of justifying their *own* positions in the company. That was a criticism I heard from some employees who were

disdainful of all the new, disjointed projects happening across different teams – everyone wanted their new project to be the centerpiece of the holding company as a kind of symbolic display of their competence towards the owner-CEO Ahn.

But we could also analyze from the way that it modeled both office life and managerial work in two different senses: in one sense, it created a system that sought to mimic actual work relations, so as to create a more accurate picture of work, its modes of completion, and instances of evaluation. Through minute technical details, it also implicitly sought to model better team relations by forcing managers to write out their evaluations and justify them in face-to-face meetings with employees. It was thus a mechanism for creating better team relations in an idealized model of direct face-to-face contact. (Not all team managers were proponents of the new process – even the younger ones. One said he delayed doing the DRIVE forms until the last minute and clicked through the boxes confirming that he had met with the employees; I also assume he asked his employees to collude.) The kind of experimental program that DRIVE represented was nevertheless framed as a model or pilot program of modern HR management that could eventually be spread to the whole Sangdo Group over time and with technical refinement.

But we can also see here the kinds of supporting work needed to make this particular model of expertise come into being and the kinds of participant roles that it generated unintentionally. First, in modelling new relations among team members, it created new interactional encounters between team managers and employees that could supersede managers' own styles. Other team managers in Sangdo Holdings were not necessarily friendly to the program nor the way it forced face-to-face encounters for open discussion. The manager mentioned above who didn't like the DRIVE program was himself well-liked by his team

members and saw no need for a new managing model. Second, the creation of the DRIVE program put HR itself into a role we might normally associate with “higher-ups” or executives: they became both architects and witnesses to the projects, tasks, and progress of every other team, not to mention adopters themselves. Interactionally, this was a peculiar role to take on vis-à-vis their co-workers who stood equal to them in organizational status, but whose work they were now shaping, albeit indirectly. Ji-soon’s ways of explaining the program in individual meetings served to equate the teams as equal and level their own authority by framing them as a new HR method. Third, the HR team also had to construct a position for itself vis-à-vis the subsidiaries. Rather than constructing itself as an authority, the team, through Team Manager Jang, framed the project in different ways (as a mere demonstration in one case, and a co-production in another case) rather than as an elitist program being forced upon them. Thus, where we might expect Human Resources to be nominally involved in viewing the corporation as a collection of people with different tasks and responsibilities that needed to be evaluated better, HR actually redefined the work itself. In the process, it also became entangled with the nature of manager-employee relations and subsidiaries who had invested in their own systems.

In closing, where HR Planning Team saw the need to create a new HR-based expertise within the group entailed convincing their own coworkers of the need for the project first. As the only team whose object of control was employee conduct, this created a heterogeneous circuit of communication and interaction. In order to reinvent the practices of the subsidiaries, they would first have to reinvent their “own” practices, something many other team managers were not in favor of as it too affected their own salaries, bonuses, and promotion futures. Thus, even as the HR team developed a bonified project to capture their expertise, they had to carefully ensure its successful implementation both below in the subsidiaries and on their own floor.

Performance Management¹² and Monthly Reports

Sangdo Holdings had three teams that were interested in the productive performance of their subsidiaries. The Performance Management Team's main job was to oversee productivity and sales from across the major steel-producing subsidiaries. The Strategy Team was meant to think about the future of the steel and steel-related industries to make sure the subsidiaries were structurally prepared for market changes. And the Auditing Team, while nominally in charge of policing financial or other kinds of fraud within the group, framed much of its work as an internal consultant to subsidiaries and overseas offices. Each of these teams, however, had vastly different institutional domains and participant roles in relation to seemingly similar objects of control. In short, Strategy and Auditing frequently went *out* of the office into the economic worlds of the group: the former to go visit factories or meet potential new suppliers in anticipation of new mergers and acquisitions, and the latter to visit individual offices around the world to "improve" local management practices by gathering extensive production, sales, and financial information at individual offices around the world. Performance Management largely found itself situated *within the office*, nestled between the subsidiaries and the Chairman. Their role was to assess and summarize company sales reports and management reports. This existed in the genre of "monthly management reports" (*wolgan gyeong-yeong bogoseo*). These used to be prepared by each subsidiary and collected by the team and delivered to the Chairman.

During my time at the company, the Performance Management team was undergoing a shift in expertise. The team had been one of the few teams to predate the rise of owner-CEO

¹² There is a subtle difference between the translation of "management" in the name here. "Management" is the official English title the company used for its business cards, the word derives from the Korean *gwalli* meaning narrowly "control" or "administer" as a function or activity. This is opposed to the more broad meaning word *gyeong-yeong* which is used for things like "management studies" or "management philosophy." One writer compared the difference to the German terms *Betriebs* and *verwaltung*. Source: <https://www.mentorsnote.com/archives/746>

Ahn. It had been made up of mid-career Sangdo men who had been lifelong subsidiary employees who had been promoted up to the holding company. The team had been led by a team manager and CEO who had both spent their entire careers at Sangdo First and respected the authority of the Chairman and the subsidiary CEOs. Thus they did not directly interfere in the work of the subsidiaries but acted as conduits for the Chairman, collecting and presenting information from the subsidiaries on time and in standard formats. In 2015, the former CEO retired and was replaced by an incoming CEO. The incoming CEO – only ten years junior than his predecessor – had spent his entire career at one of South Korea’s elite conglomerates where he had risen to be a high-level manager, but was ultimately forced out. He had a demonstrably different style than the previous CEO. When he moved into to his new office at Sangdo, he had a large flat screen TV installed and insisted on using no paper. He reviewed all the reports with his team on a large flat-screen TV and read any reports on his iPad or laptop. In addition to the CEO, two other men joined the team, one a CPA from an accounting firm and another a former manager at a finance company. The new CEO made a warm gesture by buying everyone in the company smoothies on his first day in the office. But otherwise he could be heard yelling at members of his team from inside his own office for hours-long meetings.

When I was spending time with their team for a few days during the end of my fieldwork, the three team members, the team manager, and the new CEO were in the midst of revamping the monthly reporting process for subsidiaries. They were debating a new format for how to submit the monthly management reports to the Chairman. At issue for the men was how to reform a report that could only be produced within a very narrow time span as well as textual space (each report was typically only three to five PowerPoint slides long). Each month, subsidiary representatives submitted data via a standard template that reflected latest sales

achievements from their subsidiaries' various product lines as well as any indications of new clients gained or lost. Getting this information in the days following the end of every month, the Performance Management Team had little time to compile this information into PowerPoint and report it to the Chairman and other owners (the so-called *hwoejangdan*) for their reading. These reports, despite continuing important financial and sales information, had very short shelf lives: there was pressure to submit them at the end of the month to the Chairman in time for him to make any decisions or evaluations which could be passed down; after this brief window, they would lose their value as indicators of a current economic state and utility for making decisions. The information, if not reported on time, for example could be considered "trash" (*sseuregi*) in the words of one manager. This was literal in one sense: I found old monthly reports in the reusable printing paper box in the days after submission.

I had the chance to participate as an observer in a pair of two-hour-long meetings called by the CEO to discuss the templates. They were discussing different options for how to create a PowerPoint template that would be tailored to what the Chairman and owners' "needs" (using the English loan) were. Unlike HR they were not modeling the real world of office relations, but anticipating a moment of literacy: because they didn't know exactly what the Chairman would hypothetically want to know, they debated how to translate this into the textual specifics of a report. What they decided to include in the report would also entail what their own contribution was versus that of the subsidiaries. For example, their debate included the issue of whether to mix the content of the PowerPoint report between "60:40" quantitative and qualitative information, "80:20," or even "40:60." That is, should it have more raw data or more interpretation and analysis? Quantitative information like sales information was useful but it would not provide any interpretation over what the data meant, a gap which the qualitative

information could provide. Qualitative information, like analyses of market trends or rationalizations from subsidiaries about increases or decreases in sales, would be more beneficial to interpreting the data. Doing so, however, would require subjective interpretation on their part, more information gathering, and a longer production time to analyze data and make consistently useful insights. What if they merely said the same thing every month? Thus, they were not concerned only about the relation between the primary source information and its synecdochal summary to the Chairman (i.e. *how* it was represented). They were also concerned with its second-order readings about how their own labor and expertise would be enacted.

Doing a more value-added approach (with more qualitative data to allow interpretation of the quantitative data) would take longer, they reasoned. This meant that, if they added in time for weekends, the Chairman and owners might not see the reports until the twelfth day of a given month, instead of the eighth. The CEO believed this would make the reports useless since it was already too late to get use out of the reports to make changes on a month-to-month basis. Asking subsidiaries to submit the information in a shorter period, such as at a fixed date (the thirtieth day of the month), would mean that subsidiary representatives would have to work on weekends or holidays. The managers happened to be discussing this in May, a month with a number of national holidays (Kid's day, Father's day, Worker's day, Teacher's day, and Couple's day). This fact seemed particularly salient to the younger managers who deemed it unfair to make subsidiary employees work over the holidays. The CEO, who had come from a conglomerate where workers took little vacation, had less sympathy, unless they could find another way to reduce the time to deliver the reports. He also considered excuses for being late, like holidays, suspicious. He harbored some antipathy towards the subsidiaries and their motivations: he

colorfully called them subsidiaries “rotten excuse-makers” (*birinnaemsena-neun bbenjjiri*), meaning they were likely trying to hide poor results from the holding company.

In the meeting, the CEO went on a long explanation about the importance of the physical act of delivering the report to the Chairman. If the CEO were to deliver the numbers with no analysis but on time, then there would be no value for their team. They would be merely conduits of numbers. As members of the Chairman’s staff, however, they should come up with some analysis to include in the report, or else the CEO would look ineffectual in front of the Chairman with nothing to say. As they debated what kinds of qualitative information to include, one joked that too much information would resemble a school textbook. Thick reports, however, were the preferences of one of the members of the ownership, one manager chimed in. Even if it looked like too much to the Chairman who preferred shorter reports, another member of the ownership (the owner-CEO Ahn) might find it more useful and thought that it should be covertly tailored to this style, even though he wasn’t the “official” final recipient. The owner-CEO Ahn, after all, was seen as the real decision maker and, more importantly, their direct boss.

By the time I had left the company in 2015, I was not able to see what the final choice on the template was. Nevertheless, in analyzing their discussions about the template, I highlight how the managers found themselves in a particular managerial bottleneck. They were embedded within an existing and predefined textual genre that generally was meant to convey information about subsidiary performance to the chairman. How that information was structured, what circuit it took, and what kinds of second-order readings one could infer from it were central to their concerns. The particular genre of the monthly management report afforded a narrow window both *text-internally* – in terms of content, length, or style – and *text-externally* – in terms of deadlines and mode of delivery. In a software platform that conveys little inscriptionary evidence

linked to personal contributions, the experts were cautious of other ways their expertise would be read within a PowerPoint format – hence a need to hand deliver it. This meant they had to translate how visual representations of numbers or textual representations of interpretations worked in a fashion to offer just the right amount for reading. The CEO was adamant that they should make sure that the Performance Management Team make its impact on the reports known – otherwise they are (seen as) passively submitting numbers. For them, in comparison to HR, they were not concerned about controlling the uptake of a new project as much as aligning their situational between subsidiaries and the CEO with an idealized image of themselves that could be gleaned from the document itself, a process that would need to be re-performed every month.

Worth noting is that while the Chairman’s reading habits and needs were important, they were also impossible to explicitly ask about. It was the job of the Performance Management Team to attune to this.¹³ On the other hand, the subsidiary representatives were seen as entities whose time could be controlled, but also could be disciplined as well – forcing them to miss vacation if need be. It was precisely through the discipline of timing (and not of information per se) that this particular department could exert some managerial command over its narrow domain. This form of discipline parallels the way that financial companies also discipline firms through demands for regular, standardized financial statements.

Public Relations and Emblems of Group Identity

¹³ One informant described this as reading the chairman’s *bonsim* or “true heart.” She was explaining that the job of high-level managers who interacting with executives or ownership was not just to deploy their expertise but to anticipate what a chairman *might* want and to interpret what he really *did* want when he used few words.

When I participated in the Korean Iron & Steel Association's annual 5K in April of 2015, I picked up a copy of the official magazine that consisted mostly of advertisements for the member companies. I noticed on the third and fourth pages, two bright glossy advertisements from two Sangdo subsidiaries, Sangdo South and Sangdo First, who were both sponsors of the race. The advertisements were notably different: one featuring a large "1" in three-dimensions, composed of steel and lying on the ocean in huge proportion to a steel factory complex on shore. The headline wrote that the company wanted to "surpass South Korea and become a global steel specialist." On the facing page was a giant steel pipe set against a blue sky background. In the distance was a city where the steel pipe was curving towards. The headline read: "[We] will become the main artery of global steel." Both rang true of an older style of Korean corporate aesthetics and copywriting: one talked about its desire to be number one and the other described its long history as a steel exporter. Aesthetically, it would hard to know that both were part of the same group aside from the Sangdo logos in the corner.

I showed these to the PR team manager at the holding company, Team Manager Chu, after the event. She was mildly taken aback. She had spent her days carefully managing Sangdo's corporate (i.e. group) image across various media and formats, yet she had little mechanism for controlling the haphazard marketing activities of the subsidiaries – who even issued their own advertisements. The Public Relations (PR) team was a small team of three junior managers and one team manager. While officially called PR or *hongbo*, their team focused on internal company marketing and coverage in trade newspapers. Steel companies, like other major manufacturing companies, are not typically in the business of consumer marketing. Nevertheless, the scope of their work encapsulated the entire group, inclusive of its overseas subsidiaries and foreign workers – anyone who worked at a Sangdo company was their potential

audience. Whereas most subsidiaries had HR or Performance Management functions, none had a dedicated PR or marketing function. (One of the ads above was produced by the subsidiary's Human Resources department.) PR represented a new function for the Sangdo Group. It was the mandate of the new PR team manager, who had been hand-picked from another major conglomerate, to develop and cohere the group's brand image.

In the few years that Team Manager Chu had come on, the group branding had been dramatically revised with the helpful support and financial allotments afforded by the owner-CEO Ahn. This entailed a range of new activities, such as the re-making of the company logo and color scheme, the dissemination of new company jackets and paraphernalia, the development and distribution of company values and a code of behavior, the revamping of the company internal magazine, *Our Sangdo*, a new website for each company in the whole group, and revamped trade show displays. For the PR team, then, the object of control was the company image, in general, but to do so meant enacting it the various behaviors of company employees who could wear their company jackets, read (or not) the company magazine, or publish their own advertising. Company-internal advertising was not so much about the dynamics of controlling brand qualities among a consuming public prone to mis-citation (Moore 2003, Nakassis 2012) but about reframing the internal culture as a modern, sophisticated place to work. The brand, inclusive of the new logo, was embedded into the qualities and aesthetics of material objects distributed to employees to use and take up: company wallets, briefcases, lapel pins, logo-embossed notebooks. Even the company café had its own Sangdo-stamped coffee cups that aligned with the new image. (I cannot share too many of the details of the new image without revealing easily identifiable information.)

The audience for the new company image was itself a specific kind of addressee, one that intentionally or not, elided other forms of belonging in the group. All readers could be addressed as “Sangdo Family” (*sangdogajok*) but more commonly just as “members” (*guseongwon*) of the group. *Guseongwon* is a generic term of organizational membership that can interpellate any kind of participant, regardless of employment status, in much the way “stakeholder” functions to include both shareholders and non-shareholders in US corporate-speak. This implicitly erases other forms of intra-group belonging, such as members of individual subsidiaries, individual plants, or, labor unions. Where this became most visible was the group magazine. Many subsidiaries produced their *own* magazines, narrativizing their own corporate lives (in some cases these were distributed electronically on the intranet; in others, they could be found in lounge areas in offices). The Group magazine, *Our Sangdo*, explicitly covered the wide-world of Sangdo Group companies, selecting specific teams to highlight and overseas offices to introduce in each issue. Thematic issues aligned to new group values and featured special articles that discussed the theme (such as “professionalism” or “communication” in more depth). The magazines also featured examples of Sangdo’s history – neatly depicted as a unilinear history of development and expansion. To represent the different voices of employees, results of light-hearted surveys posted from the intranet were tabulated and colorfully visualized and reader notecards were also included along with birth and wedding notices.

The magazines, distributed every two months to each employees’ home address,¹⁴ created an image not only of one group of undifferentiated members, but also a highly sophisticated one. Older versions of the magazine featured employees posing on the cover. This was revamped

¹⁴ The Team Manager Chu informed me they found out that the employees were not actively reading the company magazine delivered to their desks, so they decided to send it to their home addresses where their spouse, parents or other family members might learn about the company.

when Team Manager Chu arrived who oversaw the redesign of the magazine. It was contracted out to a small publisher who, instead of employees, put artistic drawings or photographed sculptures made out of steel on the covers. The paper stock was made heavier and more texturized. Articles in the magazine were outsourced to professional writers writing on global business trends. Articles that came from the chairman were ghost-written by a member of the PR team. This writing was different from the aspirational and generic corporate language of an older style of corporate South Korea. Gone were tropes of “being global” or “being a number one corporation”; the writer used a “flowery” (*hwaryeonhan*) register that relied on visual metaphors and resembled high literature in its tone. In the magazine, then, not only was Sangdo Group unified as one group via a mode of addressivity, but to be reader of the holding company-produced magazine was also a matter of refinement.

Our Sangdo depicted a world of Sangdo companies and employees, but it was only produced in Korean and distributed to South Korean offices. However, the PR team saw its scope as eventually widening. By the time I left the company, a number of projects were pushing the circulatory sphere of its reach further. Small pocket-size pamphlets summarizing the three company values were written in Korean, Chinese, and English and sent to subsidiaries to distribute to their offices. Similarly, the company began to make short news briefs in English and Chinese that summarized group-company accomplishments that would be distributed to offices in China and North America. Even within South Korea, they were testing new kinds of outreach: one member of the team was planning a new video relay service that would work by setting up displays in cafeterias and lobbies around the Sangdo offices and factories in the rural areas. This would allow the PR department to broadcast updated content from the headquarters to TV screens all around the country as employees were waiting in line for lunch.

Extending the brand through new genres and modes of uptake (reading, wearing, seeing, and so on) out into the world of addressees (the “members”) that it presumed to exist, was in some ways a matter of coordination and expense. The PR team was not as entangled in the complex organizational politics or reporting genres as other teams – many employees appreciated the fine qualities of the new objects that they were given or could hand out to clients. Thus, as an expert department they were not in charge of controlling within a managerial chain. In fact, one of the only sites for upward communication was approving purchase requests from subsidiaries for new company schwag – not a particularly complicated managerial affair.

This does not mean, however there were no risks. One particular area that was difficult to control was South Korean trade journalists who sought information on company news. There were a number of online-based trade magazines or newspapers that relied on press releases and advertising from major companies. To get this advertising, however, ill-intentioned journalists could call potentially any employee in the group to seek out information from unwitting employees on trade deals, labor issues, or internal politics. Often times this information could be used not as a news story but as a threat against a company to be used to buy more advertising in a newspaper or to provide exclusive scoops for a company. To thwart this risk, the PR team hired a writer and artist to create a cartoon strip that they sent out via the Sangdo intranet. The cartoon, drawn vertically so that it could be read on one’s phone, showed the risks of employees mistakenly giving out information to seemingly harmless journalists. It provided narrative instructions on how to funnel requests directly to Team Manager Chu’s office line. And because of this potential risk, Chu spent much of her time cultivating personal relations with a number of individual journalists themselves – with the hope that friendly relations would forestall the risk from their members.

The case of the PR team illustrates a case of widening physical and circulatory expansion of the company brand and internal audience, as it was reimagined by the holding company. This entailed matching a pre-figured audience with the actual reading groups. Where other departments were enmeshed in a specific kind of genre through which certain forms of managerial control could be exerted (Performance Management) or around which other genres were needed to frame and support (HR), the case of PR exhibits the necessity of multiple modalities to encompass the brand/image as actually existing in the world (what brand marketers often call “touch-points”). Sangdo as a manufacturing company did not have the same trademark-related issues of people “mis-styling” their brand by renegade consumers, but they did encounter simple risks that could destabilize their efforts – like ads produced by subsidiaries, competing company magazines, and ill-intentioned journalists. Thus, what was a seemingly open world to expand the brand/image through different genres of branded encounter, was actually a meta-semiotic necessity to consistently produce objects that would populate the world that they sought to encompass.

Unifying Managerial Worlds: Monthly Manager Meetings

With all these different perspectives on the conglomerate, the panoptic image we might imagine of a control tower – where the executives or owners could see everything in their group were quite rare. Even the owner-CEO Ahn received his news through department specific reports and meetings. Managers in each separate team were often quite unaware even of what other teams were doing or how they did it. While they might have known generally what the others did, they did not see the various ways others’ worlds were shaped by particular genres, meetings,

and files, as well as the risks that each team faced. This does not mean that they could be encompassed by one however. Just as each of the three teams I've discussed attempted to encompass a diverse set of actors through modes of technical representation, documentary process, or material circulation, respectively, so too could expert teams themselves.¹⁵ Team managers became objects of reporting themselves once a month. All of Sangdo Holdings' higher-ups gathered on the thirty-ninth floor conference room for two meetings, once a month, on back-to-back days. The first meeting included just the CEO and team managers; the second, added the executives and owners. No non-team manager was allowed to participate in either. The meeting operated as a kind of call-to-report for the face-to-face evaluation of the CEO and the owner-CEO Ahn. All the managers sat around a large marble table with the CEO and owner-CEO Ahn symbolically in the middle of the table with executives closer around and the team managers filling out the edges. I had requested attendance at the executive version of these meetings which I was able to participate in May before my departure.

My original interpretation of these meetings was as part of a managerial chain of reporting that passed from the teams ordinarily up through the team managers, executive, CEOs, and ownership. In certain performative ways, both through the seating arrangements, the speaking turns, and the preparation for the meeting, it did recapitulate this image (cf Duranti 1994). Beyond the meeting proxemics, there was a local circuit that reproduced this image on and through paper: in anticipation of the meeting, team members updated their individual tasks on a shared template, after which team managers collected the information and sent it to one team who was tasked with assembling all of the team summaries into a shared document. This

¹⁵ That is, HR encompassed other kinds of work units in its representations of work and labor through its DRIVE system by representing work through singular discursive field. Performance Management did so through the discipline of the process of submitting monthly reports. PR did it through a circulatory encompassment of group branding.

document was printed and shared at the meeting, used to guide the order and topical choice of the meeting in which team managers reported to the CEO and the owner-CEO Ahn who were free to interrupt and ask questions as a privilege of figurative position as final addressees. My impression of the meetings as representing a formal process in the chain of command was broken when I learned from one manager that the meetings had originally begun by fiat of the former, retiring CEO.

For the retiring CEO, these meetings originally served as a way to stave off increasing team isolationism – a sentiment he expressed in an interview I did with him before he left. Putatively, they were a way to re-socialize members to each other in a way that did not happen naturally in the hallways or at *hoesik*. Indirectly, these meetings served to enact his own authority which had been largely trumped by the new crop of experts that was growing up around him, as well as the authority of the owner-CEO who was beginning to surpass him in organizational status and control. The monthly meeting (*wolganhoe-i*) represented a conventional genre format in which to do that. In this light, I began to see meetings as less an object of formal decision-making or the final events of formal chains of reporting, but as modalities for interactionally enacting the status of a given manager or executive.

Meetings like this were a common genre that recurred throughout the office. Teams also often held weekly meetings to discuss team-internal issues. It was normal for teams to have meetings first thing on Monday mornings in anticipation of the week or on Friday afternoons in reflection on, as well as in anticipation of the upcoming week. These weekly meetings were not mandatory, but most managers decided to hold them, as much of the work in Sangdo Holdings involved such highly individualized work that even members of the same team might not know what members one or two seats over from them were working on. Different team managers had

different styles in the conduct of these meetings as well: the Finance Team had highly structured weekly meetings in a roll-call format, where each member of the team read off their tasks from a pre-distributed sheet, dictating in an abstract, formal style. The HR Planning Team conducted meetings outside of the office, often ad hoc, while eating coffee and snacks. Team members in HR took casual notes and broke into long discussions about certain projects, injecting jokes, gossip, and teasing throughout. Finance resembled more like a “father-knows-best” format in which dutiful employees delivered information for the evaluation of their team manager (cf. Ochs and Taylor 2001). Despite the stylistic differences, we can observe a “fractally recursive” (Irvine and Gal 2000, 38) quality that both monthly meetings and weekly meetings maintained in a keeping a similar authority structure.

Monthly meetings reproduced managerial authority through the process of requesting information to be summarized and submitting it for evaluation. In this case, the purpose was to inform the CEO, and later the owner-CEO, who otherwise would not have been privy to all the information in each department. Yet, functionally, the meetings did very little for knowledge production in the organization. As a performative genre, however, it was a way for the CEO to claim a kind of managerial authority over the teams via the team managers.

Meetings, as Schwartzmann (1987) has described, are contexts “for individual and group social relationships, agreements, and disagreements to be discussed and framed as a discussion of the business of the organization” (1987: 282). That is, they are sites for reckoning relations and action in particular ways. Certain meetings may be ritually or semiotically framed as more “key” than others, such as meetings that gather the heads of departments or divisions (following Turner’s (1967) notion of “key” symbols or events). Call-to-report meetings, in this sense, seem more significant sites for grounding managerial authority than others. (They have an intertextual

quality with *hoesik* [dinner/drinking] events which are also institutionally salient events called by older managers as a mode of grounding their authority.)

By looking more closely at the textual construction of reporting, however, we can get a sense of how the diverse object worlds and practical entanglements of the various teams were translated to a common linguistic register via the meeting. Both types of monthly meetings reduced the complex object worlds of each team into a discrete category: “work” (*eommu*). This was done via a template through which each team manager would account for his team’s activities in a given month. For each team, the template was split into two large boxes: work (*eommu*) from the previous month and work for the upcoming month. For work from the preceding month, the box was split into two columns: “plans” (*gyehwoek*) and “results” (*siljeok*). Tasks for the upcoming month were listed under "plans" only, creating a simple three-column format of bulleted line items, printed horizontally via a PowerPoint slide. The results of the plans from the upcoming month were meant to be copied and rolled over to the next meeting’s month. Every team had to participate in summarizing and reporting the various work tasks in this way.

Within the columns, teams had freedom to group their tasks as they chose; there were no categorical constraints beyond listing “plans” and “results.” Most team managers grouped sets of tasks under larger ongoing projects, some listing them as individual line items, and others by fixed areas of responsibility per member. Each team’s page was written in the same register, known as *gaejosik* (or “itemized style”) a bureaucratic register used for lists. Item-style displays a reduction of syntactic forms to its base noun string. Lexically, it is marked by specialized two-character Sino-Korean words, making little or no use of pure Korean lexical items or grammatical derivations (similar between the diglossic contrast of Germanic and Latinate forms in legal English). Notably, individual lines of, say, a bulleted list, are marked by lexical strings

with little to no grammatical markings (e.g., case endings, verb endings, prepositions), punctuation markings, or other syntactic features. An example of this style is in Figure 1.3 below. Compared to other registers in Korean (such as narrative style or *seosulsik*), it is markedly shorter. From the meeting agenda I looked at, there was a reduced lexical class for describing actions: for plans, words like "launching", "set-up", "confirmation", "analysis" made up a narrow range of descriptors. For results, there were generic verbs of completed states, such as "completion", "finalization", "distribution" (or in some cases, "ongoing," to euphemistically, it seemed, describe projects that were delayed). In the item-style of meeting agenda, no tense markers are used to convey temporal completion and the use of specific dates were rare. Bulleted items did not specify *which* employees were in charge of the work. (For comparison, the format of the HR project, DRIVE, asked for fully narrative sentences to be filled in paragraph boxes with specific requests for dates, participants, and metrics.)

Item Style (<i>gaejosik</i>)		
	Example 1	Example 2
<i>Korean (Hangul, native)</i>	재무분석 양식 설계	사별 결과공유 및 개선과제 수립
<i>Korean (Hanja, Sino)</i>	財務分析 樣式 設契	辭別 結果公有 및 凱旋科第 樹立
<i>English (direct)</i>	Finance Analysis Template Planning	Per-Company Results Sharing And Improvement Task Establishment
<i>English (natural)</i>	Designing a Financial Analysis Template	Sharing results for each company and establishment of Improvement Plan

Figure 1.3. An example of *gaejosik*
 This is the item-style (*gaejosik*) in Korean with glosses in Hangul (Korean script), Hanja (showing Chinese root words), direct English translations, and a natural English translation. In *gaejosik*, complex actions are reduced to noun strings of Chinese root words from a limited denotational class.

All departments and all kinds of works followed the register in describing how action was conceptualized and reported. This time had a certain cyclicality to it as well: what was proposed for the upcoming month moved verbatim to the preceding month's column at the next meeting,

where the activities would be evaluated again. As calendrical time moved forward, activities within it followed a simple structure of “planned” and “completed.” At the same time, however, within the boxes, one could see the traces of very different object worlds. That is, they were not all reduced to the sum of their register. The Performance Management team included an addendum of stock prices for subsidiary companies and competitors with monthly changes. The legal team had divided their work up into columns reflecting cases marked implicitly by which lawyer was doing what. HR Planning simply divided its work by separate ongoing projects (perhaps in the style of their DRIVE model). Nevertheless, each was contained within the same visual format, register, and temporal construct.

The lack of specificity on paper to individual responsibility and actions was echoed in the interactional dynamics of the meeting itself. Team managers largely read neutrally but blithely from the document, giving some generic details about certain projects listed on the paper. They provided an oral summary for the text on paper. While the managers spoke to the group, only the CEO and the owner-CEO were expected to evaluate the language of the team manager. At times, however, side laughter or teasing broke out among the team managers who were largely well acquainted with each other. One manager was teased for giving *too much* detail in one of his reports. These meetings were a space generally reserved for team managers but if a team manager was out of town, the next highest team member would fill in, reading off their team’s activities as the representative. My interpretation of these moments of blithe participation, occasional joking, lack of formal evaluation and individual accountability, and the substitutability of members suggests that these meetings were indeed a mode of grounding authority for the CEO, and were continued on, but were largely seen as an event that one must show up *for* as a matter of ceremonial respect that was codified in the production of the agenda

and summary template, but did not have a wider functional connection to organizational documentation or knowledge.

These meetings were one of the few ways that fields of managerial expertise came to be intertextually legible with each other via a specific event genre (one-hour meeting) together with a textual genre (team-based agenda of plans). Even though the genre merged these different worlds, it was not textually problematic (like the problem of translating between socio-cultural worlds) – all managers could putatively understand the various registers for each department, after all – nor were they interactionally problematic. There were no breakdowns in communication over the meaning of words, as such. Attempting to summarize across these diverse worlds does fall, I would argue, into a diagrammatic fallacy that interactional subordination and textual images of homogenization translate into organizational subordination. There is a difference here, however, between the kinds of constructive work that other genres do, like HR's DRIVE program, Performance Management's management reports, PR's nation-wide video relay, or for that matter the structures of financial reporting demanded by a holding company status – and these manager meetings. Those kinds of broader managerial activities become built up over time into a web of material, textual, and behavioral patterns. They are also girded by other supporting factors that insulate them from the performative risks of teasing during a meeting.

Conclusion: Temporal Horizons

In this chapter, I've discussed how the conversion to a holding company, a format dictated by the "market" and encouraged by the South Korean state restructured the ownership relations among most of the nation's conglomerates. However, this did not necessarily engender new kinds of Westernized or financialized managerial practices. Rather the managerial practices that were shifting within the Sangdo Group reflected a different kind of change within its own political order: the shift to an expert-based, centralized form of management. The holding company itself was merely a vessel in what I argued was an organizational type common in many other South Korean firms, the "future strategy office." The individual experts that populated the company and the kinds of managerial expertise that were deployed largely co-occurred with the ascendancy of the owner-CEO Ahn as an executive within the group. He was an executive of Sangdo Holdings when I arrived, and at the time of writing this, he has been promoted to the CEO of one of the major subsidiaries. The trajectory of heirs in conglomerates do not follow typical organizational patterns, but nonetheless move through recognized conventions for building authority over years of incrementally increasing managerial powers. This chapter has looked at how his managerial delegates, the expert teams, attempted to translate their managerial expertise into the organization through the creation of new modalities of authority and the modification of existing ones.

The managerial world that the owner-CEO Ahn operated in was itself quite different than that of other expert-based departments. It had less to do with situating himself at the top, or end of a line of reporting like a document – though he certainly reviewed those in his day job. His perspective had a longer temporal horizon. While he was concerned with individual reports and meetings, in conversations with him and about him with other employees, I noted how he was largely concerned not with texts per se but with the retention and circulation of loyal employees

in the holding company and throughout the group. Members of the holding company acknowledged frequently they were hired by the owner-CEO Ahn personally or came because of his managerial vision. For a while in 2014 and 2015 these members were consolidated in the holding company, but gradually employees began to be transferred: junior managers, assistant managers, and team managers, received new appointments in subsidiary units, for instance. One assistant manager, similar in age to me, was transferred from the Future Strategy Team to the Foreign Sales (export) Team of Sangdo South. Another member was transferred to the same team in Sangdo First. When I stopped by the company for a visit in the summer of 2016, a year after my fieldwork, the holding company's landscape of faces had changed even more. Two members of the HR Planning Team had been transferred to Sangdo South, as well as familiar faces in PR, Future Strategy, and Performance Management. One manager had left for an MBA in the US but was intent on returning to a higher position within the group later in his career. (Other empty desks marked employees who had left the company altogether for other reasons.) Replacing the managers I knew well were entirely new employees who fit similar sociological profiles. Why break up the kinds of knowledge practices and organizational cultures of individual teams?

Team Manager Jang explained to me that the owner-CEO Ahn was the only one who had a lifelong stake in the Sangdo Group. While most employees could imagine their lives before and after company life, for the owner-CEO Ahn, the group existed before him and would exist after him; his life was encompassed by it. His larger plan then was to hire people at the holding company who could then begin to populate key positions throughout the group as other older executives and CEOs retired. Despite his hereditary claim, he himself faced a complex organizational environment of subsidiary CEOs and executives who would be skeptical of his

young leadership or executive decision-making. However, as he would progress through the managerial hierarchy, he would also need to have managers who supported his decisions, especially at the subsidiary levels. In this way, the circulation of managers from Sangdo Holdings to other parts of the Sangdo Group was not just a mode of good organizational practice; it was a means for distributing his own people throughout the company, beneficial in a future managerial reality where he might find himself in more complex political entanglements.

This meant that managers must stick around, however. One of the problems for expert managers was that the projects that they worked on – like DRIVE, the group brand, or the monthly reports – were long-term projects aimed at building small lines of reporting that would eventually create the gestalt recognition of an experienced control tower. For individual managers, however, there was a constant threat that these projects would not come into fruition during their *own* timeline. For what are known as *illyu* or “first-rate” talent in the corporate world, loyalty to a given corporation is thin (in contrast to the always loyal old boys of the past). First-rate talent is often headhunted from one company to another. And if they felt their work did not have broader impacts on the group, they would be tempted to leave. Thus, even as the owner-CEO Ahn spent had power to recruit top talent to the company, he also had to ensure that they *stayed*. This was difficult as many of these first-rate managers were averse to the conservative steel culture of the subsidiaries; furthermore his efforts to hire talented female workers and have them work their way up the company were thwarted when they encountered an all-male workforce unaccustomed to female managers. Thus, he often spent considerable time with team managers and team members, taking them out to lunch or dinner, or even coming over to their desks to say hi when he was in the office. It was in this way that even he had to translate a claim to his own political authority – to own the company – into a managerial practice of overt

appreciation and reward that would ensure the longer term political order in the company would properly transition.

Chapter 2: Corporate Hierarchies Revisited

Locating Hierarchy

Chapter One introduced the notion that managers in the holding company translated changes in the conglomerate political order through the tools of their respective fields, marked by differing epistemologies of expertise, scales of control, and mediating genres. I focused on the disjunctures between formal models of corporate form (such as the role of a holding company) and instantiations of control in managerial forms by looking at a cross-section of managerial expertise. This chapter turns to a more processual view of how hierarchical relationships within the conglomerate were redefined over the course of a long-term project. I examine how one team, the HR Planning team, attempted to gain control vis-à-vis its subsidiaries by and through a specific project – an employee satisfaction survey. My aim in this chapter is to understand how organizational hierarchies emerge over time and across complex fields of action and what the conditions of such changes are.

Hierarchy has long been a trope of South Korean and Japanese office life (Rohlen 1974) and claims of Confucian tendencies in East Asian capitalism more broadly (Kim 1992, Wei-Ming 1996). Abstract conceptualizations of Confucian hierarchy, for instance, or cultural predispositions to authority, served as explanations for South Korean and Japanese economic failure in early modernization, and ironically, as explanations for their economic success in the 1970s

and 1980s. Perhaps because of its essentializing tendency, hierarchy has gone out of favor in the study of the East Asian corporation. Greater (and much-needed) attention has been paid to other forms of economic inequality wrought by the broader capitalist system in South Korea on contingent labor populations (Koo 2001, Song 2011). In corporate depictions however, hierarchy remains a consistent trope for explaining South Korea and Japan in the West – such as nearly any mention of Samsung or Toshiba – which paint East Asian corporate worlds as highly top-down, patriarchal, obedient, and homogeneous organizations. This trope tends to contrast flat and individualist Western culture with the vertical and collective Asian culture. For the analyst of conglomerate practices, then, this poses two kinds of problems: on one side, addressing the multiple ways that hierarchy is pervasive in South Korean organizations without replicating Orientalist depictions of its structural and encompassing nature, and on the other hand, unpacking participants’ own idealized views of how hierarchy works in practice.

At the outset, we might note that hierarchy is not a singular system in Korea, but operates in two ways: status ranking and organizational hierarchy. These distinctions are codified into organizational charts, building layouts, financial relationships, reporting relationships, and other officializing diagrams. Both of them stratify the objects in their array, but in quite different ways: I briefly give mention of what marks them as distinctive, formalized semiotic systems.

Status ranking is an ordinal series of status distinctions, pure indexes that point to an individual’s tenure in a company. In Korea, these vary from company to company, but have a conventional form: beginning from low-level *sawon*, each rank shifts every four to five years as an employee is promoted: moving from *sawon* to *daeri*, *gwajang*, *chajang*, and *bujang*, the last of which is the highest managerial rank. After *bujang* there are executive ranks, such as *sangmu*, *jeonmu*, or *isa*, terms that vary by company. A company may also have a *daepyo* (CEO) and a

hoegang (chairman), along with various vice-positions in between depending on the size of the company. Individuals bear only one rank at a time, and move up through them over the course of their career; it is largely impossible to move down. It is conventional in most Korean firms for employees to address each other by their status term with an honorific suffix *-nim*. These rank hierarchies are elaborated in interaction through linguistic, behavioral, bodily codes that create asymmetrical contrasts. They are also elaborated through things like salary, benefits, vacation, desk location, and digital access. Rank hierarchy can also be elaborated through documentary practices such as the order in which decisions are collected (from lowest to highest) or elaborated in relations of financial debt and labor obligation.

Organizational hierarchies are relations between organizational entities, such as between a holding company and its subsidiary, or a division and a team. Organizational hierarchies can be premised on either financial ownership (owner and owned) or relations of encompassing administration (smaller within bigger). Ownership relations often follow a kin order: *mohoesa* (mother company), *jahoesa* (child company), and sometimes, *sonjahoesa* (grandchild company) while administrative orders follow a semantic classification of scale in size (e.g., cell-unit-team-division). Organizational hierarchies are not between people, but people tend to instantiate them. For instance, an executive from a headquarters placed into an overseas subsidiary who reports back to the chairman embodies an organizational hierarchy via a mechanism of administrative reporting. Financial claims to ownership are often instantiated by and align with administrative processes of subordination, though not necessarily, as Chapter One illustrated.¹ Where status-

¹ It is worth noting that to “own” a company is not the same thing as owning it *outright*. At a minimum, corporate shareholding grants rights to vote or make proposals. But even for those who are “owners” there are different grades of ownership that do not align to other concepts of owner-responsibility. A corporation can in fact own a corporation. To own more than 30% of a company, for instance, means that it is a subsidiary company and the owning entity must report it on its consolidated financial statements. To own 29% of a company obviates this necessity. To own itself becomes ambiguous when administrative control is involved. Many corporate scions, such

ranking operates largely through rituals of ceremony, organizational hierarchies are mediated through evidentiary techniques such as physical reports, templates, survey, guideline, or other rationalized genre.

Status ranking and organizational hierarchy articulate two commonly recognized systems of hierarchy in a conglomerate or corporation.² However, we should be careful not to confuse the (semiotically elaborated) systems of hierarchy with how they are put to use, for a number of reasons. In one sense, these two differentially elaborated systems come to overlap in practice: individual rank can be associated with an organizational unit (team manager, division chief, etc.) and certain organizational units exist only for the fact of individual promotion (such as a vice chairman or vice president who has no formal office, but is reported to). A chairman occupies both the highest rank and the highest organizational position within a conglomerate. Even on organizational charts these two hierarchical orders can become conflated (with teams reporting to executives, for instance). In a second sense, these distinctions only provide a basic blueprint for how organizational relations operate: they must each be instantiated by those who legitimate such authoritative relations (Weber 1986). A surprising moment to me in fieldwork came when a young employee reported that subsidiary CEOs had refused a chairman's order to implement a new production system that was successful in another subsidiary. The CEOs were reported to

as Lee Kun-hee of the Samsung Group, only "own" 1% of stock in the controlling entity, which as an entity owns the majority share of other subsidiaries.

² Latour (2011), in his synthesis of Karl Weick's approach (e.g., Weick 1979) to collective action, marks a difference between "political" and "organizational" modes of existence. Political modes, in Latour's view, represent designated roles, such as directors or managers, who have an abstract relation to body politic. The *organizational* mode, however, represents the roles that such political actors take on in their organizational activity: that is, holding a meeting, conducting a survey, making a decision. Each of these modes is mediated by particular instruments. In Latour's view, organizational modes of existence are constantly in need of stability. My approach has much in agreement with Latour's general observation that social sciences tend to conflate these two modes as representing "the organization," rather than as a political order that's enacted in various mediated activities. One difference that this chapter reveals is that, for my analysis, the political order itself is equally "instrumentarily" mediated, though through different kinds of semiotic processes that make them appear natural and hence stable.

object to the Chairman with the argument that it might hurt their revenues and raise expenses. Chairmen do not *always* have unconditional authority with respect to their position alone, just as the holding company in Chapter One did not have unconditional control over the subsidiaries it too “owned.” Lastly, it is worth noting that it is impossible empirically to parse when something is “organizational” and when something is “status-oriented” given that individuals represent their companies in their work.

Tracing how the holding company managers sought to wrest control over subsidiaries vis-à-vis expert-based modes of managing was not as simple as deploying expert models of analysis or making their own work invisible. Managers had to navigate within the demands of both status ranking systems in which those in the subsidiaries were higher than them and organizational hierarchies which would require highly rationalized and scientific modes of evidence. In this sense, status ranking and organizational hierarchies both presented highly visible institutional constraints within which they had to situate their projects and navigate organizational politics.

Awkward Introductions

One instance from my fieldwork illustrates the particular way that different modes of signaling hierarchy (or disclaiming it) overlapped in practice. On a cold Monday night in February 2015, the Human Resources team of Sangdo Holdings met for dinner with the Human Resources team of a subsidiary, Sangdo Max, at a spicy pig’s feet restaurant. Sangdo Max is one of the major subsidiaries in the Sangdo Group, occupying a middle position within the conglomerate’s organizational chart. The team managers of both HR departments had met before

but this was the first time for the two teams to meet face-to-face. The two team managers had decided to introduce the teams through the common medium of team-to-team company dinner. Seated around the table were four members of Sangdo Max and five from Sangdo Holdings. The event was framed as an occasion to allow putatively similar HR teams to become familiar with each other over a medium of food and alcohol. *Hoesik*, as such events are known, can be a conventional mode of after-work conviviality and team-bonding. They can also be a site for intra-company socializing by which members meet in a non-formal setting to establish an existing exchange basis for future work encounters: exchanging food, drink, and conversation in a reciprocal fashion helps to ritually “pre-format” future encounters (or re-format previous encounters) in formal settings like meetings at the office.³ This mode of socialization also works for cross-conglomerate relations, such as between Sangdo Holdings and its subsidiaries. While there are friendly *hoesik* events, there are also covert politics behind these symmetrical encounters, including this one.

Sangdo Max had had a series of executive layoffs the preceding month. A new CEO and new executives had been hired to help turn around flagging sales. Because of the privilege of appointing executives, the holding company was the one to fire and hire new top management. At the event itself, however, all those complicated politics were in the background and little discussed. That night’s meeting had the superficial goal of baptizing the young employees from both teams.

³ While largely imagined as a unitary phenomenon, I encountered four different kinds of *hoesik* in my time at Sangdo: 1) Team-internal *hoesik* for personal events or after-work venting; 2) team-to-team socializing (e.g., HR & Finance) within a company or across a conglomerate; 3) division or company-wide *hoesik* with every team invited and organized by an executive; 4) *hoesik* for sales or purchasing, such as taking out a client or supplier. Each has different structures and subtle differences in their moral valences.

The site of this dinner was a restaurant, a ten-minute cab ride from the Sangdo tower. The pig's feet were famously spicy while the décor was notably low-end. We sat in plastic chairs and ate off plastic plates. Huge trays of sliced pork covered the small tables; the bottles of beer and soju barely squeezed onto the edges. The food and drink, however, were not enough to break the initial awkwardness between the two unknown teams. Luckily, the team manager of Sangdo Holdings, Team Manager Jang, was deft at breaking the ice in these kinds of situations. He performed mock-interviews with the two young new employees of the Sangdo Max team, asking them about their jobs and what projects they were working on. Every few questions or so he would pause and initiate a group round of soju (Korean liquor) shots at which time everyone clanged their glasses together (the men took full shots, while women sipped). Team Manager Jang peppered the other team's members with job interview-like questions. One involved quizzing two twenty-something employees (*sawon*) on who their favorite manager was (between the two managers flanking them), whether they were dating anyone, which celebrity they thought they resembled, and how they would describe their own office fashion style.

As the dinner progressed, conversation fractured and employees talked more freely in pairs and threes. I was sitting at the edge of the cramped table, in between the middle manager from Sangdo Max, Assistant Manager Kim, and Ki-ho, the *sawon* from our team whom I sat next to everyday. Assistant Manager Kim was a third rank (*gwajang*) in the company, an indication that he had worked at Sangdo Max for roughly 10 years. Ki-ho, on the other hand was only on his third year at Sangdo Holdings not yet promoted out of bottom rank *sawon*. The two had, however, encountered each other before.

Within Ki-ho's job responsibilities, he was in charge of gathering data from the subsidiaries, such as information about salary, labor statistics, or organizational charts. Ki-ho

would send formal requests for this information through the shared internal messaging system. He also had to call down to the subsidiaries before deadlines to ensure they understood the request and filled in the information properly. In some cases, the requests were on short notice, such as via a request from the chairman for ad-hoc information. These requests – sometimes seemingly simple to fill in – required accurate information to be tracked down or aggregated by the subsidiary employees, often within a span of two or three days. From the perspective of Sangdo Holdings, the subsidiaries were uncooperative when such information did not come through on time. From the perspective of the subsidiaries, these requests could be complicated, vague, or time-consuming, especially for work that was not part of their own domain.

At some point in their conversation, Assistant Manager Kim changed footing with Ki-ho and made a plea. He beseeched Ki-ho, a man about seven years younger than he, not to request information so urgently, since he was under a lot of pressure with the new executives and his own work; to boot, he was often away at Sangdo Max's factory site, not the office. Assembling the data itself was no easy task. He indicated that the unexpected requests from Sangdo Holdings – coming down via the company's digital equivalent of a pneumatic tube, with no indication of their ultimate purpose – were ultimately causing him stress in his own work. Ki-ho and others at the table were mildly taken aback by the plea. In response, Ki-ho politely apologized and promised to take into account Assistant Manager Kim's situation in the future. After the momentary tension and its swift resolution, conversations shifted back to more jovial topics.

This incident appears to illustrate a case of an unequal organizational relationship bleeding into a social event, but with an unusual structure: a roughly 38-year-old middle manager from a subsidiary pleading to a 31-year-old low-ranking employee from the holding

company. Ideally, hierarchies in a South Korean office should be aligned, such that age, rank, and organizational position co-articulate. Within a company, these forms of hierarchies tend to align. However, given the heterogeneity of office environments and life in a large conglomerate, it was not uncommon for a junior person in the holding company to request things of a senior in the subsidiary. Yet it can create for awkward moments in interpersonal address and certain kinds of speech acts, such as commanding, approving, or evaluating (where a young person directs an older person). In this case, it was pleading by an older, higher rank to a younger, lower rank that caused such alarm.⁴ By pleading *to* Ki-ho, Assistant Manager Kim put him in the (temporary) position of a “superior” who had to issue a judgment in regard to the plea. This kind of spontaneous asymmetry was highly salient as an awkward moment for all members of the table even as it was hard to categorize or label exactly *what* was colliding. What this makes clear is that organizational hierarchies are not necessarily felt between organizations, but between their representatives in ways that conflict with interpersonal footings.

Interactional awkwardness from mis-aligned hierarchies are a commonly commented feature of contemporary organizational life – the classic example often depicted on Korean TV shows is the hot-shot younger junior manager assuming a high rank and directing a longer tenured older manager, or a woman taking over as the CEO and dealing with chauvinistic males; these make for comedic or melodramatic effects alike. Such contrasts in hierarchy are easy to recognize and trope on. But there is another way that hierarchy infiltrated the event in a more covert way: the occasion for the dinner in the first place was a matter of organizational politics (Sandgo Max’s recent purges). But it was articulated in a highly symmetrical manner: teams

⁴ In more stereotypical versions of this kind of story, mis-alignment is pragmatically cued by differences in speech level which clearly demarcate an interactional abuse above the level of awareness. This case both men were using formal register to address each other but the interactional asymmetry was marked by a *speech genre* (of pleading) enacted in cross-turn pair-part.

were placed across from each other at the table. They were identical in structure (team manager, middle manager, junior employees) and reciprocal in behavior (sharing questions, sharing shots) such that it could seem they were structurally equal and “friendly” in practice. In this sense, the organizational hierarchy that framed their own work relationships (with one department attempting to have a degree of administrative control over the other) was concealed by the framing of the event as interactional equals at the table. When organizational problems did bubble to the surface – with Ki-ho and Assistant Manager Kim – it was taken as an interpersonal issue, resolvable through politeness.

Surveying Sangdo

I came to find out about the real purpose of a group-wide employee survey during a rain-soaked smoking break. It was a rainy October day and Team Manager Jang, Assistant Manager Min-sup, and I were gathered under the covered eave of the Sangdo Tower late in the afternoon. We normally would walk to the designated open-air smoking area around the side of the building and behind a 7-Eleven, but we took exception on a day of massive downpours. Sangdo Tower, looming over an open-air mall, had an area for delivery motorbikes around the corner of the main entrance; we were just out of sight of businesspeople coming and going into the building, but in sight of deliverymen on motorbikes for a Burger King on the first floor of the mall. Team Manager Jang had previously mentioned in the office that we would be starting the development of that year’s employment satisfaction survey. After he had an hour-long meeting with Executive Cho, he relayed to us updates about the survey. The smoking break served as a pulmonary

release from the tensions of the meeting as well as a site for releasing secret information on the background of the survey.

As he described it to Assistant Manager Min-sup and me, the survey would go out to all white-collar employees in the entire Sangdo Group, gauging their satisfaction with their work place for the year 2014. It was first envisioned as a survey that would include overseas office workers and be translated into English and Chinese. (In the end, it only went to office workers in Korea for issues of language and technology access.) On the break, Team Manager Jang seemed particularly excited at the thought of starting the survey officially. Not that he liked surveys themselves. He often told me of the inherent statistical problems and vapid results that came from high-profile employee surveys – especially when they were conducted by high-priced outside consulting firms. He was giddy for another reason. He sensed that this survey was a way that our team would get the necessary information – in the form of white collar employees’ voices – to use against managers at other subsidiaries.

The survey had been carried out sporadically by the holding company’s human resources team before, in 2007, 2009, 2012, and 2013, with different personnel in charge. The 2013 survey was led by the previous team manager, but it was ineffectual, according to Team Manager Jang. There were problems with how that survey was structured and how the numbers were presented – it had been quantitatively imprecise – so that Sangdo Holdings couldn’t use the survey as the basis for forging any kind of changes at the subsidiary level. This year’s survey, now under Jang's direction, would be re-designed under a new format in both design and analytical method. These results would allow the HR team to use objective information from the voice of the subsidiary employees to enact changes at the subsidiaries. An implicit target of the survey seemed to be the older generation of managers whose working styles were not only deemed

outdated, but detrimental to the health and wellbeing of younger generations. To target this group through a survey, however, would depend on the proper calculations, summations, interpretations, and selling up of employees' (sincere) responses via the medium of the satisfaction survey and its final reporting. In the survey's content would be embedded particular figurations that targeted the work culture of the subsidiaries. The survey's overall execution then would allow the HR team to leverage its expertise over the subsidiaries.

Employee satisfaction and climate surveys are a ubiquitous genre of survey techniques across global corporate workplaces, a sub-genre of general satisfaction surveys that mediate most qualitative experiences in modern corporate-consumerist economies. Employee satisfaction surveys first emerged in the US in the 1970s when concerns over individual worker happiness and satisfaction – beyond base pay – came to be seen as a necessary factor to measure (Schneider, Ehrhart, and Macey 2013). Survey measures were used to track aggregate levels of satisfaction annually, via the mechanism of standardized questions on five-point Likert scales that asked how satisfied workers were with their workplaces, benefits, manager, and so on. Such information could then be laddered up to provide an aggregate view of corporate culture from individual subjective experiences, rendered into average-able integers of its members, and tracked from year-to-year.

Organizational survey techniques are an instrumental domain of expertise in their own right and have developed considerably over the past thirty years. Today, a number of professional consulting companies offer trademarked survey methods that use innovative analytical formulae (asking “just” the right questions) or benchmark one company's worker satisfaction against satisfied or unsatisfied employees around the world. Transnational American human resources consulting firms like Mercer, Aon Hewitt, and Towers Watson along with

independent survey companies like Gallup and the Great Place to Work Institute, offer their own paid approaches to satisfaction, climate, and engagement surveying. These services are widely used by large Korean firms as well. The 2015 Sangdo employee satisfaction survey borrowed ideas and concepts from a range of these sources – where publicly available – without explicitly modeling on any given one. The survey was referred to, at various times as a “satisfaction survey” (*manjokdo seolmun josa*), “engagement survey” (*muripdo seolmun josa*), and the “GWP” survey short for Great Work Place (*irhagi joeun hoesa seolmun josa*).

Team Manager Jang, who used to work as an HR manager at a larger Korean conglomerate prior to Sangdo, showed me some examples of reports from the big HR firms. He had become familiar with the methods of those firms over the course of his time at his previous company. While showing me examples some of their analytical methods, he would often scoff at the ways the large consulting companies used arbitrary rubrics of satisfaction, backed up by statistical averages, to make audacious claims about the dependent and independent factors affecting workplace satisfaction and dissatisfaction. Such surveys promised companies a sure-fire way to figure out not just whether employees were satisfied, but which particular aspects were “drivers” or “causes” of both. In this way, managers could better target specific dimensions that drove up satisfaction numbers, while leaving others alone (such as vacation time vs. fringe benefits). To him, these kinds of surveys were based on faulty survey design: how could one really know that these were specifically the drivers? Our self-designed survey would be more structurally sound and give a better insight – or so was the plan.

It would be an exaggeration to say the goal of the survey was really to improve the working experience of every white-collar worker across the group’s companies, even though that was the stated reason for running the survey. The survey was not as mission-critical to the HR

team's work as other projects were, such as reformulating assessment and promotion methods, standardizing monetary and non-monetary benefits, developing new HR records systems, and restructuring salary bands or gradations for different ranks, among a host of less visible projects. Those projects required expert forms of technical knowledge, but many were targeted for Sangdo Holdings itself (a company of roughly 50 employees), and not across the whole Sangdo Group (of many thousands). Sangdo Holdings did not have *de jure* control over the HR functions of the whole group, even though it "collaborated" laterally on many projects with subsidiaries.⁵ The rather innocuous satisfaction survey ironically was one of the few areas where the holding company's HR team had a license to contact and gather data from employees and use that information to engage CEOs and other HR teams.

The managers in the HR team *were* nominally concerned with wanting to improve the work culture at Sangdo's companies, especially at offices or factories where employees were known to work long hours, those who had particularly stern bosses, and those who had sub-par office conditions. However, to the degree that the survey was run by the holding company, it played other roles as an organizational object. Primarily, it was a mode of demonstrating the expert authority of the holding company. More narrowly, it stood in relation to the expertise of the HR team, which was seeking to make its mark as a competent and insight-giving team worthy of its salaries. The wider the scope (geographic, categorical, linguistic), the wider their domain of expertise. Ignoring the expensive plans of consulting companies was not just a matter of cost-savings or professional elitism – doing so was a mark of the team's expertise in the eyes

⁵ Part of the reason for this has to do with legal regulations for sharing personnel information. Private information, such as national ID numbers are not allowed to leave a company. Part of the reason was historical: the HR function of Sangdo Holdings had only recently grown to half-a-dozen employees, paling in comparison to the decades of experience that other subsidiaries had. Lastly, part of the reason was technological: each subsidiary had its own HR system that to integrate across the whole group would cost millions of dollars and take multiple years to implement.

of the owners and chairman who would receive the final reports directly. Even I, the ethnographer, putatively fit into this scheme, as an outsider. A PhD student from America putatively studying organizational culture and not sociologically different than consultant experts could be ratified as an expert to lend an outsider's view on a cultural survey that could get at the underlying dynamics of organizational culture.⁶

Managers at other subsidiaries seemed highly attuned to the fact that the survey was a mode of inquiry that threatened to supersede their own authority for two reasons. First, it would expose their organizational cultures to the Chairman in a new kind of light. After subsidiary CEOs had been informed of the impending survey, but before it launched, an executive from Sangdo Max called Team Manager Jang directly to ask if his company could *not* be included in the survey (another form of pleading from a higher rank position interestingly). He explained that they had already done their own *internal* survey a few months prior and discovered that employees were not happy. Anticipating negative results again, he didn't want this information to be shared with the Chairman. As I mentioned above, Sangdo Max had recently gone through a management change-over, so the new managers had been working employees particularly hard to make good sales results. Participating in the group survey would run the risk of adding another challenge to their current challenge of increasing sales. Team Manager Jang did not grant them exemption. Second, it superseded their authority as experts of their own companies. Subsidiary departments also ran their own internal surveys with regularity. I received copies of these as I was helping to draft the survey. These surveys asked straightforward questions about satisfaction across a number of areas and were largely tabulation based. The surveys did not have any

⁶ As I will discuss below, despite the ratification, handling a complex organizational survey, in Korean no less, was beyond my training. However, I was still put in charge of drafting and analyzing key parts of the survey, activities that were heavily edited by my direct superiors. I suspected that Team Manager Jang hid my incompetency in part to maintain the illusion that I was also an expert.

mechanism for correlating satisfaction to specific aspects of work, or figuring out causality. Our survey was meant to be more superior in its explanatory power.

The form of expertise required would be, like other forms of expertise, a capability of both using and interpreting complex instruments unavailable to laypersons (Carr 2010). However, this form of expertise would not depend on oral performance alone – it relied on the proper presentation of evidence to base its claims (Kuipers 2013). Neither of these forms came from the survey itself – but from analytic techniques and reporting aesthetics. If these methods were illegible as examples of good analysis to the Chairman or the CEOs, they would have little impact on executing change. The survey's data, method, analytic process, and findings had to clear the analytic ideas of those higher ranking than them. As such, the proper execution of the survey depended on numerous factors to occur over a series of six months, involving the proper use of human actors, technical instruments, key meetings and approvals, and the proper organization, arrangement, and a tangible relationship between numbers and effects that could make the results appear as a true reflection of employee sentiment.⁷

The survey existed within both status ranking and organizational hierarchies, but was heterotopic vis-a-vis its own communicative circuit. That is, the survey did not follow a linear path (top-down, bottom-up) like on an organizational chart but involve a range of different actors, objects, and trajectories. The survey represents a genre architecture through which an HR-related hierarchy could be instantiated. It is composed of actors, including thousands of employees, an intranet capable of distributing a survey, IT systems to collect and put out raw data sheets, knowledge of survey methodology, and expertise at creating PowerPoint data reports with organizationally salient modes of reporting. Such a process does not itself reproduce an

⁷ See Law (2009) for an STS approach to large-scale surveys, a comparative point I return to in the conclusion.

image of top-down authority – in fact it does the opposite. As a mode of collecting all the “voices” of the thousands of Korean office workers at the Group (below the level of executive), the survey performed a neutral, non-hierarchical collection of undifferentiated company “members” (*guseongwon*) as a matter of corporate improvement. But because this process was operated by the holding company, and because the results went directly to the owners and chairman, it was positionally located within a hierarchy of information that skirted other orders of hierarchy. In its ideal enactment, the survey would actually supersede an older organizational hierarchy where CEOs and their staff were in charge of their own companies, with minimal reporting up to the chairman. The survey allowed the holding company to appeal directly to employees *en masse* - superseding subsidiaries' own social orders. By neutrally commanding an instrument that collects the voices and summarizes their objective results, the holding company would appear to be just a mediator and not an intermedator (that is just a conduit and not an interferer). Having identified the problems at the subsidiaries through the survey itself, the HR team would have the legitimate authority to oversee subsidiaries as they would be forced to acknowledge their own glaring corporate culture problems.

Note here that the salient dimensions of the survey are not the categories of its content, nor the aesthetics of its documents, but the emergent structure of visibility invoked in the wider participatory structure: the holding company had privileged access to the data from subsidiaries. Subsidiaries were only shown reports of their own companies, not actual data. The owner-CEO Ahn and the chairman's position received reports as well, but received reports from every subsidiary with detailed comparisons.

Organizational hierarchy, as it comes into being in this sense, is delicate and covert procedure that must be tightly monitored, but its motives could also be disclaimed. It was part of

a survey that had already been done before and seemed innocuous on the surface. Yet as the survey was deployed, it began to depend less on the careful actions of the managers of the HR Planning team and more on the successful responses of the employees taking it and proper outcome of numbers, so that it could properly display objectivity, non-manipulation, and expert insight. In these efforts, the logical alignment of numbers was a paramount concern. What would happen if numbers did not line up?

Confronting an Internal Hierarchy

The survey as a form of organizational technology did not and could not exist outside of the ranking system that initially authorized it, approved it at various stages, and ultimately relied on the results as evidence for tidying up aspects of corporate culture at the subsidiaries below. In this section, I turn to the ways that modes of rank hierarchy within the team, grounded in a “vertical circulation” model, reinforced a common mode of office hierarchy, even as they attempted to upset another kind of organizational hierarchy.

The Korean system of decision-making (*gyeoljae*) and general description of upward circulation of documents (*pumui*) closely model those of the Japanese *ringi* system in its inscriptionary and circulatory nature. The approval and decision system is differentiated by sequential access to approvals or decisions that are visibly marked through individual artifacts like stamps or signatures. There seem to be parallels between Japan and South Korea in this regard and historical continuity between offices of old and today. In an anthropology dissertation on South Korean bureaucracy (never published as a book) with fieldwork carried out in the 1960s, Donald Christie recreated a document very similar to a *ringi-sho* and forms I encountered

at Sangdo in 2015 (Christie 1972). The document was marked by a set of small boxes in the upper-right hand corner for sequenced signatures. Much like other Korean administrative techniques at the time, I presume they were imported from Japanese bureaucratic techniques.⁸ Aesthetic similarities aside, the local pragmatics of the Korean *gyeoljae* system and institutional understandings of hierarchy differ from themes common to Japan. Upward forms of decision-making in Japanese corporations and bureaucracies have long been known for their emphasis on harmony and political consensus from below, rather than military-like orders from above (Tsuji 1973). One management scholar comparing the South Korean version argues that where the Japanese *ringi* system was used for consensus-checking, in Korea, the *pumui* or *gyeoljae* form of decision-making is used as a form of control and centralization of authority (Lee 1989).⁹

In the Sangdo office, the fact of its use in control was exhibited through the highly deferential nature of asking for decisions. Early on in my fieldwork, while talking to Ki-ho, I asked him about how they circulated documents for decisions. He said that even though they had an electronic system through which documents could be submitted, he would seek prior approval in person, before initiating a formal decision on the company intranet. Even though the *pumui* / *ringi* document did not exist by name, various sub-genres did exist on Sangdo's company intranet, such as in application forms, submission forms, inquiry forms, formal contact forms,

⁸ While the macro-influences of Japanese capitalism on Korean capitalism are subject to wide debate and have been discussed at length (Eckert 1991, McNamara 1990), I have found only scant scholarly description of the borrowing of Japanese administrative techniques or when periods of importation or borrowing took place. Casual intertextual comparison reveals that systems like the *ringi-sei* as well as the titles within the rank hierarchy are nearly identical. One news article I found suggests that certain register of Korean bureaucratise comes from Japanese (and hence should be abolished). Source: <http://www.pressian.com/news/article.html?no=121715>. Accessed June 5, 2017.

⁹ *Pumui* is a direct borrowing of *ringi*, with both having the same underlying Chinese characters, 稟議. *Pumui* and *pumui-seo* (the equivalent of *ringi-sho*) were never terms I heard in the Sangdo office, yet the “upward” circulatory process was pragmatically identical in a number of areas, including the layout of forms and the mode of “upward” collection of signatures. The verbs used to characterize decision-making were either *uisagyeoljeong* or *gyeoljae*.

and complaint forms, that all followed a similar mode of production (directed by senior staff, drafted by low-level staff) and circulation (approved by senior staff along the ordinal ranks). Different departments had customized the process for particular genres that served their needs, such as in HR and the Legal department, but common to each form was a set of four to six boxes on the top right, where the given level of approvers was pre-inscribed. These were to be filled in by the form's author, identifying how high the approval should be to gain approval (See Figure 2.1 below). Different requests, from small purchases to major decisions, begged different ranks to need approval. Not everything went to the chairman, however. Team Managers, for instance, could be deputized to sign off on team-internal decisions like vacation-day requests whereas for office supply purchases, the division head or CEO might be required. For financial requests, employees often referred to an Excel spreadsheet that clearly listed what rank was the highest authority needed.¹⁰ But the process nevertheless makes equivalent the relative “importance” of a decision with the relative “importance” of person, such that low-level managers take care of putatively low-level issues, such as approving vacations or small purchases.

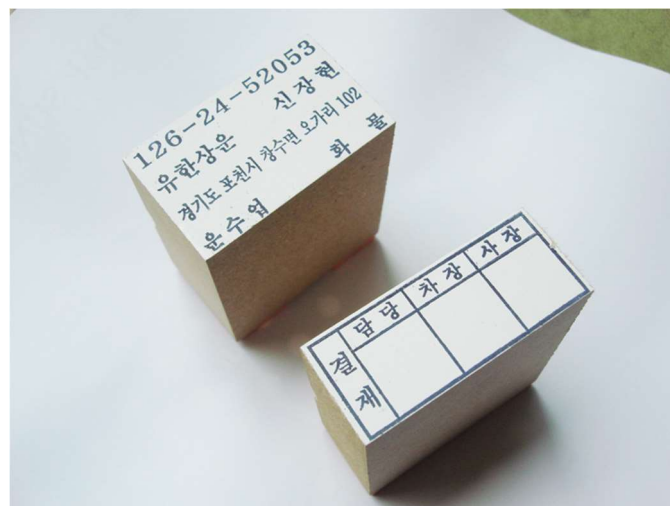


Figure 2.1: Decision-making stamps example

¹⁰ This system is known as *jeon-kyeol* (Chinese: 專決) indicating that certain categories of decisions are granted to certain ranks for their “exclusive decision.”

Example of decision box-stamping that could be stamped onto the cover of any document or report needing approval. Identical to the kind used in Sangdo's office.

Source: <http://2555316.tistory.com/entry/고무인-결재도장-결재방> Accessed September 1, 2016.

The model of rank-based decision-making nevertheless appears to format team-internal work relations more generally, even outside of formal decisions that require signatures. Most office relations in Korea appear to follow this model in practice, by the manner of reporting relations where subordinates appeal to superiors in sequence for approval, even without the necessity of a given physical artifact stamped or coded onto a document. (One can see here, in both English and in Korean, that the idea of "reporting" [who one reports to] can refer to a durable relation outside of any specific report.) *Actual* signature gathering on documents or formalized decision making through the intranet is itself a different process – a modality for creating evidence trails and assigning legal responsibility in the case of disputes or audits – pragmatically doing different kinds of work (cf. Hull 2003).

In this sense, each member of the team reported directly to Team Manager Jang, who sat just on the edge of our team circle, positioned to look onto our team circle. Sometimes we would report to him directly, such as when he would call out my or Ki-ho's name as a sign to come over to his desk. I learned from watching Ki-ho that it was a good idea to always dart up quickly from whatever one was doing and make a two-step hop-sprint over to his desk to ask what he needed. Other times, we would kindly beseech Team Manager Jang in person, ferrying some document for his evaluation and delivering them with obsequious speech and bodily gesture in front of him. We would also have non-periodic team meetings in which each team member would recite whatever they were doing as a group form of individuated oral reporting. For a while, Team Manager Jang would run these meetings in a relaxed and fun way. We would often

leave the building and go down to one of the six or so coffee shops in the mall below to discuss our work, while sipping Americanos and sharing dessert-like waffles at ten a.m.

However, when Executive Cho decided to institute a fixed, weekly meeting with our group and the other half of the HR employees (those who ran the HR education sections), the meetings had a decidedly different character. Still a call to report, they were done in the company's executive meeting room, with a set agenda and a formal tone of reporting to the executive, which were met with stern evaluation or requests for on-the-spot elaboration. In cases where I had to present, Team Manager Jang would step in to assist me in properly reporting verbally to Executive Cho about the status of the survey or smaller projects I was working on. In both Jang's and Cho's styles, the "core" content of the meetings was largely the same, but the interactional routines involved and their metapragmatic framings invoked were markedly different.

In the development of the survey, Team Manager Jang originally assigned me to come up with its basic design, comparing other design research companies, previous surveys, and using my own anthropological insights. I spent a few months of my time at Sangdo Holdings slogging away, trying to curb information from American HR companies' websites on the structure and analysis of their survey formats, while the other team members each worked on separate projects at their desks. Ki-ho was anticipating year-end tax preparation, tabulating monthly labor statistics, and developing new methods of storage of employee records. Assistant Manager Ji-soon was working on the implementation of a new annual goals and evaluation project. She had worked with the IT team to develop a customized software on the company's ERP software system where team managers and team members would log in and enter their projects, goals, and outcomes. Assistant Manager Min-sup was working on the redesign of salary pay-bands.

Team Manager Jang had originally delegated the survey to me, but asked help from Ki-ho, Assistant Manager Ji-soon, and Assistant Manager Min-sup to assist on more complex tasks as the survey went along. This went on for a number of months, as we drafted the questions, the analytical format, and the rationale behind how the survey was to operate. When we finally had a version that we thought would be adequate to show to Executive Cho, Team Manager Jang had me arrange a meeting room with a projector to walk him through the PowerPoint that described the survey and laid out the questions so he could evaluate them. Team Manager Jang, who had more experience dealing with Executive Cho than I, took over the walkthrough of the PowerPoint soon after I bumbled through the title and opening slide. More than my own incompetence, Team Manager Jang would often iterate to me that he knew that Executive Cho had his own particular style of evaluation, and that we had to be careful about how we presented, lest our whole effort be wasted (and sent back to the drawing board entirely). Executive Cho asked sharp questions in that meeting, but was largely amenable to what we had written. He even suggested an innovation on the survey method that we had not considered and integrated it into the design.¹¹

Once Executive Cho had orally given the go-ahead on the survey, we took it to owner-CEO Ahn of Sangdo Holdings. While the ultimate recipient and authorizer of the survey was the chairman, owner-CEO Ahn had more of a tactical interest in how we were going to run the survey and what the quantitative results would look like. As the person just below the Chairman in the ordinal rankings but one who had more of a working knowledge of Sangdo Holdings' operations, owner-CEO Ahn had greater input into the future circulatory path of the survey. In

¹¹ The survey had a section on a variety of office behaviors: how often do you work late, do you talk to your team mates outside of work, do you work independently. Executive Cho suggested that we put in an “as is” and “to be” option to allow us to see the “gaps” between current and desired behavior. The numerical “gap” between these two numbers ended up providing considerable numerical help in parsing the differences between subsidiaries later on.

the eyes of the subsidiary CEOs, it was under his watch that the survey would be developed. Team Manager Jang often expressed to me that he thought Executive Cho was a roadblock for the team to getting the direct opinion of owner-CEO Ahn who would be more favorable to their direct report. Once the survey would clear owner-CEO Ahn, then it was most assuredly likely to clear the Chairman, whose interest in the execution and details of the survey was minimal. It was the Chairman, however, whose authorization and digital signature would be needed to beget the series of activities to “launch” the survey in late December.

As the survey moved “up” the chain of command, there were in fact no direct paper or online forms of authorization, prior to it reaching the Chairman. It was only after it had reached the approval of the Chairman that a formal document was drafted through the company’s intranet to mark the official approval of the survey. The process of developing the survey did not rely on a physical stamp or set of decision boxes to guide the process, it already did so in its basic formatting. General relationships between the team members and Team Manager Jang, Executive Cho, and owner-CEO Ahn, followed the circuit modeled in the signatory model. Everyday working relations were formatted by the broader participant structure of the stamp/signature model; thus, it is not merely a model of titled-authority specified in “decision-making boxes” but involves the wider participant organization.

When stamps or signatures are actually invoked it signals something quite different: the transfer of legal responsibility to the authorizer. If we look at the decision-making boxes, we can appreciate this under-specification (shown above in Figure 2.1). The stamp, which is today most often reproduced in Microsoft Excel in iconically similar ways as older documents, marks a particularly minimalist sequence of conveyance by rank: blank boxes, sometimes noted by title, that begets an illegible but recoverable signature. A signature means that approval is granted, like

the signing of a contract. This process, by convention, must also be done *in sequence*. (The Chairman cannot sign first, for instance.) While the boxes allow for signatures to be gathered, they do not specify *who* should convey the document to be signed, let alone the process for what kinds of information need to be conveyed to get a signature. Ambiguity about the conveyance means that different actors can “fill in” to do the reporting. In some cases, as I mentioned above, team members would report directly to Executive Cho. In others, Team Manager Jang would mediate the process by presenting on behalf of a team member. When presenting to the Chairman, Executive Cho would often take responsibility. In this way, the *messenger* of the document is underspecified – allowing for considerable room for flexibility. Team Manager Jang saw it as his special forte to be able to talk with Executive Cho, who was notably persnickety in front of junior team members.

The flexibility in the messenger role was apparent to me when I spent a week at Sangdo First, one of the larger subsidiaries a few floors below the holding company. I had come to know the HR team and asked to spend a few weeks with them. When I was there, I saw from the desk where I was sitting, young *sawon* (lowest rank) and *daeri* (second lowest) men report directly to one director (*isa*) who had his own office. The director was known to be quite fierce, and the young *sawon* and *daeri*, in what I witnessed, presented him with files and reports throughout the day which he seemed to repeatedly evaluate (sometimes he did this in meetings with PowerPoints). They would stand sheepishly in front of the director’s desk while he, seated, appeared to excoriate them in a verbal rebuke while looking over the files brought before him. These men, perhaps the authors or drafters of the document, were nevertheless merely “filling in” to convey the information, but they received the brunt of harsh criticism, in a manner redolent of how depictions of older managers and junior employees are depicted on TV shows I

watched (though not as loud). I surmised that it was safer for team managers to let the junior employs convey the (potentially bad) news in front of the director. Ki-Ho on our team had to do this too, often when he had to report financial matters to the managing CEO (different from owner Ahn) as a matter of keeping him informed. Because the stakes were different than presenting it to owner-CEO Ahn, Ki-ho could merely act as a neutral vessel to convey the information to the CEO who rarely had countervailing opinions. When it had to go to owner-CEO Ahn or the Chairman, Team Manager Jang or Executive Cho always took care to usher the proposal, lest someone like Ki-ho or me botch a delicate presentation.

In one sign that the signature model exists as a habitual model of general office relations is how workers can be *excluded* in an office. Korea does not have an at-will labor system like the United States, meaning that it is almost impossible to fire regular employees, even for low performance.¹² However, there are many ways that individuals may be re-shuffled, moved away, kept in place, or left alone such that their careers may flounder or they feel social pressure to leave. The clearest way to indicate that someone is exiled internally is to not give them any work, not give them anything to evaluate, or skip over them in the reporting chain of command. These acts of exiling can be interactionally disclaimable by others as a sign of making someone more comfortable or not overburdening them. Thus, they are a subtle hint to resign before one's performance review indicates that one did no work. To go outside the rank-based sequence, such as to cut off a middle manager even from everyday "check-ins" by going directly to a superior

¹² This process does not work in an identical fashion for higher up members, such as executives. They are formally registered with the government and their employment conditions are different. They can actually be fired for the performance of their whole unit, for example.

above or team members below, is taken as a sign that one is out of the reporting sequence, and hence, out of the organization, when rank, salary, or even desk remain the same.¹³

My argument in this section has focused on how certain patterns of hierarchy remain ritually embedded in office work, even among expert holding company members who were trying to upend other hierarchies within the company. Even while the general “circuit” remains as a framing device for office work, there is flexibility in *who* enacts this kind of hierarchy. Sometimes it is enacted by the lowest ranked employees who carry news or documents around for oral approval; sometimes it changes hands in the case of delicate or important decisions. There is also latitude in *how* it occurs: it can happen through face-to-face interactions that look like evaluations of individual performance; documents can be carefully laid in binders that have “I request your decision” embossed on the cover. Team Manager Jang sought to make these relations more informal amongst his team and held “reporting” meetings at cafes. And lastly, there is latitude in *when* these occur: like the way Ki-ho or I would “check” decisions with Assistant Managers Ji-soon or Min-sup before talking to Team Manager Jang, reflecting a mode of approval not even specified in reporting procedures, but nevertheless redolent of them.

Stratifying Numbers

If rank hierarchies were premised on delicately gaining approvals – or at least verbal affirmations from higher ranked authorities – the survey depended on something equally small:

¹³ This experience had happened twice on the team I worked with at Sangdo Holdings in cases both before and after I had worked at the company. Goffman interestingly observes a similar phenomenon in his article “Cooling the mark: Some Aspects of Adaption”: “Sometimes the mark is allowed to retain his status but is required to fulfill it in a different environment...an unsatisfactory plant manager is shipped off to another branch. Sometimes the mark is ‘kicked upstairs’ and given a courtesy status such as ‘Vice President’” (Goffman 1952, 457).

tabulated numbers in Excel sheets. When we received the results of the survey, a mere two days after the survey wrapped up in early January, the numbers came out perfectly ordered in an Excel sheet from an auto-generated script created by the IT manager. We would spend the next three months trying to figure out the calculations behind the survey that we had in fact crafted and sold to the executives and CEOs. The reason was that the numbers didn't line up the way they were supposed to, making the satisfaction survey analysis took longer than it was supposed to. The problem was not with the technology on Excel sheet, but in their analytic correlations. For me, who was in charge of putting together the initial analysis, the process had “the taste of dying” (*jugeul mat*), to borrow a Korean idiom.

The survey had been sold on its ability to be able to do a correlational analysis between employee satisfaction and employees' reported behaviors. This was captured in a diagram on PowerPoint slide that promised to figure out the causal relationships among three areas: satisfaction, drivers, and behavior. That is, using three separate sources of self-reported data about how employees feel, what they think motivates them, and how they behave in the office. It was this particular innovation that I had offered as a solution; in part because I had asked a doctoral student and friend in statistics from the University of Michigan to give me advice on survey methodology. He even promised to help to run the data through his statistical program. Early on in the analysis, our team thought we were going to discover the holy grail of managerial phenomena, besting both the paid HR consultants who charged hundreds of thousands of dollars and outstripping the basic statistical models of the subsidiaries. We would cement our own authority as elite holding company employees, who had both the tools and panache to run such a high-level and high-value survey. I was personally invested in the project in part because it was the main task by which other teams' employees viewed my own presence in the office. By the

end of March, with analysis not progressing, I was getting particularly worried about how the survey analysis would turn out.

The roadblock in the analysis centered on the logical relationships between numbers and the categories they indexed. Numbers had to be logically traceable to reflect the employee voices that were presupposed in the model of the survey to begin with. If part of managerial control is about the collection and progressive summarization of information up a chain of command, reports must show synecdochal traces of original data in order to represent them. They had to be able to withstand the scrutiny of Executive Cho, owner-CEO Ahn, and the Chairman, not to mention the potential pushback from subsidiary CEOs or HR managers reluctant to take orders outside of typical circuits of information.

Holding company employees needed concrete data with which to be able to exercise any authority over subsidiaries. Team Manager Jang had mentioned to me previously that the survey the year before had failed in its efficacy – the team manager prior to him merely averaged sums of satisfaction scores (numbers like 3.2, 4.3, 4.7 on a 5-point scale) that did not indicate to the CEOs *what* the specific values of those number meant and what the underlying problems were that they linked to. Because the numbers did not properly translate the voices into a semiotic medium that was legible as a causal sign of something problematic, the previous year's survey led to little change in the subsidiaries, even though it was carried out in the same fashion. (That team manager had left prior to my arrival.) Thus, one of our first analytic tasks was to aggregate survey responses by “very satisfied” (4 and 5 scores), "satisfied" (3 scores) and “not satisfied” (1 and 2) to give the proper picture of the distribution and variation between scores, and hence between employees.

However, other efforts to connect satisfaction scores with behavioral response scores met obstacles. This was made clear when the statistician's report from Michigan that I had asked to work on the correlations came back with the correlational analysis.¹⁴ Team Manager Jang was initially delighted when the statistician had noted that there was a correlation with positive behaviors and high satisfaction at the aggregate level (across the whole group). This would mean that we had proof that behaviorally happier workers were more satisfied at their jobs. However, our *own* satisfaction at the numbers dwindled when we realized that for a statistician the positive correlation still suggests some degree of error. Positive correlation was also marked by a subjective marking of *, **, or *** next to "R" results on a large print out of numbers. These were in fact too subjective to be considered as proper evidence, since the statistician himself had ultimately made those decisions based on his own judgment. Lastly, the correlation existed for the aggregate of a few thousand workers, for which the margin of error was small. However, for each individual subsidiary, whose samples ranged from a dozen to hundreds of workers, the margin of error in turn ranged from five to forty percent. How could we convince anyone on a forty percent margin of error? The statistical hope of drawing correlation not only did not work, but it wasn't built on enough certainty. Anticipating future rebuttals, Team Manager Jang reluctantly admitted that the correlational analysis wouldn't be clear enough to pass the muster of the scrupulous CEOs, assuming it even would get past Executive Cho.

Abandoning hopes for a statistical savior, we spent the next months separating out the data into individual categories. Nevertheless, that itself proved difficult as we could not figure out the relationship between employee satisfaction numbers, "drivers" (categories that motivate

¹⁴ Note all identifying human subject information were scrubbed from the Excel worksheet. The statistician also signed a confidentiality agreement about his work with the company prior to beginning.

or demotivate people), and behavioral responses. We could not conceptualize how to make the logical connections between what was “negative” and “positive,” e.g., which aspects of office culture had to be improved – like team internal relations, overtime, benefits – versus what had no impact on satisfaction – like vacation days. In some cases, employees selected that they were motivated by salary and also demotivated by it too. Were they motivated by salary in general but not their current salary? Or did they misunderstand the question? The employee voices started to look very equivocal, and they needed to look not only uniform, but aggregately uniform.

Our attempts to model employee behavior into behavioral types floundered. We had created a two-axis model for mapping corporate culture by each office, depending on whether they were "work-focused" (*eommu-jungsim*) or "organization-centered" (*jojik-jungsim*) in their organizational structure, "cool" (*kul-han*) or "warm" (*ddaddeut-han*) in their working relations. We had suspected (and hoped) that some teams would fall on one side, and others to the other side, giving empirical proof to differences in internal cultural organization. In the results, every team fell to one side. I spent many days trying to come up with a different rationalization of the survey structure. Around the same time, we also realized we had two other problems: the numbers started to look less like stable icons of employee voices.

The first problem was that the survey was completed by workers who were not actually office workers. When I originally checked the log of employees, I was able to cross-check their employee IDs with their worker status, turning up workers who would otherwise be classified as “non-permanent” workers, mostly workers who worked in factories in pseudo-managerial roles. When we launched the survey it was sent via the company’s intranet, which did not have the capacity to limit who was able to take the survey. This meant that anyone who had access to the intranet could fill in the survey. While access to intranet and white collar worker were *generally*

correlated, there were still a number of workers who had email accounts but worked in factories. When we figured this out late in our survey process, we had to re-analyze all the numbers to remove them from every statistic for each subsidiary.

The other problem we faced was one of meta-awareness. Were the employees aware what the point of this survey was? Did anyone try to sabotage their answers? We had tried to thwart against false positives by deleting any account that automatically answered with completely “satisfied” for the whole survey. However, we still saw peculiar outcomes that surprised us. For example, one of the subsidiaries, Sangdo South, the one that was purported to have the most militaristic culture of the whole group – in part due to its regional origins, its involvement in the domestic auto industry, and the fact that ninety percent of its workforce was male– reported the *highest* employee satisfaction rates in the whole group. How could this be? Some HR members thought that it was due to the fact that their managers might have influenced employee responses, perhaps giving them the secret nod to answer well. Some thought that it was because employees just “knew” that they should respond in such a way. Mentioning one’s true opinion on something like an innocuous survey could be a dangerous game that could come back to the employee (as I discuss more in Chapter Three). In this case, however, there was no way to de-legitimize the voices of those employees via the Excel spreadsheet, unless we were to accuse the company’s happiest employees of not being happy. Whereas we could scrub the names and responses of irregular or blue-collar workers, we had no mechanism for scrubbing the scores of the responses from Sangdo South. Their responses remained in the final report.

Eventually, Team Manager Jang and Assistant Manager Ji-soon developed a visual way to depict the information on PowerPoint that presented a lot of data while leaving out the analytic connections that we had worried about. The final reports were divided up by each company.

Only Executive Cho, owner-CEO Ahn and the Chairman could see the aggregate report for the whole group. Individual reports for each subsidiary were prepared that showed results from their own companies' data with anonymized data from other companies. This would show, for example, where they were relative to other companies with the satisfaction of their company, team or office space, but without knowing which company was first or last. The chairman discussed the reports with the CEOs of each company in person. These then turned into occasions for the HR team of Sangdo Holdings to go over the results with the HR departments from each subsidiary. Team Manager Jang scheduled meetings with each of the HR team managers, walking through the report. I was able to participate in a few of these meetings towards the end of my fieldwork. In each, HR managers from the Holdings company neutrally presented the data to their fellow HR managers as a matter of "lateral" information sharing. At one, Team Manager Jang and another team manager had a robust discussion about the problem at one of the factories and how they could fix a factory that had the lowest satisfaction numbers, but was the highest-revenue producing factory in the whole Sangdo Group. Changing things drastically at that factory – mandating that people be allowed to take vacation, and try to get rid of seven a.m. "encouraged" check-in time for office workers – might negatively affect production or revenues, it was discussed.

In the space of the meeting, such debates reflected amicable, face-to-face, attempts to fix problems within the companies. Like the pig's feet dinner with Sangdo Max, they were a format which presented both parties as equal voices, despite their organizational asymmetries. However, following the meetings, each subsidiary HR department was distributed a document from Ki-ho. The subsidiaries were meant to fill in the sheet to indicate what areas to improve among their problem areas. The blank Excel template, with column headings listing out 'areas of concern',

‘plan of action’, ‘date of start’, and ‘date of finish’, was a direct command, in such little visual syntax, to create an action plan for solving their problems. The subsidiary HR departments had to do such forms, because the template was an extension of the Chairman’s order. Thus, like Ki-ho benignly distributing and collecting a form, the holding company was in the interactionally neutral position of merely conveying that information. Because of this, subsidiaries would not be able to ignore it, and would have to make time to identify their issues, shape what ways they would fix them, and write an action plan for how and when they would resolve them. The final results were to be delivered back to the Chairman for his inspection. By the time I finished my fieldwork in late June, the subsidiaries were individually filling out their forms and creating their plans for the end of the year.

The satisfaction survey was an indirect and covert means of wresting information from the subsidiaries to use against their management. The neutrality of the request, the objective way the data was analyzed, the equality premised in face-to-face meetings, and the documentary mediation of the follow-up together made the hierarchical nature of this project less salient. However, unlike the rank hierarchy enacted by the gathering of signatures in sequence, this kind of project depended on the stability of numbers to stand for employee voices, especially unsatisfied ones. More than simple iconic representations of their voices,¹⁵ these numbers would have to be causally connected so as to serve as a managerial tool for the holding company HR team to use them as proper evidence in the final report and justify complicity. Deep frustration occurred when the numbers could not tell a causal story as was hoped, thwarting an opportunity to demonstrate a new and effective instrument. We “merely” reported the numbers in a more

¹⁵ Interestingly, other signs of the employees’ voices were present: there was a space to write their free opinion at the end of the survey with no length restriction. However, these responses were largely ignored for much of our analysis. Some individuals wrote page-long responses lamenting over their office, their company, South Korean work culture in general, and the ineptitude of the survey itself.

neutral way, which did have some impact on how the subsidiaries addressed persistent problems in their office cultures. The HR team eventually created a new node for reporting between themselves and the subsidiaries, who were tasked with solving their biggest office culture problems over the second half of the year. Like the social functioning of *hoesik* (corporate dining), the hierarchical nature of this administrative relationship was concealed through various attempts at presenting discursive, technical, scientific, and interpersonal neutrality.

But what did the holding company actually control as a result? Subsidiaries HR departments were compelled to investigate the problems outlined in the survey. Is this a sign of the control of the subsidiaries themselves? Sangdo First even went as far as to have a focus group on the factory site at which foremen could air their grievances to the HR rep. Thus while that HR rep was also reporting back to the holding company, it also created a new node by which the subsidiary had greater degree of control over their own laborers. When I visited them, the same HR team themselves took the well-crafted survey report from the holding company and reworked it to come up with some of their own conclusions about what they already knew about their organization. They seemed little bothered by the fact that they were reporting to the holding company at all in this process. Sangdo First was probably an outlier in this regard, however, as their relationship to the holding company was the most fraught. They regularly flouted the programs of the holding company as they pursued their own projects or did not participate in collaborations as much as other subsidiaries. Thus, even when compelled to fill out the “action-template” and report it to the holding company, they were not bound by the kind of power imagined by the holding company itself, but were able to accomplish something fractally similar: reposition their own role as an overseer of their workforce.

Conclusion: The Rights of Hierarchy

The pig's feet incident in which a senior employee from a subsidiary pleaded with a junior employee from the holding company is a useful analogy for thinking about the role of Sangdo Holdings within the Sangdo Group. Not the true headquarters in a system of semi-autonomous subsidiaries, Sangdo Holdings was made up of young managers, wielding fancy degrees and complex expert tools with the civilizing mission of turning around the subsidiaries through documentary discipline. This did not sit well with members of the subsidiaries, particularly those in managerial positions whose own positions at the tops of *their companies* were premised on the maintenance of localized expert knowledge.

In this chapter, I have described two kinds of formalized systems, status ranking and organizational hierarchy that structure relations within the conglomerate (cf. Parmentier 1987). These are not natural descriptors of two kinds of spheres in the office, such that we might imagine Sangdo Holdings is “on top” of other subsidiaries or managers are “higher” than lower-ranked employees. That is, themselves do mark separate spheres of office life; instead, they can be understood as resource and constraint for organizational activity. Any given political action can align or disalign with images that people may have about the proper hierarchy or not. Status ranking and organizational hierarchy can become articulated (or under-articulated) through specific kinds of projects and activities, like running a survey, holding a meeting, handing in a document, or having dinner.

In closing, it is worth discussing what ways these systems perform the relations they are bringing into action. Status ranking, for example, is embedded into many kinds of sign formations: from interactional norms to salary stratifications. Because of this, rank hierarchy is often the most salient form when we describe organizational or managerial hierarchies. It seems

like the natural state of affairs – in such a way that organizations imagine themselves as “flat” or “vertical” precisely along the organization of their rankings. To underperform the proper demeanor or deference involved in status ranking differences can have major effects both interactionally (as an insult) or organizationally (as in exile). Since status ranking is so well articulated with other kinds of social stratifications in broader society, it is less open for change at a basic level of practice. Thus, even the experts in the holding company who were attempting to up-end the organizational hierarchy in the broader Sangdo Group still maintained a familiar hierarchy within their own team, based around the sequential ordering of document production. Even though Team Manager Jang had a more relaxed approach to team-internal practices (holding meetings in coffee shops for instance), careful strategy was needed when submitting documents to Executive Cho, or anyone higher, such as the chairman.

Organizational hierarchies minimally depend on financial ownership but become instantiated through discursive activities. These discursive activities are less salient as formalized relations or as formalized ceremonies that poetically figurate the parties’ relations (cf. Urban 1986). One telling sign of the fact that organizational relations are relatively opaque is that experienced managers will often predict or guess what kinds of relations are actually occurring in an organization: a stock-sell off or transfer may be a sign of a power-grab, a new project from the headquarters may be a sign of growing central power. Organizational hierarchies are under-articulated in this degree. Thus, organizational hierarchies do not perform their own relations in the same way as status ranking do, which are over-articulated (Besnier 2006). Because they are enmeshed in neutral or objective techniques that do not formally diagram the relations being undertaken, they can appear to be more subversive by nature. Even basic diagrams, such as building layouts or marketing brochures, provide only a pictorial representation of these kinds of

relations; much more detailed diagrams exist for reporting charts between individuals themselves.

Organizational hierarchies are also subject to acts of manipulation as well. As the case of Sangdo Group illustrates, active attempts to conceal the hierarchical nature of the relation between the holding company and its subsidiaries through appeals to both democratic ideals and interactional symmetry (such as capturing the “voices” of employees or sharing results with different HR teams in a superficially open way) minimize the appearances of a shift in organizational hierarchy. The discursive and technical nature of organizational hierarchies in part explains why there is difficulty in understanding organizational inequalities more broadly: they are mediated by discursive forms (like regular reporting or control over certain processes) that in themselves are not hierarchical to the degree that they do not enfigure asymmetrical relations in the same way that interpersonal ones do. Thus, in efforts to cover up organizational hierarchies, interactional routines can be invoked. The employees at the holding company were particularly deft at this: the HR team would regularly hold *hoesik* with other HR departments as a way of bonding, team to team.

Where *hoesik* can be called to create an image of equal relations, it is not as easy to project an image of *scientific* neutrality. Scientific neutrality was based on the alignment of numbers with employee voices, such that they could be authoritatively said to stand (as a representative sample) for employee sentiment. This proved difficult as the mode of analyzing that the team had originally planned turned out to not correlate and the results themselves were tainted by employees seeming to misunderstand or possibly fudge their answers. Such problems could not be solved by political acts of humility alone. What is worth noting is that even highly prestigious forms of calculation – like the regression analysis conducted by the PhD student

hired – did not actually prove more useful as signs of science; in fact those numbers looked even less reliable as proper indicators of employee sentiment.

Looking at the discursive relations then provides a better account of the intra-conglomerate relations than merely judging by their financial ties or organizational charts. Sangdo First, for example, was not even directly owned by Sangdo Holdings yet still came under its managerial control in certain HR domains and not in others. While such administrative control often overlaps with financial control, financial ownership in and of itself does not constitute any kind of modality of control. Yet we should be wary to see these as simply relations of reporting for the matter too. That is, who reports to whom. Such a model replicates a model of ranking hierarchy to explain organizational hierarchy. What I have emphasized in this chapter has been the fact that organizational hierarchies operate through a wider constellation of activities whose forms of control are heterotopic in relation to the organizational hierarchies they constitute, involve activities that explicitly minimize the impact of other activities, and depend on different modalities of evidence. It is difficult, then, to say what kinds of organizational relationships are performed. In fact, it seemed that the survey was not merely meant to change relations through it itself, but over the course of time. The development of a successful survey in 2015 would be the beginning of what would become a successful “hinterlands” (Latour and Woolgar 1986, see also Oppenheim 2008) of previous reports and pathways of reporting that could in turn naturalize the relationships in ongoing surveys and in other projects. Together these would provide intertextual reference upon which the holding company could establish itself as an expert authority, not just through single instances thereof.

Why do rank hierarchies appear over-articulated and organizational hierarchies under-articulated? The problem of rank hierarchies asks why they come to be articulated in so many

different domains. This phenomenon however has received extensive treatment in linguistic anthropological accounts of hierarchy. Niko Besnier, for instance, has noted that hierarchy is rarely a singular sign read at single moment for a single effect (Besnier 2006). Conventional symbols of social status or rank differences are often extended into signs of linguistic excess (multiple honorifics) to diagram excess itself. These extensions also are marked in material contrasts, spatial distinctions, interactional convention (timing, order) or other semiotic contrasts that provide multi-channel cues for reading status difference. Certain practices of status relations may only be properly expressed through the right set of co-textually aligned signs that properly anchor status as a property of the person. Think here to the bachelor who wears a fancy tuxedo but drives up in a used car. Duranti (1997) has called situated elaborate ceremonial performances as part of a “multi-channel architecture” for displaying hierarchical status. While some ceremonial forms do this practice in situ (Perrino 2002), others occur through more elaborate architectures mediated by documents or other mediators (Yankah 1991). In South Korea, rank hierarchies in corporations seem premised on the number of other individuals that report up to someone, a fact articulated in visual icons and temporal sequences of the *gyeoljae* process.¹⁶

But the other problem of organizational hierarchies remains more elusive analytically precisely because such hierarchies do not articulate discursively with recognizable or excessive poetic forms. Rather than assuming this is another case of elite power control through the concealment of expert techniques or the creation of a kind of organizational hegemony, I suggest we can think about the fact that relations of ownership and control are under-elaborated because they are not an ambiguous kind of political relationship – between ownership and administration.

¹⁶ The relative prestige of South Korean weddings and funerals can be measured in the number of fake wreaths donated by status'ed individuals or companies themselves that line the hallways of wedding or funeral halls.

Ownership itself does not require control. Such forms often translate into *passive* forms of control – the passive acquisition of wealth and the surplus of labor (in an ownership relationship) or the reception of reports and information (in an administrative relationship). Thus, while organizational units may be stratified in different ways, we should be careful not to assume that they necessarily re-instantiate the same kind of ontology of domination as interpersonal hierarchies which recapitulate space, size, or quantity contrasts. As the philosopher Michel Serres (1982) reminds, certain forms of extraction also come in the form of the parasite – precisely the privileged position of inserting oneself in the middle of a relation of production in a way largely unnoticed by the organism being parasited. To own or to administer another corporation or unit is not to be bigger than it or to encompass it (discursively or otherwise) but rather to passively receive the fruits of its labor.¹⁷

As much as interpersonal features of status differences can be conflated with organizational differences, the salience of status rankings ideologically is pervasive – and one that is undergoing radical changes in South Korea today. In the next chapter, I turn to attempts to reform vertical rank hierarchies. Even as vertical hierarchy is complex technical feat that creates the image of verticality, this has not stopped companies from experimenting with how to make their offices horizontal. I look at the equally complex ways that language, communication, and office interactions were made to be flat.

¹⁷ And we can note here that many headquarters functions receive revenue by virtue of a contribution from the revenues of their subsidiaries who pay a fixed percentage of annual revenue to fund operating costs of the revenue-less headquarters.

Chapter 3: Evaluating Office Interactions: From Flat Titles to 360-degree Feedback

Introduction: Overturning (Interactional) Hierarchies

International news audiences encountered a major South Korean scandal over an interaction gone bad in 2014. Dubbed “nut-gate” or the “peanut-return” (*ddangkong riteon* in Korean), the incident involved an heiress-executive of the Korean Air conglomerate who became infuriated at the way nuts were plated in her first-class seat. Before the Seoul-bound flight could leave New York, she forced the plane’s purser to offer a ritual apology on his knees in front of her, hitting him with the manual he had used to explain the policy. She directed the pilots to turn the flight back to the gate so the purser could be properly deplaned. The heiress, Heather Cho, was promptly excoriated in the press after the story leaked on social media. She was reported to be “abusing” (*gabjil*) her position as an elite. That incident was not the first of its kind: in a preceding incident, an executive from the POSCO (steel) conglomerate became known as the “ramen executive.” On a Korean Air flight bound for Los Angeles, the executive had indicated that he did not like the in-flight food on a plane and asked for ramen (cup-noodles) instead. Unsatisfied by the quality of noodles, he repeatedly demanded that the stewardess remake it for him, finally hitting her with a magazine in anger over her incompetence. The executive was ultimately pressured to resign after netizens tracked down his personal information and berated him online.

These two incidents capture negative attitudes towards elite power abuse in interaction that have new traction in the South Korean media and on the internet. In corporate lore, executives and chairman were once lionized for their iconic acts of yelling or ordering, such as the case of Hyundai founder Chung Ju Yung who was famous for his trademark phrase “*ibwa haebwasseo?*” (“Hey, have you tried it?”) to encourage workers to challenge themselves to innovate (see Steers 1999) or Lee Kun-hee of Samsung who in his famous “Frankfurt Proclamation” where he told workers to “change everything except [your] wife and kid.”¹ In recent years, media attention has begun to re-evaluate these kinds of exhortations as instances of elite abuse, not paternal encouragement. Newspaper articles have focused public attention to the “emotional labor” (*gamjeong nodong*) (a la Hochschild 1979) exerted by retail and service workers. These workers in particular must weather the tempers of those who believe their status has been infringed upon by improper shows of deference (Goffman 1956, 477-488). In mediatized accounts, micro-interactions involving two unequal parties come to stand for a nation of haves and have-nots, or alphas and betas (*gap and eul* in Korean terms).² Public shaming or poor treatment by elites become lightning rods for criticisms against the elite and their rights to assert their authority interactionally.

Though corporate executives or corporate heirs are the perpetrators in many of these news scandals, hierarchical interactions and concerns with interactional abuse have also been a

¹ His well-known phrase was: “마누라와 자식만 빼고 다 바꿔라”

² *Gap* and *eul* derive from Korean legal theory, which uses ordinal terms for contracting partners. This ordinal system derives from an older calendrical system and functions much like the way that Alpha, Beta, Gamma, etc. can function as ordinal units in English. Multiple contracting parties are given ordinal sequence to denote their role in a contract. The first member of the party is known as *gap* and the second as *eul*, functioning as an anaphoric reference in contract for “Party A” and “Party B.” Merely sequential by definition, the terms have taken on a different connotation by convention in contracting. Party A (*gap*) is the party that extends the offer and Party B (*eul*) is the party that receives the offer. Conventionally, the *gap* has come to be taken as the “stronger” party compared to *eul* in a contract. That is, in relations between companies, for instance, the bigger company will typically be the *gap* and the smaller company the *eul*.

concern within corporations and among corporate actors themselves. In this chapter, I look at the way that the negative dimensions of hierarchical behavior were being re-evaluated within corporations. I focus not on conflict within the corporation per se – labor and trade related conflicts have always been present. Rather, I am interested in how images of anti-hierarchy have become part of contemporary office reforms and how these images were used to delegitimize modes of behavior of an older generation of South Korean office worker. As part of the larger argument of this dissertation, delegitimizing certain modes of behavior was part of how political authority within conglomerates was carried out. But where news stories focused on capturing images of abuse (*gabjil*) that could be witnessed, circulated, and discussed in the public sphere (as a form of public shaming), the way these kinds of behavior became delegitimized within offices has taken a very different form: they are highly indirect, part of modernizing projects, and even scientific in nature. In this chapter, I show how negative behavior becomes an object of office reform: from title-flattening, to two-way communication and wholesome work activities, and even rationalized Human Resources programs.

Ten-thousand-year managers

At the outset, it is worth asking: why did office interactions become a key site for (re)solving office problems in the Korean workplace? And what problems were they (seen to be) addressing? In Chapter One, I described how sites of corporate governance, industrial licenses, and ownership structures were key pieces of political legislation enacted in the wake of the crisis, changes that wrought major changes in the corporate and employment landscape of Korea at the time (cf. Haggard, Lim, and Kim 2003). Many of these changes, such as the recommendation to

convert to a holding company structure for instance, were advocated by foreign (US and European) investors, IMF authorities and the Korean government, who saw the Korean conglomerates from the view of improper governance and behavior: such organizations were not acting transparent enough and did also have enough checks at the board-level to meet Western standards of proper governance.

For a new generation of South Korean office workers, the problems were of a different nature, what I call a domestic crisis of authority. This domestic crisis of authority had to do with the ways in which an older generation of managers who grew up during the 1970s and worked in the 1980s and 1990s were seen as outdated to the demands of the twenty-first century South Korean working place and problematic for a new generation of men and women office workers. Many of the changes to office relations that I discuss in this chapter, topics like flattening of titles, appear to have an American aura to them, albeit more Silicon Valley than Wall Street. But they are situated within a very South Korean crisis about how to deal with the authoritative behavior of those who still line the higher ranks of the corporate world.

Across all the genres of interaction that I will discuss, there is a central figure that emerges: an imagined type of older manager or *bujang*. Often referred to as the “10,000 year manager” (*mannyeon bujang*) for his inability to be fired and tendency to not retire, the *bujang* is one of the indirect targets of interactional reforms. Formerly the highest rank of non-executive positions, the title of *bujang* has long lost its direct reference to a rank with direct responsibility (“department manager”). Since the advent of the team-based working structures in South Korea in the 1990s, the role of *timjang* (“team manager”) has largely replaced *bujang* as the head of basic work units. A *timjang* is selected for his or her managerial aptitude, not their tenure or

status. *Bujang* today can signify more broadly a cultural type of an “older” (i.e. outdated) office figure.

Older male managers can also be referred to in a different light: as *oldeuboi* (an “oldboy”). This is a colloquial term for someone who spent their career in one company, an allusion to someone with strong institutional ties and loyalties. About half of the team managers at Sangdo Holdings could be labeled as “old boys,” given their life-long status within the company. Both Team Manager Jang and Executive Cho, despite their competing personalities, did not see themselves as part of the oldboy coterie of Sangdo – they were outsiders who had joined mid-career. But more than personality differences or matters of taste, to both of them, oldboy managers were a scourge on attempts to create a friendlier, more gender-inclusive, and better performing office. Team Manager Jang would often point out their behaviors to me when we were walking together – about their excessive drinking or late night philandering, their abuse of their junior employees, or their inability to catch up to modern working styles. He recounted to me and other team members the minutia of their behavior in manager-only meetings or things said at company drinking events, behaviors he particularly derided. To him, a saving grace was that there were many other progressive and competent team managers in Sangdo Holdings. Older managers were typically generalists – having rotated through numerous departments over many years. Managers like Team Manager Jang and Executive Cho, as well as other younger managers, were subject-area experts, such as in Human Resources or Strategy. Executive Cho also criticized this kind of worker, but he was more indirect than Team Manager Jang in his critique. On one occasion talking to him in his office, he asked me out of the blue if I knew of any literature or books that described the differences between “Western” and “traditional” ways of acting in an office; that is, something that outlined how certain people should take advice and

listen to the opinions of others. He was being a little vague – even when speaking in his highly competent English – but I suspected he was talking about a problem with the older cohort of team managers (he was poetically looking “out” from his glass office onto the floor). He thought that some managers did not know how to properly take criticism without being offended and was looking for some program to explain it, or better, correct it.

To many office workers, these behaviors are highly salient in interactional cues. A female informant, who worked as an in-house lawyer at another conglomerate, once recounted to me a story involving a subsidiary manager who called her office line. When he called, he immediately began speaking in *banmal* (or informal speech) upon their first conversation, while demanding a favor from the legal team. The audacity to *assume* one could speak in asymmetrical, but highly intimate, terms such as *banmal* was a feature of entitled older office managers, in her view, facts that clashed with her status as a professional worker in the head office.³ This kind of stereotypic behavior is often troped upon in in movies and television, where the older male manager is marked by his hot temper, as in Figure 3.1 below.



Figure 3.1: Depictions of angry managers
Two examples of the “angry” male manager type: Left: a screenshot from the television drama *An Incomplete Life* (*Misaeng*), the manager *Ma bujang*, played by actor Son Jong-hak, yelling at a

³ In-house lawyers in South Korea are actually exceptional to the hierarchy/ranking system because of their professional qualifications. They are typically addressed as *byeonhosa*, the formal term for lawyer.

lower-ranking manager. Right: an angry manager from the comic series *Gaus Electronics*, getting angry (r) and then cooling his tone (l).

That such a manager type came to be problematic is perhaps not a surprise – they were seen as holdovers from a past South Korea that was “rougher” (Harkness 2011), a qualitative distinction that contrasted with the new “soft” modern Korea. This temporal distinction (past and present) is mapped onto countless qualities in South Korea. What is interesting in the case of the older male manager is the fact that it is problematic in so *many* qualities. The anecdotes I have relayed here pick up many salient different interactional or behavioral qualities, such as managerial ability, speech level asymmetry, emotional outburst, not to mention more illicit consumptive features like excessive drinking, smoking, and late-night entertainment. These all indexically link back to the same figure, to which any token instance of these behaviors could be reflexively linked. Concerns for identifying this figure did not lie only at the level of stereotyping an undesired office figure however; they penetrated into human resources concerns about the high cost of high-ranking office workers, office problems regarding sexual harassment and worker abuse, and other difficulties with “top-down” culture that evaded even friendly or forward-thinking office policies. But how these issues came to be “solved” in office policies and what these policies led to in practice had heterogeneous effects on office life, promotions, office socializing, and everyday interactions.

Thus, this chapter looks at the way concerns over this kind of illicit behavior became manifest in different office policies. In the first half, I address changes in the broader Korean corporate sphere beyond Sangdo where conglomerate groups have been experimenting with different sets of policies: including flat-name policies, two-way communication, mentoring programs, and socializing restrictions. In the second half, I turn to a specific HR program that was instituted at the Sangdo Group to evaluate executives and team managers. This program

made managerial behavior a matter of scientific concern, but ended up affecting *all* managers in its wake.

Changing Titles for a Changing Workplace

In 2012, the telecom giant Korea Telecom (KT), announced a major office reform for its twenty-thousand-plus workforce. Dubbed the “Unified Manager System” (*tonghap maenijeoje*), KT’s system removed the system of differentiated titles for ranks below team manager. Any worker between the first (*sawon*), second (*daeri*), third (*gwajang*), and fourth (*bujang*) rankings would now be called a “manager” (*maenijeo*) as their official title. Employees in these ranks – the majority of its workforce – were supposed to address each other as “manager” affixing the honorific *-nim*, such as “*Kim maenijeo-nim*.” By highlighting one of the most salient aspects of office hierarchy – differentiated titles – this was supposed to have the effect of flattening out ranks for the majority of office workers in the company (while not affecting those figuratively above, like executives). One of the justifications for this system was the need to reduce the number of approvals on internal decisions, as all “managers” would directly report to team managers, instead of gaining needing to gain a signature at each rank.⁴ It was also intended to promote more equitable working relations between employees, relations that were based on skill

⁴ There are three conventions for reckoning an employee position in a company: *jig-geup*, *jig-chaek*, and *jig-wi*, – “job level,” “job responsibility,” and “job position,” respectively. (The morpheme *jig/jik* refers to “work” or “profession.”) *Jig-geup* refers to an individual’s ordinal rank, which may be classified in an HR database as S4, S3, S2 or S1 with finer gradations to specify how many years they have been at that rank. *Jig-chaek* refers to a designated work responsibility, such as team leader or division chief. *Jig-wi* refers to the general managerial titles that once did actually accord to oversight of an office layout (*bujang* was manager of a *bu*). However, their reference to office layouts has been lost. All employees will have at least a *jig-geup* and *jig-wi*, but not necessarily a *jig-chaek*.

and merit rather than rank. If everyone is a *manager*, in theory, it lightens the burden for those at the “bottom” since they are equal to others – at least in terms of title. The deeper target of these changes was the reputation for bureaucratic inefficiency that had plagued the once state-owned, but now private, telecom.⁵ New titles were seen to contribute to the “efficiency” (*hyoyul*) of the office while also improving the internal culture, which was known for abuse of junior workers by those above them (and those above them).

KT was not the first or only major corporation to reform its titles, ranks, and modes of address by employees in the time of my fieldwork. In fact, it was following its closest rival, SK Telecom, which had also changed to a “manager” system in 2006. Most of the largest Korean companies in the 2000s experimented with some solution to the perceived connection between fixed rank systems and titles. Because the lexical class for titles in Korean is not closed, like *tu-vous* alternation, and there is a general taboo for first-name address, companies have developed a variety of linguistic solutions to address their title problem, so to speak. Some of these reforms have been *title-raising* (*vous-vous* equivalent). Title-raising, like the manager system of KT, lifts the respect of all employees in the company without directly lowering anyone, at least denotationally. There were a number of other innovations around how to mutually raise titles: when I took a brief freelance job to gain a foothold into a large company early in my fieldwork, I was told that I should call everyone by “pro” (*peuro*) with the honorific suffix *nim* attached, as in “professional.” An informant at a large conglomerate was called “manager,” despite her high-level duties in global marketing within the headquarters. At Sangdo Holdings, all the managers above the second-rank were uniformly called “chief,” (*suseok* [-*nim*]), an uncommon form of

⁵ KT is a case of a formerly state-owned company that still had strong political ties. Besides the bureaucratic work culture, the changing of the CEO every five years -- aligned with changes to the country’s presidency – were an indication to many shareholders that it was not “fully” private.

address that even those at the more traditional subsidiaries occasionally mocked. Some companies did selective raising such as mandating that the lowest-ranked employees – those without any titles – be addressed by their first-name with the subordinate-respect suffix *-ssi*, rather than name-only or name with the diminutive suffix *-ya*. Figure 3.2 below captures examples from other companies along with the year they implemented their title reforms.

Companies using horizontal forms of address		
CJ	2000	Every employee called by [first-name + <i>nim</i>]
Amore Pacific	2002	Everyone employee called [first-name + <i>nim</i>] except for designated managers/executives (in 2011 changed to every employee)
SK Telecom	2006	Everyone employee called manager except for designated managers
Cheil	2010	Every employee called <i>pro</i>
Yuhan Kimberly	2011	Every employee called [first-name + <i>nim</i>]
Posco	2011	<i>Sawon</i> are called "associate," <i>daeri</i> to <i>gwajang</i> are called manager
Hanwha	2012	<i>Sawon</i> are [first-name + <i>ssi</i>]; <i>daeri</i> to <i>gwajang</i> are called manager
Ajou Group	2013	Everyone employee called manager except for designated managers/executives

Figure 3.2: Flat-title policies across conglomerates
 From a *Chosun Ilbo* newspaper article in 2014 discussing the recent changes to office titles.
 Translated from Korean. Source: <http://weekly.chosun.com/client/news/viw.asp?nNewsNumb=002328100012&ctcd=C02> Accessed January 20, 2017.

Attempts to flatten hierarchies through title-raising are akin to the *vous-vous* raising described by Brown and Gilman (1960). For that study, the authors argued that changes in address-levels, some of which became *vous-vous* (raising) and some became *tu-tu* (lowering) expressed a general *social* reorientation towards solidary (i.e. symmetrical) relations in face-to-face encounters, in the US and Europe. Even though they characterized this as a general societal shift, they argued that forms of speaking did not change all at once. Rather different sets of relations become re-mapped over time, like parent-child, boss-employee, waiter-customer, some of which mapped onto *vous-vous* and others *tu-tu*. Hierarchical relations in the West tended to skew more towards informal, solidary relations marked by *tu-tu*. In South Korea, shifts to equal address

generally follow a *raising* tendency (*vous-vous*), such as the manager-system, though there are some cases of lowering, as I show below. Where in Brown and Gilman's argument, these forms indexed changing concepts of *authority* in the West in general (marking an equal society off from a hierarchical one), in South Korea title-raising projects appear to fit into a chronotope of modernity: marking the past off from the present through linguistic icons. Harkness (2015) has elaborated a similar phenomenon with South Korean Protestant Christians. Within the church, members of the laity are encouraged to address (and think about) each other as non-hierarchically marked "brothers" (*hyeongje*) and "sisters," (*jamae*), while not using the age-indexing, and hence asymmetrical, "older brother" (*hyeong/obba*) and "older sister" (*nuna/onni*) kin terms that generally mark intimate friendships outside the church. By selecting an authority-neutral set of forms of address (neither raising nor lowering), Korean Christians can index a universal and hence progressive, form of sibling-hood, a second-order reading of which is contrasted with the more "traditional" default modes of kin address.⁶

In the context of South Korean corporate titles, raising is marked by a double contrast, one denotational and one interactional. Denotationally, in forms like *maenijeo*, *timjang*, and *peuro*, there is a lexical contrast between Korean-language titles and borrowed English titles that stand outside traditional ranking titles. A case in point: there is no company making raising all of its employees to *bujang*. Interactionally, titles only express symmetry or asymmetry when they occur in a pair (ex: A and B both address each other as "manager"). Symmetrical address, normally a form reserved for one's closest friends, intimates, or spouse, has become closely associated with successful Western organizations, from the circulation of business case studies

⁶ See also Luong (1988) for a description of the ways that systems of address mediate differences among political movements in Vietnam.

on Western companies such as Google and Apple to the former Korean national soccer coach (and Dutchman) Guus Hiddink. In 2002, Hiddink became famous in Korean news for making his players address each other by their first names as a way to rid his team of the age-hierarchy between older and younger players (see Figure 3.3 below). Korean hierarchy featured as a major obstacle in Malcolm Gladwell’s 2008 book *Outliers*, in which he (problematically) traced a spate of Korean Air plane crashes in the 1990s to norms of hierarchy that disfavored “upward” communication. Drawing on the intercultural social psychologist Geert Hofstede, Gladwell saw Korean rank hierarchy as a problem that could be fixed by the open norms of English, which minimize the inherent problems of “high-power distance” cultures like South Korea (Gladwell 2008, 177-223). Hofstede’s more general theories about cultural (i.e., national) orientations to power-distance are a common reference point among globalized Korean businesspeople as well. Interviewees frequently mentioned it when describing inveterate problems in Korean business culture. The general idea is that by fixing asymmetries in language or conversation, imagined to take place at the level of personal-address, one can clear any obstacles to communication, and hence “unobstructed” success.



Figure 3.3: Influence of Hiddinke’s name policy on office work
 A blog post that compares company title changes with the influence of Korean national soccer team Guus Hiddink’s approach to “title dismantling.” Left reads: “Recently, more companies are using flat titles like the *nim* approach with no relation to rank.” Right reads: “Coach Hiddink’s ‘title dismantling’ greatly raised the organizational power of the 2002 World Cup team.” Source:

<http://m.blog.naver.com/spp0805/120105721609>. Accessed on January 17, 2017. (Post originally appeared April 18, 2010).

While it seems that all these new manager-led forms mark a contrast with “native” forms of asymmetry (either denotationally or interactionally), not all companies have adopted title-*raising* approach like KT and SK Telecom. Some companies, for instance, have been title-*lowering*, often by removing formal job titles all together.⁷ The major media and food conglomerate CJ, for instance, became famous for its “*nim*” policy launched in 2000, one of the first companies to do so. At CJ, employees address each other with their first names, with the honorific suffix *nim* attached in direct address. This applied to everyone in the company from the CEO down.⁸ A CJ press release at the time declared that this was a mode of “title democratization” (*hoching minjuhwa*), borrowing a common Korean trope for institutional reform. The change to the titles was said to be “the only way to raise competitiveness in the intense market situation confronting the company and raise the creativity of the employees,” according to a PR statement. The titles were meant to usher in a “horizontal culture” (*supyeongjeok munhwa*).⁹

In a similar fashion, friends who were computer programmers at large Korean IT companies recounted to me how their companies adopted English-name address policies. Employees could designate their legal English name (if they had one), one that they personally liked, one from a list, or one that sounded like their Korean name (e.g., *Hank* for *Hankyu*).

⁷ Brown and Gilman do note that the “solidarity semantic” in face-to-face address could shift to either *vous-vous* as a mode of mutual respect giving or *tu-tu* as a sign of mutual intimacy. While certain conventional dyads seemed to fall naturally onto V-V or T-T forms of symmetry, they note that the direction is entirely dependent on which social variables people see as a matter of solidarity (such as parent-child).

⁸ In cases of direct address using first names, it is more common to use the suffix *-ssi* in polite address. *Ssi*, attached to names, is respectful but indexes that the addresser is superior in status or position, such as a teacher addressing a student. The suffix *-nim* is an honorific suffix, but typically attaching to titles, such as *bujang-nim*, indexing upward (T-V) or mutual (V-V) respect. Thus, a policy to create first name-plus-*nim* indexes iconically connotes, in its very form, the informality of mutual first-name address with the title-indexing (and hence mutually respectful) suffix of *nim*.

⁹ Source: <http://news.joins.com/article/17898446>. Accessed January 17, 2017.

Employees would directly address each other in Korean using English names without honorific suffix, avoiding the highly intimate and informal relationship that real-name mutual direct address would presuppose.

There have been some awkward results and unexpected outcomes of all these title changes. As one news article described the “manager system,” when someone came to an office looking for “Manager Lee,” various Manager Lees came down to greet him. At the same time, the article reported that it was hard to identify the person responsible for a project, given that everyone had the same title (where titles used to be an index of authority and responsibility). To accommodate, some employees would introduce themselves by saying what their former title was before the manager system, as a way of reckoning status. Others kept traditional titles for meeting with outside clients or partners, while reserving solidary titles for internal address.

The shift to manager system or even a first-name policy is not an inevitable stage in organizational flattening or “Westernization.” In 2014, just two years after they had instituted the manager system, KT announced that they were abolishing it and reverting to the five-tier ladder of traditional rankings as a way to boost employee “spirit” (*sagijinjak*). GM Daewoo did so as a result of pressure from their labor unions. Hanwha Group also reverted back to its five-tier system because people outside of the company had trouble reading authority into titles.



Figure 3.4: Cartoon depicting KT and SK name policies

A KT worker is waving the white flag of surrender with its “manager system” in the face of the (upward?) success of its rival SK, seen here by its iconic logo of the orange-and-red butterfly. SK was successful in instituting the manager system. Source: <http://news.kmib.co.kr/article/view.asp?arcid=0922711511&code=11151400&cp=nv>. Accessed January 3, 2017

The degree to which some companies succeeded or failed in these endeavors is complex, having to do with the degree to which changes in forms of address aligned with other dimensions of hierarchical elaboration. One problem in many companies was that even as *jig-wi* (titles) were flattened, *jig-geub* (tenure ranks) were maintained, meaning that employees were still graded differentially by salary and benefits in HR systems. This is not to mention other factors, such as the conservativeness of the company culture, industry, make-up of the workforce, and the forcefulness of company unions, many of which have opposed manager-ization as threats to seniority and pay. We can note some patterns though: more conservative companies (such as those in heavy manufacturing) have favored raising (*vous-vous* equivalent) such as *maenijeo*. This change has only effected titles and not deeper HR rank-distinctions which are largely preserved. These are companies that have higher male employment rates, as well as strong unions. More progressive companies, such as those in fashion, IT, or media have tended for lowering (*tu-tu* equivalent) like first-name-*nim* or English-only policies. Companies like these see themselves as more progressive, more gender diverse, in relatively newer industries, and more likely to reflect flatness in their wider organizational structure.¹⁰ In a general sense, however, both kinds of change also signal a second-order reading of “flat interaction” to a notion of “flat organization.” To be a worker at a company with flat titles, also creates a larger semiotic

¹⁰ For example, in many computer programming companies in Korea, work structures are highly flat in terms of few ranks and very limited reporting structure. Units in these companies are called “cells” (*sel*) which have more of an independent work structure than typical corporate “teams” (*tim*) whose members are often responsible for each others’ work.

alignment to modern/flat/Western companies like Google and away from older/vertical/rigid companies like Hyundai.

As part of my larger argument, we should not see these as merely aligning with Western organizational features. These modes of changing address also have an indirect target: older male managers. In many cases, the employees most affected by the raising or lowering were those at the top of the old pyramid, so to speak. One newspaper article reporting on the change noted that managers like *bujang* experienced a “sense of loss” (*sangsilgam*) because of their sudden drop in status and a loss of motivation to seek higher promotions anymore.¹¹

Communicating Cultures of Respect

The corporate leviathan Samsung Electronics announced in 2016 its first major change to its ranking system. Following the CJ group, Samsung Electronics would have employees address each other by their first name plus *nim*, from executives on down. At the same time, Samsung sought to situate the title problem within broader problems of its corporate culture, not just its titles. Having too many layers of reporting, for instance, was cited as a cause for overtime work (*janeop*) and missed vacations by employees. Thus, the company promised to reduce the total possible number of ranks from seven to four, in addition to making the title changes. A Samsung representative was quoted in a press release saying “the corporate culture is changing to a more horizontal one through an address-system and [mode of] reporting where superior [*sang-geupja*]

¹¹ Source: <http://news.naver.com/main/read.nhn?mode=LSD&mid=sec&sid1=101&oid=021&aid=0000172106>. Accessed January 2, 2017.

and subordinate [*hageupja*] respect each other.”¹² Implicit in this idea is not only that the workplace was inefficient because of asymmetrical registers, but also because of an underlying lack of respect between higher and lower workers. Titles were merely a surface phenomenon to a larger issue of hierarchical problems.

The issue of respect between higher- and lower-ranked employees touches upon the broader communicative relations between sociologically-marked individuals. Where titles fetishize bureaucratic efficiency by the *removal* of these asymmetries in the form of titles, the case of Samsung suggests that respect between workers must be *added to* in ways more comprehensive than just titles. How was this imagined in communicative terms? As a directional phenomenon.

For relative senior and relative junior employees to “respect each other” reflects a directional notion of communication. Any kind of hierarchical communication in South Korea can be imagined as a “top-down” phenomenon when certain speech acts (ordering, commanding, asking, yelling) align with the higher of an asymmetrical pair. These directional notions are captured in a variety of phrases and metaphors in everyday speech. Four-character epithets from Sino-Korean phrases, such as *sang-myeong-ha-bok* (Chinese, 上命下服) “top orders, bottom obeys” and *sang-haeng-ha-hyo* (Chinese, 上行下效) “bottom does as top does,” are often used to describe military communication. More everyday terms to characterize verticality in speech such as “downward” (*hahyang*) or “one-directional” (*ilbanghyang*) can reference height or direction, respectively. When team members at Sangdo referenced sending a file to Executive Cho, they would use the verb *ollida* (or *olleodeurida* in an honorific register) meaning to “raise s.t. up.” The retiring CEO of Sangdo Holdings described in an interview with me that vertical

¹² Source: <http://www.kinews.net/news/articleView.html?idxno=71179>. Accessed January 16, 2017

communication was something like a downward flowing waterfall which moves smoothly. Good communication does not just go from the top and spread to all below, but should flow step-by-step. That is, it is best when transmitted rank-by-rank, as in a chain. The new CEO who replaced the old CEO responded with a different metaphor when I asked him a similar question. He drew on a military phrase *ilsabullan* (Chinese, 一絲不亂) which means that all soldiers are standing in a line with no wavering. The suggestion was that all lower ranks be ready to follow orders from above in a systematic and predictable manner (*jisichegye*).

In contrast to implicit ideas of communication as a unidirectional phenomenon, the English term “communication” (*keomyunikeisyeon*) was invoked most commonly to denote an inherently “two-way” mode of speaking. This could be paralleled by a Sino-Korean term *uisasotong* (Chinese, 意思疏通) or just *sotong* for short. Both reverse the spatial concept of verticality and unidirectionality implicit in the ideas office communication above. To use *uisasotong* for instance conveys a two-way transfer of ideas or intentions (*uisa*), conveyed freely or without care (*sotong*). This is not the same as the idea of a back-and-forth transfer of signs and meaning, common in the Saussurean tradition and conduit notions of language (cf. Reddy 1979). *Uisasotong* conveys a mutual understanding of another’s feelings, even without speech.

In 2013, the Sangdo Group’s company magazine *Our Sangdo* had a special issue about communication that gives a sense that the idea of *sotong* is less about a pure conduit of concretized or encoded thoughts, and more about knowing another person’s state of mind. A headline from one article in the magazine reads: (In English) “Relationship, Communication”: (In Korean) “Between a person and a person, *sotong*.” Below the headline, an introductory inscription reads:

Entering into another's heart-mind [*ma-eum*]¹³
Means a bridge is connected in each heart-mind
The way to cross that bridge is
Precisely *sotong*.

In the new year 2013,
How about we pledge to do more *sotong*?
Understanding the differences between me and my coworkers
While thinking about the other's point of view one more time,
Between one person and another, connecting a bridge to their heart-mind.
We hope that we can become a Sangdo Family.

The magazine article expresses that *sotong* includes talking, along with a general orientation to attuning to the conditions and feelings of others. The following section of the magazine offered employees' own ideas about what they thought *sotong* was. Subtitled "Generation to Generation" in English, a mid-level manager in his 40s wrote that the "secret of communication is precisely living in another's shoes," going on to say that "more than just receiving what you hear, communication that grabs the 'real meaning' hidden in one's words, is felt to be more smooth." (*Our Sangdo*, p. 11). Following this section, a two-page spread listed how Great King Sejong (who invented the modern Korean alphabet, Hangeul, in the 1440s) was truly the "greatest communicator." On the next page, a checklist ensured that employees knew how to communicate properly. Among the thirteen items on the list were "I always try to respect the opinion of those younger than me," "I can control my emotions" and "I don't hold fixed ideas or bias about certain issues."

But *whose* feelings were being targeted here for clearer communication? Later in the issue, a section in a bold English header framed the issue in more stark sociological terms: "Taking Care of Juniors vs. Working with Seniors." The article framed company life as marked by a generational divide between workers: young employees and older managers who

¹³ See Harkness (2013, 201-225) for a discussion of *ma-eum* (or *maŭm*).

fundamentally did not understand each other. Furthermore, the article – written as a series of hypothetical workplace problems together with short advice on how to resolve them – suggested that both parties had different moral obligations to each other: “juniors” should be polite to older managers and understand their working histories, while “seniors” should be respectful to their juniors.¹⁴ The English word “mentoring” (*mentoring*) appeared in the article, suggesting a new way that juniors and seniors could bridge the generational divide through warmer one-on-one relations, not premised on misunderstanding or pre-judgment. This invocation of “mentoring” and the use of “junior” and “senior” terms is redolent of school or university relations. In these institutions, relations between younger and older students are asymmetrical, but more intimate in terms of mutual aid giving and support.



Figure 3.5: “Mentoring” promotion example
 “A Senior from Samsung is coming!” From Samsung’s dedicated “mentoring” website, this announces a program to send Samsung employees to their home-town high schools to tell their “juniors” (*hubae*) about their career paths. This does not manifest the same older male manager discourse otherwise addressed here, but it does reflect the extensional varieties of events in which “seniors” help their “juniors.” Source: <http://blog.samsung.co.kr/5093>. Accessed March 10, 2017.

Efforts to create more *sotong* were manifest in different events around the corporate world during my fieldwork. Large-scale events like town-hall-style meetings held with a CEO and

¹⁴ In male friend or organizational groups, such as work teams, associations, or work units, framing group divides between “older” and “younger” was a common way of dividing a group in two, for humorous purposes at times. On my basketball team, we often divided between “old boys” and “young boys.”

representative employees co-existed alongside new mentoring programs at companies that framed relations between those putatively “higher” and “lower” as involving mutual care, support, and listening. Where address terms pick out the formal aspects of identity-status employees address as a site of reducing organizational hierarchy, efforts that focus on “communication” emphasize a different part of this idea: generational differences between managers and workers, between those who were born in the two dictator eras (1961-1987) and raised in the all-male, highly militaristic cultures, and those who grew up in the country in the era of democratic government and globalization in the 1990s. These two generations could overcome their differences by engaging in empathetic communication. The picture in Figure 3.5 above shows that the idea of “senior” (*seonbae*) is a role that could be extended out of specific dyadic relations to *any* kind of employee, relative to “fictive” juniors in middle or high school to whom they might give advice. The term “mentor,” while deriving from the English, reflects a Korean concern about relations of seniority in which supportive (and not abusive) relations should be cultivated.

Discourses of *uisasotong* and new (or revised) roles that emphasize mutual-caring and listening framed interpersonal relations, small-group meetings, and large-scale kinds of relationality, these terms were rarely used to describe regular talk. More common semantic descriptors of speech in everyday life are the denotationally wide *mal-hada* (“to speak”) or *iyagi/yaegihada* (literally to tell a “story,” but used to refer to acts of actual conversation, such as “to talk”). That is, despite the ubiquity of “communication” or *uisasotong* discourse in campaigns by companies, I never heard specific instances of it being used to describe everyday encounters of speaking or talking. Campaigns calling for greater empathy between employees contrasted them against presumably “regular” conversation. But in doing so, communication and

uisasotong became an idealized notion of interpersonal communication, but one that did not map (meta-pragmatically) onto every kind of conversation. To the degree that *uisasotong* came to be functionally associated with special events, or worse, company public relations, it is perhaps not surprising that an implicit functional distinction emerged between PR-led representations of office talk and actual occasions of speaking. Note here that titles *compel* employees to address each other in new terms or to come up with other ways to pragmatically re-instantiate interpersonal hierarchy. But *uisasotong* is merely a *descriptor* of how people should talk (or listen) that cannot compel any interactional behavior, despite its moral implications.

Beyond Communication: Reforming Social Behaviors

For many inside Korean companies, reforms to language (or at least certain genres of communicative activity) can indeed seem like a PR campaign: used to recruit new employees or project an image of a friendly workplace. For these employees, there is often a more direct cause, a site where the bad habits and office politics of older male managers are more visibly on display: company dining and drinking (or *hoesik*).

A common sighting on Seoul city streets around eight p.m. on any given weekday are groups of business men and women standing outside of large restaurants, ties slightly loosened, and company ID badges out of sight. Employees have likely just left the “first round” (*ilcha*) of company dining (food, with alcohol) and are in a tepid moment of deciding whether to go to “second round” (*icha*) (alcohol, with food). One can distinguish the kinds of gatherings that still maintain an air of formality and those that have devolved into more relaxed affairs. In the

former, younger employees attentively wait with bodies rigid as their higher bosses are ushered to cars or taxis and in the latter, jackets are off, cigarettes are out, and there are more back-slapping jokes. At the latter, there are typically fewer women. Rarely ever do any women go to the infamous *samcha* (or “third round”), where men can engage in a variety of female-serviced entertainment, from fairly platonic karaoke “helpers” (*doumi*) who sing songs, to private room salons where more illicit activities are said to occur.

These events, from first to third rounds, have typically been paid on company dollar as part of *hoesik* expenses (*hoesikbi*). Domestic newspapers have come to report on the exorbitant amount cumulatively spent on *hoesik* and other forms of corporate entertainment every year, alerting the public how much money is spent annually. According to a report in 2016, corporations were spending the equivalent of 25 million dollars (270 *eokmanwon*) *per day* on entertainment.¹⁵ In a good light, *hoesik* serves as a kind of mandatory obligation for those in large companies who have to navigate complicated corporate politics that play out in commensal spaces (as discussed in Chapter Two). In a bad light, however, *hoesik* is a site of excessive drinking, a waste of corporate money, accelerator of sexual harassment, influencer of domestic violence, and a shadow supporter of a vast underground of (now illegal) sexual services. In one report, employees from large corporations were surveyed to go to *hoesik* 1.7 times per month.¹⁶ During my time at Sangdo, I went on average of once per *week*, though many of those were casual dinners after long days of working or playful times when we might go play virtual golf as a team. Team Manager Jang recounted to me that when he was first beginning his career in HR

¹⁵ Source: <http://www.insight.co.kr/newsRead.php?ArtNo=69574>. Accessed April 29, 2017

¹⁶ Source: http://newsis.com/view/?id=NISX20160428_0014051421&cid=10401. Accessed January 20, 2017.

at a major manufacturing conglomerate, in the early 2000s, he was compelled to go out every night of the week, for five years. For members of the sales team at Sangdo

Since the 2000s, many companies have publicly instituted policies meant to curb these practices. One common one developed by one company and emulated by other is called the “119 policy” (*ililgu jeongchaek*). 119 is the national emergency number in Korea. The policy stipulates that companies would only pay for “1” restaurant, with “1” type of alcohol, until “9” p.m. Anything beyond that would not be covered by company credit cards. Sangdo had instituted a similar program, called “clean card,” in which attempts to use company cards at certain “illicit” bars at all and any attempts to swipe a company card after midnight would be refused electronically. When I left the auditing team was working on an alert system that would send alerts to bosses (called “real time monitoring”) of late night expenses.



Figure 3.6: Cartoon illustrating the 119 policy
The 119 policy was intended to restrict excessive drinking on company dollar: *one type of alcohol, one establishment, and until 9 o'clock*. Some companies instituted variations, such as “111” or “112” to express different policy differences. Source: <http://www.asiae.co.kr/news/view.htm?idxno=2012092110595019792&mobile=Y>. Accessed January 10, 2017.

While *hoesik* grabs the most media attention as the prototypical site of backdoor deals and secret conversations, other dimensions of corporate social life have also been subject to reform. When I conducted interviews among different companies with HR executives, many touted their new programs, some borrowed from other companies, some of their own invention. Sangdo First and Sangdo South were illustrative. Sangdo First started a “quit smoking” campaign, began “team-

vs-team” weekly gaming competitions, and had a “Family Day” on Wednesdays when workers were mandated to leave the office at 5:30 PM, putatively to be with their (nuclear) families. Sangdo South, two floors above in the tower, also had a bevy of new company projects in the company headquarters created by *their* HR team: an “eco-office” program that installed plants in each team circle, after-work sports leagues such as bowling, hiking, and soccer, a billiards tournament, small-group meet-ups for workers of similar ranks, and new guidelines for *hoesik*. In the guidelines, *hoesik*, which in an administrative sense is money allotted to a team every month, would not be necessarily limited to dining and drinking; it could now include activities such as doing volunteer work together, having a book reading, or going to a movie as a team. What is interesting here is that many of these activities are not framed in negative or anti-*hoesik* stances, but rather in “positive” terms or activities, like “family day,” bowling, and small group meetings. The Sangdo Magazine, “Our Sangdo” did a regular feature at the end of each issue in which two employees engaged in “softer” small-group activities, like cooking classes, coffee-tasting, or paper-making.

Where *hoesik* looked to re-locate afterwork activities to other locations, smoking was a common activity that was made invisible during the course of my fieldwork. When I began to do preliminary fieldwork activities in Seoul in 2011, large hordes of white-collar workers peppered smoking areas in the wide plazas in front or behind the major office buildings. However, as smoking became stigmatized, by the end of my fieldwork in 2015 many of these sightings had disappeared. I visited a friend at one office tower where I had remembered large groups of men outside smoking. Upon a return visit, they were conspicuously absent. Going inside the building, I discovered that the smoking area had been moved to a small nook within the building complex, where about 25 men and a few women were huddled together, out of public view. The Sangdo

Tower too originally had a deck next to the company café that would have been an ideal smoking location, but the top management did not want hordes of smokers in public view. The smoking area was moved ignominiously behind a 7-Eleven outside the company building. At one point, Sangdo First even ran a no-smoking campaign, and those few who still wanted to smoke found strategic times and locations outside of public view to sneak smoking breaks by themselves.

Nearly all the office culture changes discussed above implicitly punish or devalue key topoi of Korean office culture that were patterned on the male-only culture that persisted through the 1990s. What is common across these different domains is an attunement to specific types as targets of reform. Specific types of activities become objectified as problematic. What had previously been normative and everyday is now isolated as an object of control – at least in the form of policy or public relations. As part of my argument in this chapter, it is precisely activities that are indexically linked to older male manager types of behavior that have become targeted, with drinking and smoking being two of the most common forms of work-connected activity.

Like title-flattening policies that created more confusion than clarity, policies that restricted after-work drinking or smoking didn't always restrict how much, where, or how late people could drink in practice – only what teams or individuals could do with the company card or on company time. In some cases, the 119 policies actually led to a worsening of exchange politics at *hoesik* – men who used to rely on the company card began to pay with their own funds, creating financial debts with other managers and social debts with younger employees, who now found themselves indebted by their boss's goodwill. In my own case, I almost ran out of money during fieldwork because of obligations to occasionally pay for a round of food or drink (and even then I still felt quite indebted to my older colleagues). Removed of a company card, these events were not *company* obligations, but *personal* obligations to other teammates.

Each of the three cases I have discussed in the first half of this chapter addresses a different aspect of the behavioral habits of older manager types and specific policies meant to target them – albeit indirectly. That is, they overtly minimize the degree to which classic stereotypes of old Korean offices figure into the *aesthetics* of working in the 21st century corporation across different modalities: greetings, behavior in teams, and behavior in public. However, they do not directly address the targets they are presumably directed at. Reforms redirect behavior, to different restaurants or different smoking areas, or to new ways of speaking, but they do not metapragmatically signal this negative behavior through labels, nor for that matter by identifying the group being targeted. This exhibits a complicated avoidance and addressivity relationship (cf. Fleming and Lempert 2011). Practices are targeted, but not directly so. In many cases, it is entire workforces that become addressed through these reforms and whose behaviors come to be reworked as well.

These policies, however much they reform specific sites of ideologically salient behavior, leave open the putative “problem” itself: older male managers still occupied office positions. For HR managers I worked with, the inability to remove particularly problematic older managers, either because of labor laws or internal politics, was a constant cause of concern. In one instance, a factory manager was seen as too powerful to try to change because his factory was performing so well. In another instance, a team manager who had received a lot of complaints via HR could only be rotated to a different team. In the second half of the chapter, I look at an attempt by expert HR managers to create a scientific image of managerial behavior that could actually quantify and classify managerial behavior, with the purpose of distinguishing good managers from bad ones during evaluations. Where this mode of reform differs in its administrative

complexity, it shares in common with the other topics here a tendency to avoid directly addressing a specific group even though their specific behaviors are targeted.

Expert Reforms I: Accumulation Problems

One of the first projects I worked on at Sangdo was reforming manager and executive evaluations. To date, there had not been a rational process of testing, promotion, and evaluation for managers and executives. Until then, team managers and executives were simply appointed by personal recommendations to the chairman by individual CEOs. Preceding the project, an order had come down from the ownership to the Human Resources Planning team to develop a program that would properly evaluate *all* team managers and executives across the whole group. I received a document from Assistant Manager Min-sup explaining the background of the project. The first slide of the document introduced the problem in a round-about way: “resolving workforce accumulation” (*illyeok jeokchae haeso*) at the level of executive and team manager. Even though South Korea has a fairly early retirement age (fifty-nine),¹⁷ it has no at-will employment, like in the United States. This means that full-time (i.e. regular¹⁸) employees cannot be terminated unless en masse or with significant cause, such as laundering company

¹⁷ In 2015, the legal retirement age was extended during my fieldwork from 59 to 62, much to the chagrin of large companies. Such a change presented a high cost burden to support older managers for additional years.

¹⁸ The most basic categorical distinction for labor is between *regular* (*jeong-gyujik*) or *irregular* (*bijeong-gyujik*). This differs from the full- or part-time distinction, which emphasizes man-hours. Regular/irregular distinction codes a permanency distinction: both regular and irregular workers work full-time, are salaried, and receive some basic benefits. But only regular workers can get promoted, receive a pension, and are valorized socially as symbols of personal and professional achievement. (A loose American parallel would be tenure-track vs. lecturer in higher education.)

money or committing workplace harassment. Only through highly rationalized and unbiased evaluation methods could management properly – that is, socially acceptably – demote team managers and or remove executives across Sangdo.¹⁹

One could view this “accumulation” (*jeokchae*) issue from two sides: on one hand, older corporate managers who had worked most of their professional lives within one group were being rationally cut through expert programs, as an indirect or thinly veiled form of corporate politics of “boosting performance” directed at a specific class of older workers. On the other hand, such managers were often characterized as the types who drank frequently, forced their team members to work over time, spoke down to young employees, mistreated female employees, and frequented various kinds of late-night entertainment services (often on company dollar). This cultural division was strongly felt within the holding company, where a handful of team managers were lifelong Sangdo workers who had been promoted to the holding company after long careers in the subsidiaries, and the other managers represented a newer, effete group of managers who had specialized training, had worked in other global companies, and distanced themselves from the social traditions of prior generations. This division was starkly marked by the retiring CEO, a man who had worked at Sangdo since the 1970s. The CEO (who himself was replaced with a younger, more “global” CEO), had described Sangdo’s employees as “hearty” (*uryanga*), an idiom from the industrializing 1970s, when men succeeded through hard work. When I mentioned this to Team Manager Jang, he laughed out loud: the invocation of this term was only another indication of the outdated thinking of an older generation of managers who

¹⁹ A common solution to this problem among Korean firms was encouraging “early retirement.” Employees receive a bonus, say 150% of their retirement package if they leave five years before retirement, 140% four years before, 130% three years, and so on.

believed problems could be solved with an earnest work ethic. He was firmly convinced that no amount of HR training would ever improve this generation of manager.

The ethics of these kinds of personnel decisions aside, they nevertheless prompted the mediation of new HR techniques that would apply to *every* team manager and executive in the group; not just those seen as problematic. The HR Planning Team during my fieldwork had the task of implementing new policies that would create objective evaluations for executives and team managers. Having an objective basis for evaluation would provide an occasion for letting go of executives (who could be fired for performance, unlike regular employees)²⁰ and for demoting team managers (a decision which itself might cause one to leave).²¹ These were the only two levels at which the Human Resources department at the holdings company could operate within the bounds of labor laws (i.e. they could not force evaluations on lower-level workers outside of their own company). The program they created, called (as pseudonym) New Sangdo Development Program (NSDP), was developed to provide a new model for evaluating team managers and executives on a range of factors. The key basis of this model was not objective performance, nor career history, nor financial success, but the abstract notion of “fitness” or “appropriateness” (*jeokjeolseong*) as a team manager or executive. Yet translating managerial qualities into an objective system of assessment was not an easy task.

In this sense, there is a link between this kind of program and the corporate culture programs (titles, communication, social activities) that I addressed in the first half of the chapter.

These programs highlight interaction by isolating specific genres of interaction— ways of

²⁰ Assistant Manager Ji-soon joked to me once that the word for executive (*im-won*) was actually an abbreviation for *im-si jig-won*, meaning “temporary employee.”

²¹ The role of “team manager” is a separate appellation from one’s ranking. One can be a *bujang* (general manager) and not a *timjang* (team manager). The former is called one’s job rank (*jig-geub*) while the latter is one’s responsibility (*jig-chaek*). For older workers, being removed of one’s responsibility would be tantamount might be as a hint that they should retire gracefully. Cf. Goffman (1952).

speaking, social events – where the behavior of older managers was not directly targeted but devalued or benignly replaced. What is in contrast is the *object* of interaction in each: where title flattening or other changes in corporate culture highlight *iconic* behaviors that presumably lead to the promotion of new positive corporate culture (by discouraging old habits of speaking/socializing), HR techniques are different. They isolate and objectify *all* manager or executive behavior. Furthermore, they do not just highlight one iconic or emblematic feature but encompass *all of them* – that is, making overall managerial conduct an object of expert knowledge and control. As a creation of expert knowledge, the primary field of circulation for these kinds of techniques was not the public (in the form of press releases or news coverage). In fact only HR managers, team managers and executives were familiar with the program, which was housed on an internal website, separate from the main intranet.

Evaluations like these are an offshoot of what Lily Chumley (2013) has described as “evaluation regimes.” Such regimes provide ways of evaluating persons in institutions where there is high competition to enter, such as schools, colleges, or workplaces. She notes that rather than one kind of disciplinary function, evaluations select persons through both quantitative and qualitative assessments, measuring different aspects of a person: quantitative metrics like standardized tests grade an individual relative to a standard; qualitative assessments such as essays or personal statements evaluate individual relative to a desired institutional person-type. Quantitative assessments often precede qualitative ones, yet both often appear together (even on McDonald’s satisfaction surveys, for instance). Chumley warns that we should not see evaluations as a new phenomenon under neoliberalism where labor has been further individualized; indeed, all societies evaluate or select for different qualities of person. Rather, we should pay attention to *which* qualities are selected for, which modes of evaluation are marshaled

to do so, and what kinds of political projects they are invested in. What is interesting, at least at the outset of my discussion on manager/executive evaluations, is that older male managers are not the *explicit* objects of evaluation – even though such an objective was obvious to many members of the HR team.

Quantifying the person through standardization in Korea may appear to be a recent product of neoliberal change, but as elsewhere in East Asia, quantitative forms of evaluation have long been part of institutional gatekeeping, dating back to state exams for military, bureaucracy, and literary titles during the Joseon period (1392-1910). Korean corporations, have long had standardized tests to sort individuals, either when they enter organizations (through so-called *gongchae* exams) or when they seek promotion to a new rank through a promotion exam (*seungjin gongsi*). Admissions and promotions examinations in companies have traditionally been based on IQ or objective knowledge, such as in economics, global events, or English comprehension, skills that can be acquired in books or classes and that directly test one's preparation. In the period after the 2000s, there seems to be an emphasis on *behavioral* aspects of the person – that is, signs that are natural and interior but also observable by others.

The new evaluations as part of NSDP at Sangdo were intended to create a comprehensive picture of managerial qualities that captured different aspects of leadership behavior, with the goal of creating a robust set of metrics that could objectively adjudicate between well-fitting and ill-fitting leadership-types. Because the process of the evaluation for Sangdo Development Program had to be comprehensive and objective, it could not show any sign of favoritism nor interpretive subjectivity. The HR managers tasked with developing the new form of evaluation had to devise a program that would apply to *all* managers and executives, both good and bad, fairly and objectively. Of further difficulty was that the method also had to properly capture

regularities in interactional behavior, over a period of one year, in a metricized way – something that was not a simple technical feat. After talking to different consulting companies and scouring books and websites for appropriate methods and surveys and visualization techniques, the HR team eventually decided to use its own modified method by drawing on the voices of employees to assess managers and executives themselves.

Expert Reforms II: 360-Degree Feedback

There were two fundamental pieces in the evaluation program the HR managers developed: one was a survey method (data-gathering) in the form of 360-degree feedback and another was the mode of representation. 360-degree feedback is a form of organizational feedback originally developed in the United States in the 1950s. Originally a method for evaluating managers, it became popularized as a general HR technique in the early 1990s used for all employees, not just managers. Today it is ubiquitous in 90% of Fortune 500 companies, either as a method of skill development or as a form of work evaluation itself (Maylett 2009). 360-degree feedback, sometimes referred to as “multi-rater feedback,” is an explicitly anti-hierarchical form of feedback introduced to resolve issues of authoritative interpretation and bias by providing a view from everywhere, and everyone. A “360-degree” view isolates social relationships through experiment-like conditions, while distributing and displacing authority across a narrow social field. It works by re-creating a social field around an individual composed of those figuratively “above,” “below,” and “lateral to” him or her, typically at one- or two-

degrees of remove. Individual evaluators take identical surveys in isolation that include Likert scale questions on a range of issues. These are tabulated, the results anonymized, to provide a comprehensive and static picture of a worker's habitual self as a visible and static set of enumerated competencies. Results are typically shared with evaluatees to help them understand their strengths and weaknesses so that they may improve their own conduct. Figure 3.7 depicts a reproduction in Korean of a common figuration of this process in US HR manuals.

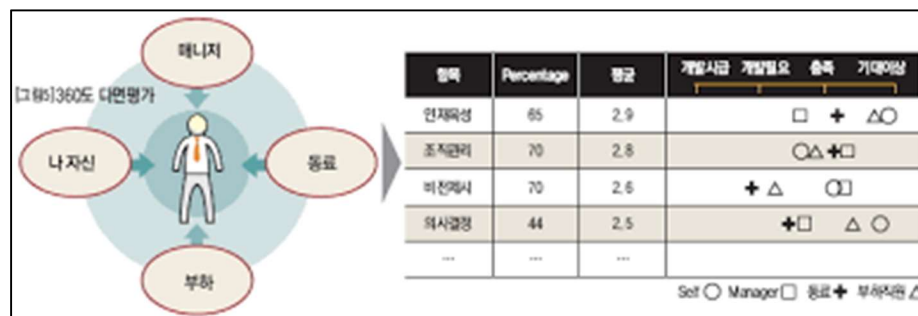


Figure 3.7: Representation of the 360-degree survey process
The drawing of a circular field around an individual (L) and its translation into key behavioral scores (R). Source: <http://blog.naver.com/winplus777/220124782696>. Accessed May 1, 2016.

With the spread of Korean businessmen attending US business schools, the globalization of American management consulting firms, the influence of the IMF in instituting neoliberalized corporate governance reforms, and the de-valorization of Japanese management philosophy, globally-oriented South Korean companies began to experiment with and adopt US-based HR theories and methods in the early 2000s. Among these methods, 360-degree feedback became a conventional form of feedback giving in Korea, though it is not as widely instituted in the US. As a formal technique, based on surveys, tabulations, and report-generations, however it is remarkably similar to models seen in the US. In popular depiction, it is often described as a foil to traditional methods of top-down feedback, and even a bottom-up feedback, in comparison to the US, where it is associated with participatory management and office democratization

movements. In a Korean idiom, then, 360-degree feedback reverses the habitually enacted dyadic role relationship of evaluator-evaluated that is embedded in default work and other institutional relations, such as school, military, family and other associations. Not only does it select the behavioral qualities of managers (discussed below), but it also makes other *employees* the delegates to solicit this information.

360-degree feedback selects for certain attributes that are favored or disfavored in the evaluation of an individual. The survey that the members of the HR Planning team developed was meant to convey new definitions about being a Sangdo manager. A previous version of the 360-degree feedback that the holding company had used was for feedback only, not for evaluation. That survey included thirty-six questions on a Likert scale scoring from one to five. Team Manager Jang indicated to me that this led to two problems: evaluators inflated the scores of their managers (i.e. by ranking a five) and the survey itself only produced one scale of a “good” manager type. That is, analytically, the survey structure itself hindered the ability to distinguish managerial qualities beyond just good or bad.

To create a better analytic for manager types, the team developed three different survey methods: the first method organized a set of 5-point Likert scale questions into different types in a way that was clear in the question order (represented in Figure 3.8 below). For these questions, the respondents were asked to respond how often they had “observed” (*gwanchal*) the behaviors under discussion, from “always observed” to “almost never observed.” The second method was a forced-choice method *between* two contrasting, but positive, qualities, again based on their observational experience. The third asked evaluators to grade the subject-area competency in a range of areas, such as business knowledge, analytical skills, and strategic planning ability along a Likert scale. (A fourth one asked respondents specifically to fill in a blank in a statement with a

choice between competing managerial qualities, but was not used in the final version).

Representations of these four types of question are below.

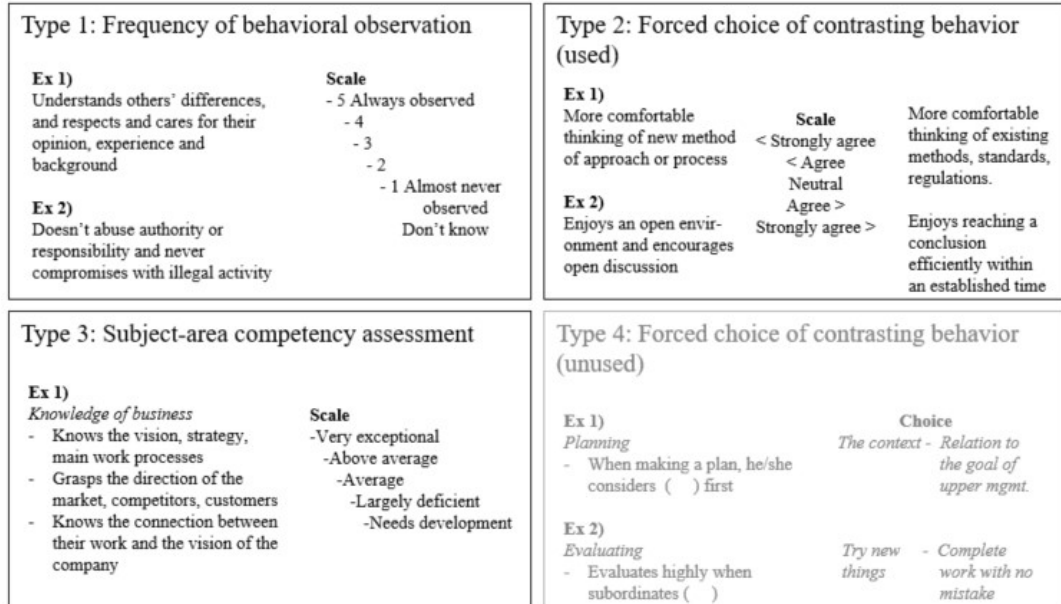


Figure 3.8: Four types of survey questions

These questions were developed for use in the Leadership Competency Development program. The first three types have example questions and scales from the survey. The fourth was developed but not used. There were 18 questions of type one, 14 of type two, and 9 of type three.

Each of the question types asks the respondent to reflect (albeit briefly) on their own interactional experiences (how much they observed) as well as the generalized interactional behaviors of the(ir) managers/executives. Note, here, the different scales of interactional behavior invoked: some reflect habitual ways of treating others, while others ask for more abstract characteristics, such as strategic planning competency. Even in the brief examples, one can recognize a basic distinction between different managerial types, either reflected within questions or across them, revealing the understandings that HR managers had of generationally different managers. That is, the survey distinguishes those who “allow open thinking” versus those who “play by the rules,” those who “emphasize new ideas” versus those who “emphasize efficiency.” The one set of questions asked on a pure Likert Scale (type 3) emphasized the kinds

of managerial competencies that come from experts, like those in the holding company, and not necessarily the kind of skills those subsidiary managers or executives thought appropriate.

As much as these questions were intended to characterize managerial action, they were designed to guard against another kind of interactional habit of office workers: inflating the scores. As I discussed in Chapter Two, concerns about workers filling in satisfaction surveys out of loyalty (or fear of retribution) to their company always pestered any kind of analysis. In the case of 360-degree feedback, similar concerns arose. In the satisfaction survey, the worry was that employees would inflate the scores of *their company*. In the case of 360-degree survey, specific concerns arose about employees orienting their responses to *their superiors*, if the respondents found out the surveys were in fact being used to evaluate their superiors. Falsely filling out a survey to show one is very satisfied when one is not may in fact be a satisfactory answer to employees.²²

In the context of items like surveys, these can present complicated pragmatic entanglements, in which an individual may have to reason across different modes of evaluation. For instance, a mean boss who gets a good evaluation from his employees may, in the long-term, be good for an employee. The boss can surmise that his employees (as a group) evaluated him favorably, in turn treating the employee better. If an employee believes his or her boss is well-connected in the organization, it is in their benefit to evaluate them favorably, as they will look to help promote their juniors as they also get promoted.²³ In some cases, there is a financial incentive: part of bonus pay in Korea stems from *team* performance grades, which can be based

²² This, in Garfinkel's term is a "good reason" for a "bad report." One could observe an implicit suggestion of this in *Studies in Ethnomethodology* (1967, 186-207). While Garfinkel is known for thinking about how a single social order is brought into being through ongoing communicative practices (e.g., Garfinkel 1988), he alludes in that chapter to two competing expert norms which dictate how to fill out office forms.

²³ This is the concept of "line" (*rain*) that I discussed in the introduction.

on managerial grades. In some cases, an employee could calculate their own bonus through a positive evaluation of a superior they do not actually like.

There are also cases of retribution. One executive shared his opinion about feedback over lunch one day to me and his team. Speaking extemporaneously, he claimed that South Korean managers would not be able to handle “upward” (*eopwodeu*) feedback implicated in 360-degree feedback. These kinds of American management techniques, with which he was comfortable, would give managers a “shock” (*syokeu*) if they heard something negative said about them by a junior. He narrated two stories about 360-degree feedback from his previous companies. In one story, an executive who had received negative feedback was so enraged that he called in his team members one by one to “find out the source” (*balbonsegwon*; Chinese, 拔本塞源). This phrase is a figurative expression literally referring to the act of pulling out a plant to cut off the roots. A phrase one might use when seeking to root out corruption, say in the government. It was ironic to him that a manager he knew known for being the “control-type” (*gwallihyeong*) seemingly lost control when he received negative ratings from below. Upon hearing this story, another manager at the lunch table piped in that even though US managers get stressed by 360-degree feedback, they can “bear” it (*gyeondinda*). South Korean managers, and South Korean culture more broadly he suggested, were too prone to losing control and wanting to meddle in who-said-what, due to a lower moral fortitude.

These dilemmas are highly salient pragmatically, though if not explicitly articulated extemporaneously. A case from popular media illustrates this phenomenon well. The TV show, *GAG Concert*, is a weekly taped variety show with recurring segments. One segment entitled “Let It Be” features four actors dressed as office workers singing the office blues to the tune of

the Beatles' titular song. In the skit, a junior worker receives a survey from the company asking him to describe his complaints. I have transcribed this in Figure 3.9.


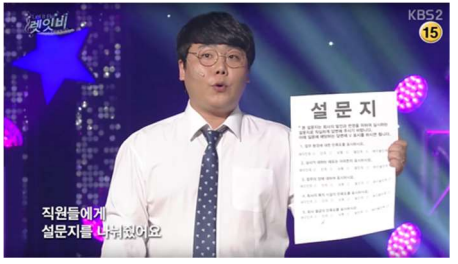
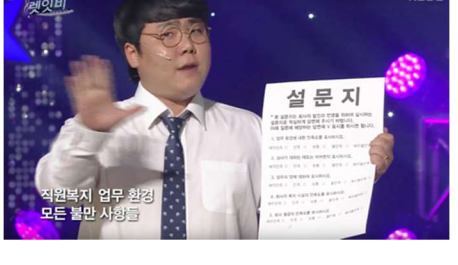
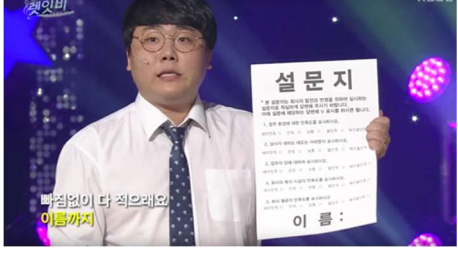
	<p>(sung to the tune of “Let It Be” by The Beatles)</p> <p>~ [They're telling] all of us to write down ~ ~ Our complaints at the company ~ ((holding survey))</p>
	<p>~ They gave out a survey ~</p> <p>~ To all of the employees~ ((aside)) Yeah, we really need this kind of thing.</p>
	<p>~ Employee benefits, working environment ~</p> <p>~ All of the complaints ~ ((makes sweeping hand gesture))</p>
	<p>~ They told us to write down everything without leaving anything out~ ((tears off paper to reveal “NAME” at the bottom))</p> <p>~ Even our names~</p>

Figure 3.9: Screenshots from *Let it Be* From the show GAG Concert on KBS1, a satirical lament based on organizational surveys. Translated from the Korean. Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LBOUX3crPlk&list=PL6ws57yj0nfr3a_JX7Dx1P5sGEqBby-e1 Accessed May 1, 2016

The Human Resources workers at Sangdo Holdings were highly aware of the possibilities of employees being compromised by conflicts over how to proceed. Even though all surveys were taken anonymously and individual scores averaged, it was still known *that* they were taken and by whom. Care was taken to frame the 360-degree survey as about “feedback for skill development” and not about “evaluation” per se. I, the curious but naïve anthropologist-cum-intern almost ruined it one day. While riding the elevator back up to the 30th floor after a smoking break, I asked Team Manager Jang what the feedback surveys were going to be used for. Team Manager Jang, aware of the other employees riding too, replied casually that the surveys were simply for “skill development” (*yeong-ryang gaebal*). When we got out of the elevator, he pulled me into a small room and quickly shifted footing: he told me that if employees found out what the feedback was for – even if just one found out who could spread a rumor to others – then it would distort the entire set of results because they would or could start to strategize their opinions. It is worth pausing to observe that a survey original

Surveys are a key building block for establishing the basic units of an architecture of managerial evaluation that renders certain characteristics of managerial behavior as evaluable. This technique depended on opinions of workers, now cast as keen interactional observers of their coworkers, to properly (and correctly) fill in the scores that allow this scale to be realizable as a legitimate form of managerial evaluation. HR managers were implicitly aware of the kinds of conflicts inherent to asking employees to report on their “true” opinions of observed behaviors. What surveys don’t always account for is that reporting itself is an objectifiable act, one situated within a different field of second-order deference signs and implications for one’s future career.

Typical shibboleths of second-order deference behavior in Korea involve honorific infixes, honorific lexical items, and others. By rendering someone as a superior in their linguistic framing, speech pragmatics, or bodily orientation, a speaker too becomes seen as polite, loyal, well-mannered, etc. These second-order features are emergent interactionally – such as holding the door, ordering at a restaurant, or taking the first golf swing, for instance. Any situation in which an individual demonstrably suppresses their own desire for that of a superior can be taken as a second-order sign of both respect and fealty. They can emerge on seemingly isolated and text-mediated events like completing a survey. Even anonymized and aggregated, survey results create an indexical trace to (possible) individual choices, which can be read as loyal or disloyal, properly subordinate or insubordinate. To choose between a “5” and a “3” on a managerial behavior survey can be seen as a choice between two different kinds of evaluatory regimes located at different sites. One represents the authority of one’s individual manager, while the other represents the authority of expert managers of the holding company, one aligns to one’s personal career or work life while another aligns to objective and open evaluations. To sum up, then, what is intended as a survey to quantify the behavior of managers necessitates labor (particularly avoidane practices, not to mention reminders, training, and monitoring) to ensure that those who fill out the survey are themselves not compromised by the phenomenon they are trying to root out.

Expert Reforms III: Icons Of Managerial Competence

In order to create a virtual social field around an individual where evaluative numbers and scores can both be said to accurately represent a social field and to stand as icons of

interactional competence, 360-degree feedback relies on visual modes of representation. These representations create a metonymic picture of an individual across fixed “competencies” of a manager such as leadership, flexibility, problem-solving, or attention to detail, grounded in the evaluations of co-workers. In this section, I look at the representations developed to capture this information and how they could stand as authoritative signs not just of numerated co-worker opinions, but as quantitative measurements of individual managerial behavior more generally.

To do so, the information from the survey had to be transformed from numerical traces into higher-order categories. Survey questions fit into superordinate categories that included “company values,” “work execution skills,” and “leadership tendencies.” That is, observed behavior about an individual manager from his or her co-workers was categorized into abstracted and generalized behavioral features, each of which could compose one kind of fragment of managerial-ness, through which a worker could come to know who he or she was *as a manager*.

These snapshots motivated different kinds of metrics to piece together different fragments of evaluation for managers. In all cases, they linked numeric averages from the surveys directly to the synoptic images of “good” and “bad” traits. For instance, company values judged managers on whether they met the three “core values” (*haeksimgachi*) of the company: “innovation,” “challenge,” “professionalism,” each of which had three sub-behaviors associated with them (known as the “code of conduct” [*haengdong gang-ryeong*]).²⁴ The eighteen questions originally asking about behavior observations turned out to be organized into two questions for each of the nine codes of conduct that were categorically nested under three core values. These

²⁴ Due to the unique set of the company’s values that would make them identifiable, I have substituted them for commonly cited values from other Korean companies.

were laid out in tables as well as in a circular spider graph showing the relative strengths and weaknesses for each area.

In a section on leadership tendencies, however, the goal was not to calculate managerial behavior as an absolute score; the goal was to organize questions and scores into mutually exclusive and comprehensively exhaustive types that could cover the four main types of manager (and hence predict *which type you are*). There were four types that emerged from the intersection of two competing axes: The types were: “fostering type,” “forward-looking type,” “relational type,” “directing type.” The two axes were: “human-relation centered” vs. “work-centered” and “change-oriented” vs. “control-seeking.” These are represented below in Figure 3.10:

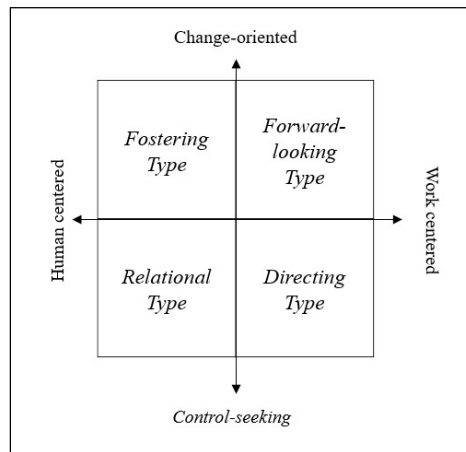


Figure 3.10: Four manager types
 This is a reconstruction of the visual representation of four manager types (within the boxes). These are based on cross-sections of two different axes of managerial behavior. All managers were told they were one of the four based on the results of the survey. Additional information (not represented here) further explained what each type meant, as well as the positive and negative points about each type.

The final component – the third area of questioning – organized managers into general skills of “work execution” (*eommu suhaeng*), which stemmed from questions about categorical knowledge. These questions were grouped into three areas – “plan,” “do,” “check” – that were meant to cover the basic components of a project cycle (starting it, conducting it, and self-auditing one’s work). The analysis of the questions operated by grouping the results into three

basic categories: “needs systematic improvement,” “needs small improvement,” or “continues improving.”

Each of these three areas then, makes representations of survey questions and renders them into different kinds of superordinate information. While this kind of aggregation was possible due to the alignment and standardization of numerical scales, this was more than a token-type or part-whole relationship between numbers and a larger polity, like a population (cf. Guyer 2004). The three areas organized different managerial qualities along with different kinds of interactional behaviors. “Values” used behavioral observation to assess whether the employee was living up to the ideals of the company. “Leadership style” indicated what kind of leader one was, based on contrasting features. And “work execution” judged managerial aptitude against a standard set of processes involved in managing. Thus, each of these modes of representations selects for different managerial qualities that scaled up to different orders of “managerial-ness” that could be understood as “fitness” to the position. Taken together, they iconically capture the comprehensive features of a manager, in much the same way we might imagine a health diagnosis to be a “total” picture of health.

As I mentioned, the HR team envisioned much more than simply aligning a manager to a negative evaluation or a negatively selected “style” (such as the “directing type”). These figures could be used in more complex ways: for example, a manager who was a controlling type in a department that needed a “forward-looking” type might be seen to have the wrong “fit” for that kind of job, and justify a demotion or a transfer. In an ideal sense, then it would serve to operate as a kind of behavioral fitness and dispatching method, aligning the “right” manager with the “right” job or “right” team.

These composite icons of managerial competence also foregrounded two other aspects beyond the quantification itself: one was the contrast between *self*-reporting and *other*-reporting, such that an individual (and his superiors) could know where he or she thought themselves and where others saw them. This was graphically enhanced through spider charts, marking differences between a self and others writ large. The other aspect is the anticipation of future annual evaluations. That is, these charts track not only negative or underdeveloped skills, but show how they were improving or changing over time. Charts in the snapshot had already figured in the prior year's survey, and had integrated a box that would be filled up over time, visually charting progress across the categories. In Figure 3.11 below, I've recreated a mock-evaluation snapshot as it appeared in the large evaluation book.

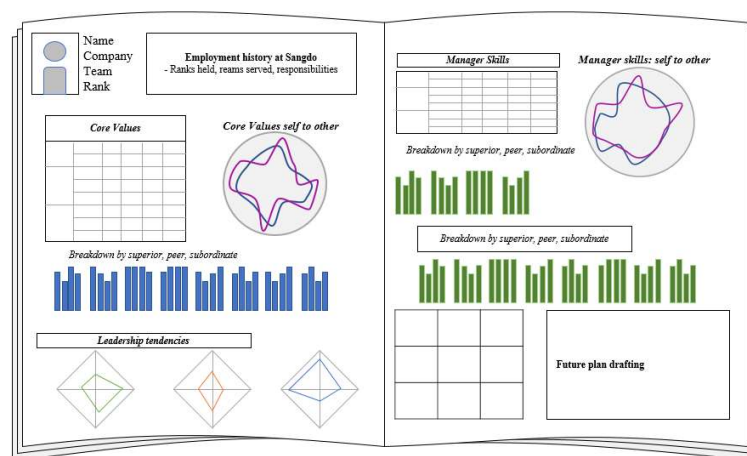


Figure 3.11: Recreation of individual evaluation. On two facing pages, the owner-CEO, chairman, or individual CEOs could receive a snapshot of a manager or executive's competency across three areas, as well as change over time and discrepancies between self-reporting and other-reporting.

The circulatory pathways of this information reinforced a hierarchy of visual access. In this mode of representation, a hierarchy of *reduced vision* ensured that those at the top saw more than those at the bottom. The visual differences here are also telling: Assistant Manager Ji-soon

created a version for the owner-CEO Ahn and the chairman, that laid on two facing pages an entire evaluation and personal working history of a given manager (such as that recreated above). More than a hundred of these evaluations were printed and bound in a book format. However, only two copies of a book were made: one for the chairman and one for the owner-CEO Ahn. These were to serve as references at times of evaluation, bonus awarding, promotion, internal transfers, or demotions. Simply by compiling this information, these books created a panoptic view of all the executives and team managers across the entire group, with information broken down by superior, peer, and subordinate responses (so that the ownership could learn, for instance, if a manager fared well with other managers, but poorly with team members). The book was off-limits to me as a viewer, though as a member of the HR team, I caught sneak peaks of the thick tome before it was finalized and presented to the chairman and owner-CEO Ahn. Individual CEOs and HR managers of subsidiaries received separate, smaller books for the executives and managers in their own companies, but not those from other companies.

Individually, managers received their own feedback reports, presented only to them via their CEOs and HR managers. Instead of a synoptic view meant for a quick snapshot of their enumerated behavior, managers were each given a four-slide (printed out) explanation of their managerial qualities, explaining the results and what the various metrics meant. The explanatory report gives copious detail to each metric and the implications of each measure, such as how to interpret the scores, what it means to be a given “type,” and what steps to improve competencies were. Furthermore, the language also shows individual scores relative to the group average (how much higher or lower), and comparison to the previous year’s scores. A key omission was the detailed breakdown of the scoring by superiors, peers, and subordinates. This distinction (present

in the chairman’s/owner-CEO’s versions) was absent in the individual versions, which I presume was to prevent concern over *balbonsegwon* – rooting out the potential culprits.

The language of these reports combines both the soothing language of “cooling” someone receiving potentially bad remarks (cf. Goffman 1952) with otherwise impersonal automated and auto-fill language of a programmed form. That is, the explanations were programmed in Excel to employ specific language based on what the results indicated. Figure 3.12 below is a sample of the language included in these reports (with a distinction between the standard information that all evaluatees receive unmarked and the custom language marked in bold):

<p>A. <i>Authority-grounding</i> Values: As the most fundamental values that every associate shares and has to put in practice, [we] aim for the highest standards in each category.</p> <p>B. <i>Personal detail breakdown</i> Competence: Compared to other similarly ranked individuals, in work execution, Mr. [Name] handled rather efficiently Global competence, Continuous improvement, Information Collection/Analysis, Systematic Execution Ability, Creative Proposal Submission, while ones easy to develop/nurture are Problem-solving, strategic planning skills, even-handed feedback, and business knowledge. The parts you need to improve are there are none.</p> <p>C. <i>Exposition of behavioral type</i> Leadership styles: “<i>The Fostering type</i>” Situation: <i>This style is effective in cases where associate growth and development is needed for organizational growth and improvement.</i> Characteristic: <i>Excels in grasping the desire to receive recognition by associates and the knowing the interests of the group, while raising attachment and loyalty.</i></p> <p>D. <i>Explanation of results</i> Summary page Your “juniors” have a different opinion about your tendencies. We ask that you make sure that what you intend is not seen differently by others.</p>

Figure 3.12: Instructions for reading evaluations
Sample language from the guide that employees received that explains their evaluation. Translated from Korean.

The final note of the document warns, in red font: “No other person is allowed to see this and it is being sent to you alone. Furthermore, releasing or sharing this document is prohibited.” The point here is that there are a range of metapragmatic explanations, down to the small print, that guide the recipient on how to read the document, that justify its knowledge claims, and that limit its potential effects. For instance, example A implicates the evaluatee as an “associate” (*guseong-won*) and that all associates are expected to live according to the same set of company ideals. Example B narrativizes the survey results by making scores into factual assertions that the employee should either improve lightly or improve earnestly. Example C represents an expert grounding of the “fostering type,” explaining what its core features are in objective language. Example D anticipates certain future disputes while implying that it is the responsibility of evaluatees to care for their own intentions and align them to the group.

To conclude here, then, we might observe that the construction of a new scale for managerial evaluation – one that would bring Sangdo executives and team managers into a new practice of 360-degree feedback – relied on the connection of that scale *visually* in a way that turned diversely collected survey questions into higher order categories. These categories were not unitary, but created a composite sketch of managerial behavior. In a way, then, these different scales each reflected ways of delegitimizing an older style of managerial or male authority: by subjecting managers to values, by organizing them into new, modern types, and by highlighting their competencies in an American-styled approach to modern management (emphasis on “project-based” work cycles). Each of these implicitly devalued other forms of managerial qualifications that had been implicit in the managerial acumen of an (imagined) older

style of management: cultivating relationships, strict top-down-ism, objective knowledge about economics or management, and generalized organizational knowledge.

At the same time, within the textual format, there were a number of externalities that had to be controlled; expert projects like this one were not blocked by institutional resistance or lack of competence: rather there were genre-specific externalities that emerged. Revealing too much information about the survey creates opportunities for possible retribution, either in the form of attacks on subordinates or through the circulation of HR information. In this case, the circulation of feedback reports was on a hierarchical cline – in which the owner-CEO had access to all of the reports across the group’s managers, creating for himself a new kind of managerial field. In this sense, the authority of 360-degree feedback was created as much by the *proliferation and standardization* of this new evaluation knowledge as it was by the *reduction and hierarchicalization* of its circulatory pathway. In doing so, it created an diagrammatic representation of managerial authority with the future chairman, the owner-CEO Ahn, on top, evaluating the behavior of their managers below through new lenses.

Conclusion: Re-thinking Office Interactions

This chapter has explored how efforts to reform hierarchical practices in offices took shape in the 2000s. I have argued that as part of a broader shift in conglomerate political order, both within Sangdo Group and across other conglomerates, the practices of a previous generation became targeted, including modes of address, two-way communication, social activities, and actual managerial “fitness.” Each of these efforts to delegitimize was justified with higher-order

moral or rational imperatives: removal of bureaucracy, promotion of individual merit, making happy families, and finding appropriate managers.

One initial conclusion to draw from this is that in act managerial behavior is always *selected for*. The examples I've discussed in this chapter here specifically target different fractions or fragments of pragmatically emergent, interactional behaviors, that indexically or iconically link back to a given managerial stereotype and a contrasting form of positive sociality. Many of these focused on individual conduct within interactions: title-flattening focused on greetings across two parties; *uisasotong* was contingent on two parties' understanding each other's "heart-minds" in an imagined conversation; office culture programs focused on a specific set of sites like drinking and smoking; and lastly, 360-degree feedback focused putatively on *all* interactions over the course of a year of given managers or executives. These each implicitly devalued a characteristic feature of stereotyped older male manager behavior while valorizing markedly opposite kinds of behavior. As part of my argument, I suggested that these programs implicitly addressed older male manager behavior while avoiding referring directly to them.

Because these policies or programs focused on different sites and modes of interaction does not mean they all stigmatized behavior in a holistic fashion. Each was explicitly addressed to different kinds of audiences, like *all* employees or *all* team managers and executives. This generated different outcomes: some policies could be seen as PR programs that could be ignored in everyday life, some made greetings awkward or ambiguous, and some necessitated pseudo-scientific controls to ensure validity. In many cases, however, idealized programs that sought to change the footing of office interactions underestimated two dimensions of office hierarchy: one was the degree of alignment that certain kinds of hierarchical forms had with others, especially explicit status markers like titles that articulated with salaries and tenure. Like the case of KT

and Hanwha, those programs were problematic who reverted back to tiered title systems. The second dimension was the degree to which aspects of hierarchy were deeply embedded into existing social relations creating sometimes bizarre or counterintuitive entanglements: creating a system of 360-degree feedback meant that junior workers now had to report on their managers creating potentially dangerous moral hazards. In the early years of performance-based feedback, companies faced the opposite problem: team managers were licensed to give out annual grades based on their observations of team members, thus granting them new powers over a mechanism meant to promote meritocratic performance. At one company, I heard that efforts to create a flexible starting time led to junior employees arriving *earlier* out of concerns they would be seen as lazy by top executives. At other companies where they had instituted family day, HR workers had to forcibly shut off computers so employees would actually leave.

These point to the fact that the normative dimensions of upper management and executives still play a strong role in office conduct. Even the framing of HR programs themselves showed deference, much in the same way that in Chapter Two, HR managers had to deftly navigate the politics of the satisfaction survey by presenting images either of equality or deference. Sangdo's program called "Clean Card" avoided the taboo topics of employees visiting sites for "entertainment." Such taboo-avoiding and forward-looking terms avoid naming their objects while projecting their opposite. On paper the problem of "worker accumulation" was a roundabout way of describing the problem of (what is to be believed) too many high paid, senior managers. Similarly, 360-degree feedback offered a thoroughly disclaimable method for instituting new evaluation techniques – it was the adoption of a "feedback" mechanism that had little to do with evaluation on paper. Note how forced early retirements in South Korea are often called *myeongye twoejik* – "emeritus retirement." In my formulation, we should not see these

particular cases as the same as “corporate oxymorons” in the West (Benson and Kirsch 2010). South Korean conglomerates may in fact participate in these Orwellian language tactics with the public. In the cases here, however, it signals shifting internal dynamics *within* the conglomerate. To the degree that these programs largely came out of the holding company and were targeted towards subsidiaries whose members were seen to embody these negative characteristics aligns with the broader argument of this dissertation which is that such changes signal a shifting political order and shifting modalities of authority within the conglomerate.

This chapter has touched upon the problem of “talk at work” as an object of analysis. An implicit assumption of studies on office interaction (cf. Drew and Heritage 1992) has been that talk at work is the locus classicus for the “interactional order” that Goffman so long (perhaps to his own discredit) named (Goffman 1983). Talking or interacting at work was seen to be a mechanical activity in which small group interaction operated through dialog, in which actors attempted to main order, convey information, and seek repairs (for a lengthy discussion, see Manning 2008). American or European office talk has been particular unmarked in this regard, where places like South Korea have been marked as having varieties of “national” talk (e.g., how South Koreans talk in meetings, how Japanese talk in meetings, etc.) that are linkable to national dispositions, such as fixed orientations to authority. This chapter has demonstrated that office interaction is not a “natural” site and that the nature of interaction in offices is itself politically loaded and objects of expert analysis. In this case, the experts of interaction attempting to “entextualize” discourse are precisely human resources workers themselves who diagram, parse, and evaluate interactional styles.

The focus on interaction in this chapter and in South Korean offices suggests an orientation towards office sociality as mediated purely by or simply concerned with face-to-face

interaction – that is as a behavioral phenomenon. Where material objects have come to play roles, they have often been as props – like a magazine used to hit an insubordinate or a booklet showcasing expert diagrams – that are reflections of different kinds of will. Yet we find that many office interactions are in fact mediated in and through texts. In the next chapter, I look at a particularly mundane medium of documents that has a vital role in everyday office life. Often remote from awareness, it is the air that most office workers in South Korea breathe: Microsoft PowerPoint.

Chapter 4: Working through PowerPoint

From *bogoseo* to PowerPoint



Figure 4.1: Cartoon about *bogoseo*

(Screen: "[What is] a report?"; Character on right: "Batang font, size 13, color gray-scale...are these really that important?")

Every time Assistant Manager Park of “A” conglomerate drafts a report and gives it to his team manager, his heart pounds and a cold sweat runs down his back. Even though he came out of a famous American university, worked overseas in the planning department of a semiconductor company, was scouted to work at “A” Co. a few months ago, and has “good” connections with the overseas-educated crowd, he has absolutely no skill at [making] reports.

After switching companies, he has received countless harsh scoldings from his team manager about reports. It was because he didn’t follow “A” Co.’s set rules for reports: font: Batang, font size: 13, line spacing: 160%, color: grayscale, and so on. He thought that if he made the report so that one could understand the comments, that would be okay, but he got culture shock at these so-called “regulations.” “Abroad there’s no place that has such standardized format. It really is amazing that Korean bosses can figure out in one glance if the font size, the font, or the line spacing are different.”

Like the phrase, “office workers speak through reports” the ability to write reports is not a choice, but a necessity.

(Translated from the Korean)

This anecdote comes from a blog on the South Korean economy daily Hankyung, titled *Manager Kim & Assistant Manager Lee (Kim gwajang & Yi daeri)*, which spun off into a book and a short-lived TV comedy. The blog narrates the humorously cruel side of office life, offering extreme office anecdotes as an entryway for light-hearted advice about navigating one's own way as an office worker. The above excerpt from 2014 is titled "The chill of a reporting "line", the fear of 160% line-spacing, 13 point font...even for the Study Abroad Crowd."¹ It paints a mini-sociocultural picture of recognizable types of actors, emotions, and artifacts that line the minefields of Korean office life: the older (male) team manager prone to scoldings, a "study abroad" type with an elite résumé, the baroque formalisms of bureaucratic document aesthetics, the contrasting of South Korean and American working styles, and the affective reactions raised before and during evaluations.² It is an icon of interaction highlighting generational differences, similar to those encountered in the previous chapter. These kinds of narratives illustrate a work life marked by harsh interactions, prompted by the necessity of delivering written reports for evaluation via face-to-face encounter.

The center of the story (literally) is the "report," the genre mediating the interaction between Park and his team manager. "But what is a report?" the cartoon asks. Conceived of in genre terms, reports are iconically summative texts of an external state of affairs, with a

¹ The original title in Korean is : "각 잡는 보고서 오싹...유학과 출신, 줄간격 160%·글씨 포인트 13 '서식 공포'"

Source: <http://www.hankyung.com/news/app/newsview.php?aid=2014021762261> Accessed October 27, 2016.

² The linguistic framing here of the main character reveals more to the Korean reader: Park is described literally as the "study abroad wing," (*yuhakpa*), morphologically similar to the way "left wing" and "right wing" are constructed, suggesting a political faction with unseen powers. See Park and Lo (2012) for discussion of the study-abroad phenomenon in Korea. The headline also makes a pun with the word "line spacing" akin to "cutting a sharp line" in one's style.

synechochal trace to some empirically defined data (such as a citation, numbers, or figures). Reports report on something. Even cross-culturally, reports represent a generic hypernym for a broad genre of office writing that can scale times and places (from daily reports to annual ones), as well as scale analytic scope (from individual performance to market trends). Reports also engender different kinds of pragmatic entailments, providing the basis for an executive decision, serving as the model for a future plan, or summarizing a project. The standardized managerial report, used for executive decision-making, has been a common office genre since the time of Du Pont's organizational innovations in the US in the 1850s (Chandler 1956). For Du Pont, innovations in reporting were about systematizing and standardizing the channels of communication – creating a semiotic effect of information moving up a chain of command by progressively summarizing the information and narrowing its audience. Reports were as much about standardizing information and form across distributed offices as they were about the information themselves.

But while reports exist as a shared semantic item (such as in the Korean equivalent, *bogoseo*) they do not just exist as a universalist genre. Reports, after all, are secondary genres, composites of certain primary genres that include tables of contents, summaries, graphs, and appendices (Bakhtin 1986). They are created within certain textual platforms and converted onto textual mediums, engendering local structures of production and literacy events. In organizations, such texts can take on higher order pragmatic or metapragmatic roles: reports can come to have disciplinary properties. Regulations about their form may be codified in manuals, or demanded by bosses. Reports can appear isomorphic with organizational knowledge, around which other activities are oriented. Following reports or report composites like files can indicate a lot about the nature of an organization itself in both its formal representations on paper, its

modes of creating knowledge, and relations between different parts of an organization (Harper 1998, Hull 2012).

However, this does not mean that individuals always have the same shared orientation to what a report should look like or even do. The story above revolves precisely around the confusion over what constitutes a report. A generational difference between two views of documentary aesthetics is suggested: one based on older traditions of calligraphy and hand-drawn documents in which office documents were valued for their ability to adhere to strict alignments in drafting (such as line spacing, margins, font size, and so on) and one based on the quality and source of content and ideas, not tied to arbitrary formatting rules. In the cartoon, the distinction in documentary ideal-types maps onto other contrasting generational distinctions. But the important point to note is that the abstract textual genre of a “report” is understood in two different mediums: one in terms of a *written, narrative* report, and one in terms of a *visual* medium emblemized in Microsoft PowerPoint.

The story represents a problem of genre “remediation” (Bolter and Grusin 1999, Gershon 2010). Remediation represents the way a newer genre or technology becomes conceived of in terms of an existing one (like email that tropes on the categories of the old office memo with subjects, inboxes, and so on). In this case, what the younger manager envisions as a highly idea-based American version of a report that can be translated into Korean, is re-evaluated within the terms of an older South Korean variety of writing that has its own bureaucratic history. Textual format and aesthetics are not the only way these two genres differ: reports are also a key site of encounter between a senior and junior worker. It is a site where a senior can leverage their expertise and demonstrate their role *as a* manager. An older style of South Korean reports represent a clear standard of sizes, line spaces, and margins by which a document can be

evaluated. This model is encapsulated in the rituals surrounding report generation and evaluation in the Sangdo office and other offices around the country. As part of their production, reports are often orally, face-to-face, as objects of evaluation between an employee and his boss, a modality redolent of my discussion in Chapter Two. Even documents produced in PowerPoint become ensconced within a local documentary and interactional genre of *bogoseo* as a formal, written genre. “*Bogo-*”ing itself structures work activity, like “reporting to” someone. In negative views of office life, reports are entirely an arbitrary mode used purely for discipline and displays of authority. Many a co-worker and even graduate student friends lamented to me the problem of having to write reports at the end of events to have as evidence (*jeung-geo*) of work activity that bosses could use for evidence for higher-ups. In the Sangdo office, the ceremoniality of these practices were also replicated interactionally: it was not uncommon to print out reports and enclose them in plush, pleather folders used for receiving decisions (*gyeoljaepan*). These folders functionally conceal document contents as they traverse around the office from manager to manager and materially mark them off as important documents for executives. Some of the folders even animate a virtualized act speech of supplication on the cover: “I wish for your decision.” A generic version of this common office prop is shown in Figure 4.2 below.



Figure 4.2: Decision-making folder (*gyeoljaepan*)

The cover inscription reads: “[I] wish for [your] decision” [formal ending]; they typically have a slot for a business card (to indicate the deliverer or a small window for revealing the title of the report. Source: Naver image search. Accessed September 25, 2016.

No doubt reports provide material for imagining ideological conflict between senior and junior employees (at the site of evaluation) and between an older generation and a younger generation (about the nature of the texts themselves). Such differences seem to iconize in different aesthetic styles that tropically align various aspects of the old/new chronotope. But as I will show in this chapter, these representations of new technologies, such as PowerPoint, that become remediatised in older kinds of genre, miss the complex work that a software platform like PowerPoint itself does in mediating office relations. In this regard, Sangdo Holdings, which was made up of many expert managers all deft in PowerPoint, proves a useful starting point to thinking about PowerPoint not as an *oppositional* aspect to traditional office culture, but as a mediating force in its own right. What we will encounter with PowerPoint is a counterintuitive argument: in an era in South Korea where offices appear to be more individualistic, less hierarchical, and more competitive, PowerPoint actually provides a space for teamwork to occur, individual differences to be elided, and group authorship to occur.

Thus, where PowerPoint is often seen just as an element of “multi-modal” office communication made for presenting or reading (see Zhao, Djonov, and van Leeuwen 2014), my aim is to consider it as a broader “multi-mediational” software production platform that mediates different aspects of office life itself.

Histories of PowerPoint

Microsoft's PowerPoint, a software originally designed to be a presenter's tool in the tradition of visualized data display at meetings (Yates 1985, Yates and Orlikowski 2007) has now become ensconced as one of the most pervasive forms of documentation formats in the world – such that even US government and military agencies routinely produce internal reports in PowerPoint (Parker 2001). In South Korea, Microsoft first began sales of the product in 1988, with PowerPoint being introduced in the early 1990s in offices. As computerization and “informatization” discourses by the state picked up in the late 1990s (Yang, forthcoming), the software became a mainstay in office life. By 2004, one study notes, it was already being used to test applicants' skills in admissions exams for large companies (Jang 2008, 8).

PowerPoint was the software and genre I encountered most frequently during years of fieldwork in South Korea. When I worked at the small marketing company Limelight in 2011, PowerPoint was the medium through which the small company received and sent all of its marketing materials. When I visited companies for interviews, PowerPoint was the medium through which company introductions were presented (as a visual prop). When I requested background documents, interviewees sent me email attachments of corporate policy in PowerPoint format. When I first began work at Sangdo, some of the first files I received were blank PowerPoint templates for creating new documents. With the exception of Auditing and Legal, every one of the departments in Sangdo Holdings generated its reports in PowerPoint. The owner-CEO Ahn's office was itself a mini-warehouse (or graveyard) of stacked PowerPoint reports.

PowerPoint has a checkered technological past. It endured a period of skyrocketing success in the 1990s when it became ubiquitous first as a presentational prop and then later as a form of documentation. By the time it became ubiquitous in American offices, it endured

considerable vitriol as an “evil” technology — in the words of visual media theorist Edward Tufte (2003). Tufte blamed the underspecificity and simplistic textual conventions of PowerPoint presentations for the 2003 NASA shuttle disaster. In recent years, media and communication scholars have looked more neutrally at PowerPoint for its role in mediating office relations and organizational knowledge production across different institutional environments, from the office to the classroom.³ Even still, assumptions around PowerPoint as representing an underspecified text and ambiguous function has shaped the American or European orientations to PowerPoint, which implicitly compare it to imagined views of organizational texts with maximal denotational reference and functional specificity (Schoeneborn 2013).

At the outset, one way to think about PowerPoint is as a technology of entextualization (Bauman and Briggs 1990). Like other entextualization technologies, such as voice recorders or typewriters, PowerPoint captures some context and encases them in a textual format for decontextualized viewing, reading, or listening somewhere else. Technologies of entextualization are interesting for a number of reasons: they select for some contextual feature and make a correspondence in a textual feature, making implicit decisions about what to include, and what to leave out (think here to courtroom stenography, police reports, or medical forms). Around technologies of entextualization are also roles for experts who produce, evaluate or consume these new “texts.” Certain technologies of entextualization, like TV news interviews, do not just represent passive ways of transmitting texts but actively come to shape how the contextual surround operates in relation to it (e.g., speaking one’s thoughts, having a two-sided debate) and to a specific audience (e.g., viewers at home) (see Briggs 2007).

³ One article is even subtitled “Slides are not all evil.” Doumont (2005) argues the basic point that PowerPoint critics often take textual slides presented as visual evidence supplemented by oral speech in a dynamic reading environment as standalone textual material.

At the time of its original development, PowerPoint was not meant to be a simplified form of text, bullet points, or auto-content that it is often projected as today. The original developer of PowerPoint, Robert Gaskins, for instance, created PowerPoint in the 1980s with a new kind of subject in mind: “content-originators” and “knowledge workers” who could directly control their presentation from their computers, without having to rely on “dreaded” graphics specialists who cost money and were disconnected from the work itself (Gaskins 2012, 458, cited in Knoblauch 2012, 26-49).⁴ While taken for granted today, the idea was that office workers could also be amateur graphic artists was a new idea at the time.

Where technologies of entextualization can be associated with an institutional setting, they can also mediate their own social fields, like photography. As Rodney Jones (2009) observes, there has been a bias towards digital technologies as derivative of non-digital technologies. But technologies like digital photography are not just new forms of entextualization – they are also in his words “technologies for recontextualization” and for “re-entextualization.” That is the technologies themselves are modalities for resituating texts and generating new textual production processes. This can stand in contrast to an understanding that texts always modulate between two imagined sites: written text and talking (see Haviland 1996, Nozawa 2007). A technology like digital mobile photography generates a continuous sense of editing, sharing, commenting, and editing again, thus “re-contextualizing” an original photograph in an ongoing discursive chain. PowerPoint usage in offices suggests that the

⁴ Gaskins has particularly colorful language on the matter: “Cutting out the ‘trolls’ and artisans’ was the message of PowerPoint. It would get rid of the “AV specialists” and all the people, both inside a corporation and outside in agencies and service bureaus, who were intermediaries in getting what the speaker needed” (Gaskins 2012, 458). In a twist, PowerPoint is more likely to be outsourced by global consulting firms to low-cost PowerPoint producers in countries like India. Writing on another technology of entextualization (stenography) Miyako Inoue has described how when technological processes become highly routinized, they tend to lose their ability to mediate prestigious subjects and become outsourced or devalued (Inoue 2011).

software is also a useful platform for re-entextualization in two senses: in one way, PowerPoint material from other presentations, from templates, and from auto-content continuously allow certain PowerPoint documents to be re-used or recycled. In another way, such re-use gives PowerPoints a timeless quality by creating intertextual links that have little temporal trace.⁵

The ability to effortless re-produce, copy, and edit creates different modes of participation than those organized around other kinds of office documents. Actors can continuously borrow and model their documents on those of others, as well as continuously modify them as they go along. JoAnne Yates (2007) cites an unpublished thesis which describes a process of “ghost sliding” in which consultants intentionally kept slides aesthetically incomplete, as a mode for getting continuous feedback (and presumably to avoid responsibility). In a previously published article, I showed that employees in a small South Korean marketing firm Limelight kept digital files of old PowerPoints from previous projects as a kind of currency to be used for new projects and future PowerPoints, with varying degrees of imitation and citation when they were re-textualized in new documents (Prentice 2015). PowerPoints are a useful currency to have for small consulting firms who are not bound to the strict documentary regulations as large firms. Large groups like Sangdo have more stringent internal practices for tracking document versions and movements; the tendency to produce and keep a record of so many drafts, however, can also be a liability. If the government audited Sangdo, for example, PowerPoint drafts that contained incorrect information could be used as evidence. Even basic features, such as saving, storing, and copying can generate both new possibilities and new risks.

⁵ This distinction fits analytically with Silverstein’s (2005) account of temporality with respect to intertextuality and interdiscursivity. Intertextuality is a relation of type-to-token such that there is no temporal link; interdiscursivity operates as token-to-token, marking a specific temporal trace (like reporting speech for instance).

In this chapter, then, I attune to the broader kinds of sociality that PowerPoint, as both textual production software and text itself, mediates in Sangdo and South Korea more broadly. Certain media have the power to organize their own forms of sociality or genre-communities – like newspapers (e.g., Cody 2009), photography (e.g., Jones 2009), or music (e.g., Park 2016). While not metapragmatically oriented to as a community as such, PowerPoint is both a mode (the software), medium (the file), and frequently a casual term for a textual genre (the report) that structures daily work activity more than other document for the managers at Sangdo Holdings.⁶ This is partly in relation to the fact that the company was itself an “expert group” and PowerPoint has become a key modality for conveying expertise (Knoblauch 2012). But this is not the only thing it accomplishes in the office. I focus on four different areas of what PowerPoint mediates in the office: teamwork, organizational knowledge, decision-making, and subject-making. My argument follows the idea that, as a collective product punctuated by moments of individual production but not individual recognition, PowerPoint works well in mediating modes of expert-based teamwork and disembodied organizational knowledge. At moments of individual recognition, like decision-making and individual reward, however, greater attention is paid to para-textual activities or signs that can signal an attention to personal tastes or personal contribution.

PowerPoint and Teamwork

⁶ Had my fieldsite been different I could have also focused more on a large-scale HR database manager, an ERP or supply chain management system, or a company intranet.

My first assignment as an intern at Sangdo Holdings was to write a *bogoseo*, or report in PowerPoint. Executive Cho called me into his office one day about three weeks into my fieldwork, and relaying instructions in English, assigned to me a report on “HR protocol during mergers and acquisitions.” He told me the background need of the report – some possible M&As in the future – and what such a report might need in terms of content, like what HR departments should do after acquiring a company, such as integrating salaries, bonuses, and pay grades right away or integrating them over many years. It was an interesting topic and I read as much as I could from HR textbooks and other academic books to understand mergers and acquisitions through the lens of HR.

As it turned out, not only did I not know much about that topic compared to my co-workers, I did not know how to put together a report in PowerPoint as well as them either. Struggling to put together a sufficient layout to the PowerPoint, I asked Assistant Manager Ji-soon, for advice. She was the reigning “god of presentations” (*balpyoui sin*) on the HR team. She sent me the following email with the subject header “Report Example” (*bogoseo yesi*).

Subject: Report Example

Hello Mr. Michael,

I am forwarding you a template example for use with reporting to Executive [Cho].

- A story that is logical,
- Contents that are structured, and
- Conclusion that is clear (as a tool for making decision)

...is a report of this style. Please refer to the structure!

Thank you.

Attachment: Report Example.pptx

Figure 4.3: Email text from Assistant Manager Ji-soon.

The file she attached contained a blank Sangdo PowerPoint template with slides that detailed different examples on how to properly lay out a slide, colors to use, appropriate fonts and sizes for headers and sub-headers, and the best way to draw block arrows. Her email, however, indicated more than just aesthetic standards. The report would have to be palatable to the logical affinities held by Executive Cho, and geared towards his future action: making a decision. Reports indeed are tools for doing things, in Austin's sense, but the perlocutionary entailments of this particular report were unclear. Was the report just for him? Did the owner or CEO ask for the report? What was it going to be used for, in the end?

Assistant Manager Ji-soon's cryptic words of advice belied an unstated reality for the team in general: all reports had to pass through the stern eye and red pen of Executive Cho. And many times, team members reported to me that they, too, had little idea of what a report was supposed to look like. Beyond the email itself, I read books, talked to a member of the strategy team, and hunted down any academic articles I could find on human resources activities in an M&A. With little success, I nevertheless made an attempt to draft a report and bring it to Executive Cho to discuss in person, hoping to learn what he *actually* had in mind for the narrative shape, contents, and the decision points. Even though I brought a print out of 15 slides, Executive Cho did not read past the first slide because he found logical errors in how the issue was visually conveyed. Discussion of this first slide alone took an hour. Afterwards, Team Manager Jang jokingly consoled me and said that now I would know what everyone else on the team felt everyday. Throughout my fieldwork, the other team members dreaded going to these face-to-face encounters because they saw little hope in either pleasing Executive Cho or understanding what he actually wanted. Like Manager Park in the anecdote at the beginning, they too wondered what a report was, and what it was used for. Within the team, it was known

that Executive Cho's background in consulting prior to joining Sangdo shaped not only the nature of the reports themselves, but much of the workaday life of the members of our team. While it was a point of lament, it was also, a point of bonding among the team members, who had a shared sense of suffering between them. But more than just a collective hardship, PowerPoint itself has come to articulate with the "team system" in South Korea in particular ways.

Teamwork or the team-system in South Korea is largely seen as a mode of organizing work units into rank-based, but non-hierarchical units, codified in formal relations of reporting that were more "horizontal" (*supyeongjeok*) which could be contrasted with "vertical" (*sujigjeok*) structures of older department structures. Team structures as basic organizing units have existed since the mid-1990s, prior to the IMF period and are common in private companies, public companies, and bureaucracies across various kinds of expertise. When work structures were converted into teams, rank was de-coupled from managerial responsibility (hence why I refer to many employees as "managers" even though, narrowly speaking, they are not). Ranks that refer to titles have no corresponding link to managerial authority and are empty signifiers. Thus, to be called a *gwajang* originally meant that one was in charge of a *gwa* or unit (as existed in Janelli's ethnography from the 1980s⁷). Today, it solely represents an index of tenure. Organizationally, all members are now known as "team members" (*timwon*) who report instead to a "team manager" (*timjang*). Thus, in formal depictions of reporting team structures have been "flattened" with respect to work cultures of the past (Park 2006).

⁷ In Roger Janelli's ethnography, desks were laid out in staggered ways, resembling quasi military formations, that reflected more gradations of status difference more clearly than today's office spaces (Janelli and Yim 1993).

While team structures can delimit relations formally, they become instantiated in practice through various kinds of genres, from greetings, to meetings, to *hoesik* that can appear to “align” with a model of teamwork or not. As the kind of document most commonly worked on by office workers, PowerPoint has a special capacity to mediate team relations. And here I argue that it does so not through *elaborating* teamwork in formal representations but implicitly through the under-inscription of work on the document and modes of re-entextualization throughout production.

Genre conventions for PowerPoint’s internal composition as well as its mode of production and conventions for circulation, do not actively track who or when a given document was created. While an author *could* be listed on a cover slide, or represented as the person responsible (*damdang*) on a cover sheet, it would still be impossible to know from the textual format who produced, authorized, edited, or reviewed any given PowerPoint file, along with the sources of its diverse texts inside. Unless stamped with a decision-making line (discussed in Chapter Two) or enfolded into a larger decision file, PowerPoint files can only be faintly linked to those roles — whose computer it is stored on, whose desk it is printed out on, and whose pen has marked it up, though in those cases other responsibilities and role fractions may be more salient (transporter, storer, etc.). In general, PowerPoints that I have encountered at various corporations are inscribed on the cover with the following kinds of markings: presentation title, team name/department, company, version, date, and sometimes explicit “Confidential” or “Internal Use Only” markings that are meant to warn about their relative sphere of circulation. They rarely keep any trace of their own production or circulation through a topsheet or other formal record.

The radical collectivization of PowerPoint is interesting in light of the highly individualized aspect of other bureaucratic forms, communications, evaluations, or records. They are vastly distant, for instance, from the highly individualizing forms of evaluation to get into a company, that include both quantitative and qualitative forms as a mode of inter-individual comparison, ranking, and fit-testing (see Chumley 2013), as well as the longer horizon of “spec” development in middle and high school (Abelmann, Park, and Kim 2009). These are the hallmarks of the neo-liberal labor market outside of the office, but not so much within in it. Employees who start at a company become embedded *in medias res* in a world of other texts that they are both expected to both produce, to know how to read, and to draw on for reference. On my first day at Sangdo, Team Manager Park, who had also started on the same day, had already begun working on a PowerPoint while I was still learning the layout of the intranet.

If we think about PowerPoint less as a textual genre of presentation and decision-making, but as begetting certain kinds of interaction, we can see various roles emerge in its production. Every interaction has a wide set of participant roles, as Goffman originally described (Goffman 1974), roles that are potentially limitless in practice (Irvine 1996). Writing never bifurcates into an imagined author-reader dyad; there are many kinds of role fractions (editor, drafter, overseer etc.) that emerge out of a structure of interaction or over time. Fixed and identifiable participant roles are largely afterthoughts after a text is produced – like the person responsible for the project who initiates it online (*damdangja*) and the formal approver(s) who signs it (*gyeoljaeja*).

Many of the team roles involved in production had no official or formalized titles, but were salient interactionally. Team Manager Jang would provide directions on paper that Assistant Manager Ji-soon, Ki-ho, or I would be in charge of creating on the screen. He might come over behind our chairs and oversee the progress, suggesting corrections from time to time.

Ki-ho would often lean over and ask Assistant Manager Ji-soon or Assistant Manager Min-sup on how to fix his PowerPoints. In some cases, Team Manager Jang asked one employee to take over PowerPoint duties from an ongoing presentation to another if it was a matter of deadline or expertise. At one point he had Ki-ho create a practice presentation as a way to build his skills up to the level of Ji-soon's. These ongoing and shifting roles around the production of PowerPoint – notwithstanding the interpersonal hierarchies that mediated the oral language used between them – created a sense of collectivized participation in which all are known to have contributed *something* without explicit inscription of *what*. Note here how because each individual works on a computer from their own desk by their own hand, but putatively in charge of any part of a document, this creates both a collectively authored but singular product, like weaving a basket without knowing who wove what. This is quite opposite to the “files” that circulate among Pakistani bureaucrats described by Matthew Hull, bureaucrats who kept detailed records of how a document circulated, but modulated the degree of their personal inscriptions in this collective process depending on whether certain files were politically dangerous or politically useful to them (Hull 2003). And it is different from the collateral forms described by Annelise Riles where backroom lawyers work out the details of collateral swaps (Riles 2010).

Even though PowerPoint does not inscribe individual participation, forms of pro-social hierarchy still exist around its production. Within a team, PowerPoint can mediate genres of asymmetrical dyadic mentoring (boss-employee, older-younger) that are common across Korean institutions. One of them is low-level mentoring and onboarding. When a new employee comes on, a junior *sawon* or *daeri* is generally delegated with onboarding, mentoring, or doing “OJT” (on-the-job-training) in formal or informal ways.⁸ In terms of PowerPoint, an employee could

⁸ Formal mentoring (*mentoring*) programs have become popular as an HR method across many companies as a way of easing transitions to the workplace for young employees, pairing them with team members or non-team members.

provide templates, background files, and other models that allowed a new employee to acclimate. More specifically, an older employee could also act as a proto-evaluator, even outside the chain of command, giving recommendations on how to structure or edit a given PowerPoint for a given manager.

This is not to say that all teamwork around PowerPoint was pro-social. Certain team managers were not as good at managing the relations among their employees, asking to do too many re-writes, being too harsh in their corrections, being ambiguous in their feedback, or yelling at employees. As I will discuss in the next section, Team Manager Park of the HR development team had his own mode of production that was very traumatic for the two employees who worked under him. In this sense, though it does suggest that PowerPoints as much as they are objects for presentations or wider circulation, are as much an object of collective production that generates its own kind of team-internal relations. It points us to the way that team-level organizations – even circular team spaces like at Sangdo – are imagined to be “flat” from the point of view of their organizational structure and formal division of responsibilities (Park 2006). Nevertheless, certain genres like PowerPoint provide a platform not for flat (cell-like) office work that is disconnected, but a collective form of labor that both articulates with interpersonal hierarchies while not creating outsized individual responsibilities (such as pinpointing who made an error on slide #3). It is around these modes of textual production where normative team-level structures can arise independently from what is imagined to be a wider corporate culture or organizational structure.⁹

Informally, among men in particular, relations of mentoring can be modelled along models of military sociality in which the dyad is described as *sasu-busasu* or “shooter-assistant shooter.”

⁹ James Barker in his book *The Discipline of Teamwork* notes that decentralized team structures, while associated with the flat cultures of Silicon Valley, often lead to highly normative work units that are prone to self-monitoring and concertive action, in a neo-Weberian argument about the emergence of norms (Barker 1999).

Among more senior employees, there is another discourse among South Korean office workers about how the ambiguities of PowerPoint texts create particular opportunities to match a style to that of those who will evaluate it, akin to how Assistant Manager Ji-soon advised me in preparing to deliver something following a strict rhetorical structure to Executive Cho. PowerPoint allows for tailoring *to* certain styles. In a book on “The Seven Principles of Reporting,” for instance, one of the pieces of advice is to closely observe and tailor a document to a superior’s liking. In a cartoon I used to read about Korean office life, one vignette had a joke about closely reading a manager’s face and expression to know what kind of mood he or she is in. And in an interview, a manager talked of how he adapted the visual style of his PowerPoints to that of his managers:

Now public companies and private companies might be similar, but in our case [of public companies], generally (you¹⁰) have to catch the style of (your) direct boss quickly and then match (your) style when (you) write something. It’s just more convenient. Like if someone starts to work in (your) department and (you) need to get a decision (from him), within one month I need to catch how he looks at reports or what style he likes and then I match it. That’s how to do it. (*MP: What about standardized...*). There are standardized files on the company intranet, but there are some subtle differences about what [bosses] want. Some people like graphs. As for colors, some people like [reports] more colorful (*MP: Ah to that level?*). Some people like pictures or models. If (I) match it, it’s easier for me too. If (I) don’t match it, then (they) always make (you) redo it. (Song interview 43:02)

At the public (state-owned) company where he worked, team heads and executives changed frequently. In this context, Mr. Song saw smooth team relations – especially with a new boss – not as something explicitly marked by equal contributions or aesthetics of democratic participation (like in a meeting or a vote), but by the adjustment and attunement to the styles of others’ liking. Because of the denotational ambiguity of inscribing labor on the text itself,

¹⁰ Because the Korean language is pronoun-optional and verbs inflect only for speech level (not even person or number), there are quite a lot of inferred or ambiguous statements. I have translated these into English using the impersonal 2nd-person “you” with parentheses indicating where there was no pronoun present. This ambiguity allows some flexibility as to when to specify the pronoun, which Mr. Song does in some clauses – specifying himself as the subject-agent, for instance.

PowerPoint can attune us to the different kinds of visual, textual, and narrative correspondences that might align with a manager's reading tastes (in the same ways that professors might define themselves as ones loose or restrictive on margins and font sizes). But because PowerPoints are produced individually in this way, they still allow one to develop their own private expert knowledge of how to tailor them.

PowerPoint and Organizational Knowledge

The statistician and public intellectual Edward Tufte became famous for deriding PowerPoint for its seemingly universal tendencies to make texts stupid. A particular enemy was the bullet-point list which was seen as the substitute for logical reasoning, the public display of evidence, and the verbal linking of cause and effect that could be evaluated through careful inference. This would cause, in Tufte's view, the cognitive dumbing down of both producer and audience (Tufte 2003). However, his argument itself conflates PowerPoint the software and certain conventions in it, with specific genres and uses of PowerPoint to creative effects (Stark and Paravel 2008). In comparison to the ornate traditions of science graphics, PowerPoint may be deficient; but linked to a visual history, like management graphics, PowerPoint is part of a longer history of representing organizational knowledge in an intentionally delimited way. Joanne Yates for instance describes how early twentieth century graphic charts were printed out in large sizes and used to actively monitor situations or to facilitate managerial discussion by presenting information without making any specific point (Yates 1985). Charts had such wide value as organizational tools that the Du Pont company even had a "chart room" that was filled with 350 different charts, calculating everything from injury statistics over time to return-on-

investment projects that managers would congregate to look at and analyze. In this section, I situate what kinds of work PowerPoint as a particular mode of textual production does in the coalition and presentation of organizational knowledge.

Before looking at any given genre, it is worth addressing how PowerPoint structures linguistic and visual signs as a basic premise of its software design. PowerPoint combines a hybrid visual-linguistic format: a two-dimensional canvas that is also part of a linear sequence of individual slides. The two-dimensional space of a single slide as an isolate has its own forms of non-sequential ordering: through the elements of visual composition, such as color, shape, layout, vertical-horizontal positioning, and proportion. These have conventionally developed around hybrid textual-graphic elements such as charts, flow charts, and pyramid graphs that organize information into visual-textual hybrids that have their own internal logics (Djonov and Van Leeuwen 2013). PowerPoint is more than the sum of its pre-determined layouts however: corporate internal presentations, for instance, encapsulate highly complex secondary genres and logical sequences of slides.

I begin first by describing some common visual and narratives elements from a PowerPoint given to me as an example of useful HR insights by a manager from a graduate school course of his. I then draw on the narrative sequencing of specific PowerPoint presentations I discussed in other parts of this dissertation: the template of the Performance Management team mentioned in Chapter One and the survey analysis of the HR Planning team report mentioned in Chapter Two.



Figure 4.4: Slide sequence of a PowerPoint report.

Slide-view of a presentation sent by an informant from his business school course in 2016. The presentation is entitled “Understanding Organizational Conflicts.” Because this contains educational content and non-company related information I am reproducing it here with the school’s name censored.

The graphic above comes from an informant who attended an executive business school program as part of his job as an HR manager. He sent it to me via email with the premise that it would be useful to my general understanding of HR issues in Korea (note its second-life as an object mediating relations of mentoring). It is a report from his graduate student team preparing and summarizing materials on organizational conflicts. Because it partakes of the genre conventions of the corporate environment I encountered, it is useful as an artifact to explain certain issues central to PowerPoint. The document is titled “Understanding Organizational Conflicts” (*jojikgaldeunge daehan ihae*) and is a guide for organizations and individuals to deal with conflicts. The whole presentation is twenty-four slides.

We might notice different text-framing devices: 1) by sequential framing devices, such as a title page and an end page, as well as a table of contents and 2) by slide-internal framing devices such as header rows that list individual slide topics and footer rows which record the slide number and presentation title. Both of these conventions hierarchically organize information for reading slide internally and in sequence. Slide-internally, a variety of heterogeneous visual elements are used: graphics found on the internet, graphics made from PowerPoint's own preformatted templates and compositional elements, and graphics made in other kinds of software. Textually, words serve as both detached labels, titles, or lists. They also occur in standalone narrative sequences, or as narrative sequences that operate in conjunction with other visual elements. What is interesting are the various modalities of visual display of textual information that create different non-linear patterns of reading and organizing data. Two slides pasted below from the PowerPoint presentation illustrate conventional graphic modes that organize concepts in different ways: the one on the left illustrates "reasons for conflict occurrence" and on the right "positive functions of conflict." On the left, four concepts (in boxes) with elaborating lists on the edges illustrate four areas where conflicts arise from (communication type, communication structure, human differences, and communication competency). On the right, a graphic illustration visually narrates the time that conflicts are most likely to happen and when it might be *good* to have a conflict. The slide on the left represents a taxonomic elaboration in a visual format, though one, it appears, that is ill-suited to the actual content (the arrows have no bearing on this form of signification). The slide on the right illustrates a point about an optimal time to have a conflict which is used correspondingly with a bell curve. Textual lines frame and illustrate the "optimal level" of conflict in the middle.

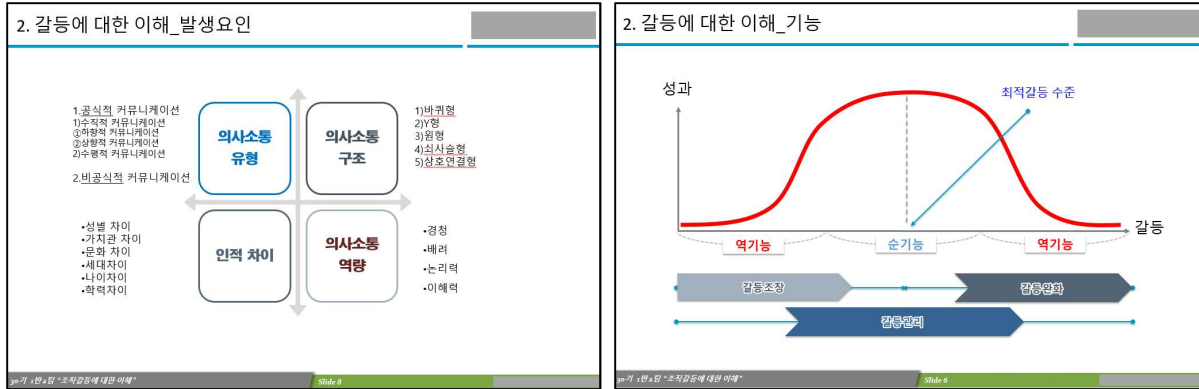


Figure 4.5: Two examples of visual organization

The brief discussion above has served to illustrate different modalities of visual and textual representation in PowerPoint. The varieties of visual-textual presentation are endless in this regard. In the decontextualizability of these kinds of presentations, I draw attention to the fact that there are specific reading audiences presumed (HR professionals) with specific pragmatic goals in mind (illustrating causes of and ways to handle manage conflict); thus it can only be reconstructed in such a context. The presentation itself alludes to different moments of text-consumption even within the document: it incorporates minimally schematic visuals that are typical of in-person presentations (such as the slide on the right above). But it also includes, at the end of the presentation, longer narrative case studies that presume secondary reading environments, such as a reference in the case of an actual conflict. In this way, the PowerPoint presentation itself pre-figures different modes of consumption – note even I was presumed to be competent to read it as a decontextualized matter. Secondary reading encounters do not presume a full *reconstructability* of the original text as a narrative object; the assortment of graphs and concepts are themselves meant to be *deconstructable* as specific units of knowledge. That is, as a set of sequenced slides, perusable at any time, I can re-use the elements and fragments for my own purposes, while ignoring other parts (as I have done, thought perhaps not to the effect that the informant intended).

With this discussion in mind I turn to the narrative structure of the knowledge productions of two teams. The first comes from reports (*bogoseo*) that were produced after the employee satisfaction survey finished and results were distributed to individual subsidiaries. Each subsidiary received its own PowerPoint file that was converted into a PDF to prevent it from being used further. The documents were meant to beget both a face-to-face encounter to explain the report and to serve as a standalone for reference by the subsidiary HR teams later. Because the content is confidential, I've illustrated the sequence of slides below in Figure 4.6, color-coding the kinds of information contained on each slide.

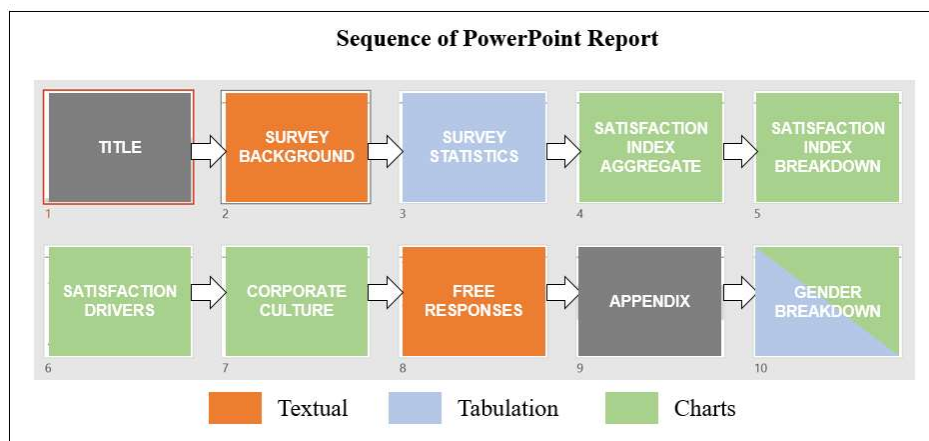


Figure 4.6: Narrative sequence of a PowerPoint document
 Sequence of a report involving textual information, tabulations, and graphic charts to represent the survey results to a given subsidiary. Tabulation/chart combination slides were used to illustrate more extensive information in the appendix.

The format of the PowerPoint is meant for decontextualized reading and reference. The appendix itself was over thirty slides of demographic breakdown by gender, age, office site, job rank and so on. As such the “main” content discussed in the meeting was meant to highlight the top-level results from the main parts of the survey (green boxes above). Each chart had a series of bar graphs that listed how the subsidiary did relative to the entire group. Other charts arranged survey data in similar ways with different kinds of statistical effects to show the a) range of

answers, b) the highest response and lowest response, c) deviance from the average. As such it was both highly schematic – with little textual exegesis – that could also be used as a reference for later study. The highly complex design of the chart-based slides would in fact be *too* busy to read decontextualized. While there is a hierarchical order to it, Team Manager Jang and Assistant Manager Min-sup met with each HR team manager from the subsidiaries not only to explain the results, but to explain how to read this particular PowerPoint itself. The PowerPoint presentation thus had the image of being decontextualized and available for reading and interpretation, but because it was an object created by the holding company, the particular visual configuration would need to be unpacked. This style thus allowed the HR Planning team to deliver the packet of data as a gift (with an ample appendix) in a way that also reinforced their own expertise through interactionally situated co-reading.

The second presentation I describe is a PowerPoint document to describe creating a new PowerPoint template. This comes from the Performance Management team which was busy trying to figure out how to re-create its monthly management reports when we encountered them in Chapter One. The PowerPoint at hand which mediated their long meetings includes two slides at the outset to frame the actual template. The two slides depict a decision-making occasion, framed by comparison of two proposals side by side. As the team was deciding which kind of template to establish, they visually represented the two details in two ways: one through a categorical comparison and one through a timeline comparison. They were deciding which qualitative or quantitative elements to include, as well as what the timeline for submission and production would be each month. The slides are not particularly interesting in this regard (even if I hadn't covered the details); but what I point to is the visual organization of the “decision-making” is organized in a way to allow the reader (in this case the CEO) to properly assess each

proposal across a range of categories, including the contents, the documents required from subsidiaries, and the benefits. The document itself does not “make” any actual decisions but visually organizes them in a metonymically reduced way so as to construct an image of a decision to be made.

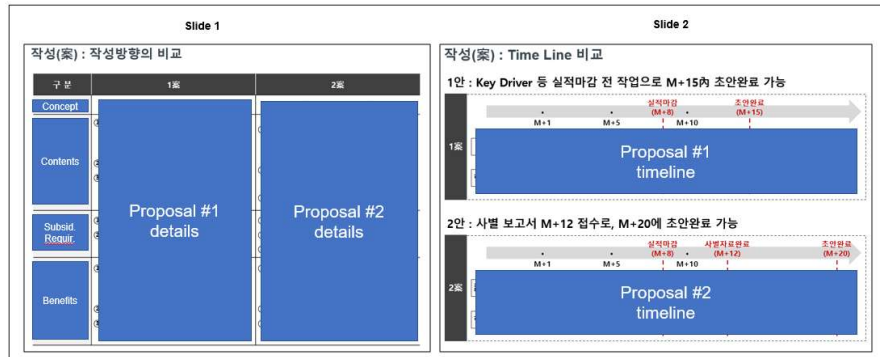


Figure 4.7: Two slides framing an organizational decision. These two slides illustrate different ways of representing knowledge and decisions. Details of the two slides have been censored by the blue boxes.

One of the two templates was included as a visual prototype following the framing slides. The template, which was conceptualized at the time of the meeting in terms of “qualitative” and “quantitative” proportions, integrates both dimensions. What is worth noting is the how the hierarchy of expertise is sequentially organized. Outside market indicators come first followed subsidiary results. The first slide gives changes to key drivers that affect all of their industries, such as the price of oil, the average price of certain kinds of steel product, and certain key minerals that are used in steel forging. The second slide analyzes how these changes affect each subsidiary’s key product markets, with markings for areas where the group should be concerned. Only on the final two slides are subsidiary data actually tabulated, with graphic and tabulated modes representing their monthly results as compared to the planned results. (Each subsidiary plans out yearly forecasts by month). Visually, the slides depict each subsidiary compared to each other as well as compared to their own set monthly goals.

As I've analyzed PowerPoint in this section, I've made a general argument that organizational knowledge, as it is instantiated in PowerPoint reports, is not always as decontextualized as it appears. Many of the charts sent to me by an informant are "texts from nowhere" in the sense of contextually-removed, yet their specific pragmatic functions remain unclear. While PowerPoints may be objects of expertise, how such expertise is being deployed remains empirically open. In the case of Sangdo documents, the larger sequencing and framing of information within the documents points to how Sangdo managers sequentially sign their own authority in two ways: One way is to present information as a gift through an abundance of information, while restricting the legibility of charts; this would necessitate individual meetings where the holding company managers could talk about the results as equals, but in which they had better footing with respect to decoding the presentations (see also Meek 2016). A second way is to sequentially organize information that demonstrates expert knowledge first (such as through custom indicators and interpretations of their impacts) while enclosing the expertise of subsidiaries afterwards. Market indicator information then frames the causes and outcomes of subsidiary results. By visually representing "planned versus actual" sales and revenue, this creates a visual icon of success or failure – something that does not need interpretation from the team. Both forms, then, presume some kind of imagined interactional scenario in which their own expertise is read alongside the document.

PowerPoint and Decision-making

In the South Korean office world, decisions are something that an executive might make, but something an employee gets (*gyeoljeong* [decision]+ *batgi* [receive]). In Chapter Two, I

discussed how a formal system of signature-based decisions largely served to perform a rank-based order within a company. But this is not how managers typically get decisions. In some cases, a middle-ranked person like an executive or the owner-CEO could be seen as the real decider. PowerPoint files like the ones I discussed in the previous section are not just passive vessels in this process – they actively shape decisions visually (by presenting them as simple options). Managers have different ways of manipulating both the production and circulation of files outside of actual representations in practice though. In this section, I address a case of how two different team managers imagined the circulation of PowerPoint files and how in turn, that structured how their teams produced PowerPoints.

Of the forty-seven employees at Sangdo Holdings, nine were team managers, seven of whom were male and two female. The Human Resources (HR) team was the only team to have two team managers, due to the range of responsibility of the department: HR Development (*injae gaebal*) was headed by Team Manager Park and HR Planning (*insa gihwek*) was headed by Team Manager Jang¹¹. The two men sat just three feet across from each other on the edge of HR department's team circle. The two teams, while nominally concerned with human resources, operated in distinctively different work worlds that only occasionally overlapped. HR Development was focused on education, training, and career development of employees, including MBA courses for executives, monthly lectures, planning and managing online course offerings, and leading new employee training at off-site facilities (*yeonsuwon*). HR Planning, on the other hand, entailed everything and anything else related to HR, including the administration of salary, benefits, and promotions for Holdings employees, a loose oversight of subsidiary HR

¹¹ This is a common bifurcation of HR departments at major companies. (In fact, larger companies will often have other HR sub-units, such as for Company Culture or Labor Relations).

policies, and the development of new HR techniques and programs. I was awkwardly placed in the middle of the two teams. If you wanted to get training in English you would stop by Sook-hee in HR Development on my right, and if you wanted to submit your income tax forms or submit your vacation notice, you went to Ki-ho in HR Planning, on my left.

The two team managers¹² oversaw various projects for each team and both had formally to report up to the Executive Cho, and on occasion the owner-CEO Ahn and the Chairman. Despite the domains of expertise, both men had followed similar educational and career paths to come to Sangdo Holdings. Both in their late 30s, they were graduates of top universities in Seoul, had lived abroad for English language study earlier in their careers, and had worked in corporate jobs related to their discipline their entire careers, before coming to Sangdo. Park had worked as a consultant in a US-linked HR consulting firm and Jang had gone straight into HR management at a large Korean manufacturing company. Both Park and Jang had been scouted to Sangdo Holdings from their previous companies, joining within a year of my time there.¹³

Their career trajectories, especially the differences between consulting and corporate management, shaped their attitudes to work. This was evident in how they oriented to PowerPoints as vessels for effective communication. Jang, the HR Planning manager, spent his career within the HR department at one of the largest manufacturing conglomerates in Korea, where he had been habituated to the flow of salaried office life, vertical hierarchies, and complex internal politics. Sangdo Holdings was new to him, but somewhat simpler in comparison to his

¹² Technically Park and Jang were “part” (*pateu*) managers, a common sub-unit beneath “team” (*tim*). Both can be affixed to the person-suffix for “head of” *-jang* and can be converted into titles with the addition of the honorific *-nim*, such as *tim-jang-nim* or *pateu-jang-nim*. Like American companies that play with titles and organizational units, Korean offices too have standard titles with vastly different referents. For the sake of clarity, I refer to Park and Jang as “team managers” as that was their functionally equivalent role.

¹³ In the elite world of conglomerate management, “scouting” is a common way that companies hire recently unemployed managers or poach existing managers from other companies, attracting them with better salaries or better working conditions, though often not both

previous work. Park, the HR Development manager was new to the world of internal-conglomerate work and to being a team manager in an HR department. He approached his work as a consultant. He saw given work tasks as projects for a paying client. Projects should be done based on a division of expertise and employees should work as long as necessary to meet deadlines. The key product of their labor was the report, which should be delivered to and evaluated by Executive Cho. For Park, reports demanded a high attention to detail, for they acted as travelling icons of their work output, and by extension, his team's expertise. They were substitutes. As such, Park had his employees spend endless hours on drafting, presenting, editing, and re-editing PowerPoint presentations that Executive Cho had ordered them. The two team members below him, Assistant Manager Sook-hee and Manager Dong-gi, were lifetime conglomerate workers, and had never worked in a consulting environment before. They were not used to the obsession over PowerPoints for company-internally circulating documents (especially for documents that never left their team). The three members of the HR Development team would often stay as late as needed to get a project done, including late nights and weekends.

The physical toll on HR Development team members from endlessly producing reports was noticeable. Manager (*gwajang*) Dong-gi was more reticent in sharing his opinion; however, Assistant Manager (*daeri*) Sook-hee whose desk was adjacent to mine, was more porous: she would often pass along worried or disparaging glances after conversations with Team Manager Park. She occasionally scribbled jokes about her boss in my fieldnote book with a variety of epithets that she and other female co-workers had come up for her boss. She once showed me a text message from Park about how they might have to come in on a Sunday and commented how crazy it (or he) was (*micheotta*). One of her frequent complaints was that they were not actually consultants doing work for a corporation; they were the ones in the corporation.

Team Manager Jang had a noticeably different approach to his team's work. He saw his work as part of a program-building for the HR team and Sangdo Holdings in general. This included developing innovative HR programs and plans, and guiding the careers of the three team members under his charge. Each of the projects that his team members worked on usually ended in a PowerPoint report, however these were not always set and final objects that circulated on their own. Based on his own experience in his previous company, he knew that reports had peculiar circulatory lives, often diverted or modified unnecessarily by higher ups, so he managed reports together with relationships. Planning for new PowerPoints or discussing draft versions were occasions for him to go speak to Executive Cho. But Executive Cho was notorious for his lengthy meetings and obsession over small details. The owner-CEO Ahn, the de facto CEO of Sangdo Holdings, had the final say in major decisions and was more amenable to details discussed in person, rather than on paper. Thus, Jang saw Executive Cho as a hindrance to getting in front of the owner. Jang felt that if he could speak to the owner directly or show him a draft version, it would have a better chance of success. If he could get the approval of the owner, then he could subvert Executive Cho's own demands for endless revisions.

Within the team of three, Team Manager Jang gave responsibility to team members for given tasks that he would manage with them one-on-one. He sought to help grow each member's competency in specific areas of HR planning and delegated them individual projects. However, When Ki-ho, Ji-soon, or Min-sup developed PowerPoint reports, Jang would take a print out of the report directly to Executive Cho as a way of shielding them from his evaluations, and to better negotiate the project going forward. His favorite move (a feat he had often joked about on smoking breaks outside the office) was to use the complications of one project or report to delay or simplify another ongoing project. A witness of harsh work environments in his previous

company, he saw his job ultimately as cultivating a more friendly and jovial environment for his team members; and he used PowerPoint drafts as negotiating chips. When we conducted team meetings just amongst the four, he would encourage us to meet in casual environments like the company coffee shop. As I mentioned above, when I was struggling over the one report that Executive Cho had given me, Jang told me to let it go and stop working on it, with the assumption that it was not a report going higher than Executive Cho. Thankfully he was right.

His counterpart Park would likely have not let such a report slip. For Team Manager Park, work entailed a consultant's perspective on the report as a physical manifestation of expertise, one for which everything would be sacrificed. Reports were not only single commodities that condensed their work, but they were icons of his team's competency. Park saw Executive Cho as the final arbiter of good performance and evaluation. For Team Manager Jang, physical reports were merely a genre among many written and spoken genres that varied as different projects or situations called upon different forms of (his) expertise. Jang was more concerned about the effectiveness of larger relationships with other managers and with other subsidiaries, not the textual icons that merely appeared to mediate them. This included relationships below him (with his team members, whom he took care of) and above him, to the owners and Chairman. Jang saw the circulatory chain not ending at Executive Cho as the final arbiter, but one impeded by him. He relayed to me often how Executive Cho unnecessarily obsessed over the fine details of presentations, opinions which were valid in their own right, but unnecessary for getting things done, not to mention harmful to members working lives. Jang would often reiterate to me that his larger goal was to create new and innovative HR programs and make a meaningful impact on the Sangdo Group's HR policies (not just the small holding company). To do so meant that one had to be good at PowerPoint, but able to see the bigger

political picture within which they circulated. Reports were the occasion to have a discussion not just with Executive Cho, but with the owner-CEO Ahn, with subsidiary managers, around which different interactional stances could be taken. For Jang and the conglomerate style, documents were just part of a long production process that may or may never become a final “text.” For Park and his consultant style, documents were like commodities that were delivered, sealed, and circulated.

The differences between Park and Jang could be explained in part by their different domains of expertise: Park in HR Development primarily focused on executive and manager training across the entire conglomerate, while Jang focused on the management of HR systems for salary, bonus, promotion, evaluation, culture at the Holdings company and on occasion with other companies. Park’s work was seen by high-ranking executives in the subsidiary, while Jang’s work was often highly confidential and enmeshed in complex politics for changing internal systems. The two also emerged out of highly different work cultures: Park, like Executive Cho, emerged out of international (US-based) HR consulting while Jang came from the world of big Korean conglomerates and big Korean labor.¹⁴ To boot they were not particularly fond of each other, and had different ideas about how to succeed under Executive Cho and how to treat their own employees, which contributed to their contrasting styles.

Despite these differences, both men operated in a reporting regime that was mediated by PowerPoint documents. Nearly every kind of work activity that they generated ultimately came to be summarized and delivered to Executive Cho in a printed PowerPoint document. In a broad

¹⁴ Among corporate workers in Korea, those who work at a foreign management consultancy are the triathletes of the corporate world. The credentials one must have to work in a consultancy are impeccable, and it seems that working in one is at least partially to earn a badge of legitimacy and possible connections with potential employers. The average tenure of a management consultant is less than a year, with employees working nearly around the clock with no vacation. Many quit within a matter of months. The executive under whom I worked at Sangdo had seemed to do the Herculean feat of working in a consultancy for more than a decade.de

perspective, they were both in charge of a small part of a larger process involving the objectification of various forms of knowledge and delivering it “up” the chain of command. Ideally this information was evaluated and read by executives, the owner-CEO Ahn, and on certain occasions, the Chairman. But the pragmatics of how to do this opened up choices of how to produce, present, and deliver the documents — these were not reducible, in other words, to the commonly seen affordances of PowerPoint as a “text” or a “presentation.” PowerPoints like other documents, mediated many forms of semiosis in relation to their material qualities. What Park saw as the destination of their documents and proper site of evaluation (his direct boss, Executive Cho), Jang saw as precisely the hindrance of his own work and broader plans for the HR planning team. For Park, PowerPoints were a representation of his work to his immediate superior, who also shared a similar perspective. Jang, more attuned to the politics of conglomerate life, the attitudes of the owner and Chairman, and the negative impact of obsessing over documents on his team, resorted to different strategies to deliver his team’s documents to Executive Cho and to others in the organization.

What this discussion points to is that even formal systems like decision-making (or decision-getting) are prompted by texts, those texts can function in multiple ways to various purposes. This is not just a matter of strategy: a common reality for many office workers is that the PowerPoints they create *fail*: proposals, monthly reports, recommendations, information briefs can be inconsequential, rejected, ignored, or simply read and left on a desk. While the formal system of decision-making emphasizes approvals or rejections, there is a whole variety of other kinds of activity that precede, co-occur, or follow these decisions. The two managers in comparison here were both acting on behalf of their teams and demonstrated their managerial expertise not via the ability to create or even evaluate the production of documents, but via the

ability to know the mind of the audience potentially reading them. In the next section, I look at how non-managers seek to make their own mark in and through PowerPoint.

PowerPoint Subjects

Like other kinds of texts or technologies, PowerPoint also generates different subjects in relation to its various modalities of production, circulation, and reception. One of these in Korea is an idiom known as the “God of Reports” (*bogoseoui sin*) or “God of Presentations” (*balpyoui sin*). (These can also be referred to as “master” or *darin*). On our team, Assistant Manager Ji-soon was the reigning god for she had a knack for creating aesthetically pleasing, neatly laid, and clearly demarcated presentations. She was equally deft at giving oral presentations, with PowerPoint as a prop, in front of other teams. I even tried to emulate her on a number of occasions but faced the fact that I did not have such skills. One of the real powers of such a God, however, was not just in designing but also engendering positive responses from listeners or readers. Here is a description of one such employee from the same blog post I cited at the beginning of the chapter.

They call a certain Mr. Kang, a fourth-year sawon at the “D” large conglomerate a “God of Reports.” When the executives look at his reports, one by one their mouths dry out because they give him so many compliments. Where’s the secret? He has one basic principle in writing a report. “Short, easy, simple” is everything. The presentations he makes are mostly 1-2 slides. No matter what, if it goes over 5 slides, he creates a summary slide with all the content.

Every manager on the HR team at Sangdo was proficient at PowerPoint, in terms of the basic aesthetics of layout, font size, register usage, and narrative structure. Team Manager Jang once helped me to fix-up a preliminary PowerPoint that I had been working on. I sheepishly

apologized for wasting his time. But he slyly remarked, using an idiom from a Korean comic, that, he “barely broke a sweat” fixing it up (*woenson-eun geodeul bbun*¹⁵). But being proficient at PowerPoint and being a god of making a report were different. Team Manager Jang told me he would rely on Ji-soon’s design skills for putting together major PowerPoints for the team. She also made visualized email announcements, booklets of large reports including the cover design, graphic representations of survey data, and well-crafted presentations to use with other teams or subsidiaries. When I left the company, she was working with the IT team to create a visualized dash board for executives to track work progress of their team members when I left fieldwork. Like a poet well-versed at the nature of meter and prosody, she seemed to have a knack for colors, gradients, proportions of shapes, and alignment of visual material on a slide. She had after all, attended one of the country’s elite universities and worked for a handful of years in HR consulting (like Team Manager Park and Executive Cho). I attempted on a few occasions to shadow her as she put together presentations, sitting behind her chair as she put together a presentation. I noticed that she experimented, modified, re-sized, re-organized visual charts and diagrams frequently before settling on a layout that captured the data she was trying to relate.

To be a “god” of something was a circulating format that I encountered at various times during fieldwork. There was a famous television show translated into English as “Queen of the Office” but literally meaning “God of Office Work” (*jikjang-ui sin*). One could also be a “God of cleaning” (*cheongsoui sin*), “god of basketball” (*nong-guui sin*), or “god of sales” (*yeong-eobui sin*). To be a god of something reflects that one has an innate or natural talent at a specialized task that is particularly differentiated from others (such as Michael Jordan in basketball). Like

¹⁵ The actual reference is from a Japanese comic about basketball in which the trademark phrase for a good shot is “I wasn’t even using my left hand” (*wensoneun geodeul bbun*), similar to “nothing but net.”

other forms of elite emblems, however, it is an individually performed skill that relies on oral performance and the concealment of its forms of production, like wine-tasting (Silverstein 2003) or coffee-tasting (Kang 2015).

Joseph Park has observed a similar phenomenon in regards to the naturalization of English-language competency in South Korea. English language competency is a kind of skill that can categorically be distinguished into “natural” or “acquired,” a distinction that can have a major impact on one’s career prospects. As such, learning English is a fraught period of high-expense learning or early study abroad travel in which that parents seek a “natural” inflection for their children (Park 2010b)). The emergence of the phenomenon of a god of report or presentation also correlates with post-IMF trends in white-collar labor. In the “performance era” (*seong-gwajui sidae*) of 2000s South Korea, HR programs have begun to emphasize individual performance and linked it more closely to promotion and salary. One of the concerns about the performance era is that it has taken fixed and objective promotion standards, such as promotion exams, and made any kind of office behavior subject not only to a performance evaluation but in a quantitative fashion. Systems of formal, written evaluations such as in state exams have existed since the Joseon dynasty (cf. Park 2007), but in the performance era, there is a sense that *any* time can become a site for the evaluation of performance.

In the case of PowerPoint, the main product of office labor, team-based activities or computer-screen oriented work do not directly index individual work effort nor its results. In my own observations, a concern with radical individuation this was a not a direct concern for much of the year, but became particularly salient towards the end of the calendar year (known as “HR season” or *insacheol*) in which worker evaluations are decided. Presumably, evaluators, like team managers and executives are more aware of the indexical features that mark individual

contribution during this time. According to one newspaper article, employees were said to become more sensitive to the meaning of their documents. One of the ways to make one's mark known or recognized is to have bosses *see one's* contribution who *witness* work or signs of effort. One work advice book I read suggested ways of making work visible in conventional ways, para-textual to the production of things like reports: you might stay at work late *to be seen* doing extra work; you might choose to attend of end-of-year parties with co-workers; you might do subtler tricks as well, such as making an easy project seem harder than it is; you might try to get extra "face-time" by going to a boss's office to deliver a document by hand when email would suffice. The word in Korean for these moments of recognition translates to "eye-stamp" (*nundojang*), signaling a specific act of recognition, in the same way that a document is stamped (or signed) by a superior. These tactics are paratextual to actual text production, but reflect a peculiarity of the performance evaluation system: in the performance era, direct supervisors or team managers have been delegated as the ones who have to decide about performance evaluations.

In the context of the internal-text of a PowerPoint, there are some strategies for indexically linking one's performance to features. As a Korean self-help book notes for instance that for young office workers, it is important to have one's point embedded at the beginning of a slide, where bosses are more likely to be impacted by it. This is known as *dugwalsik* or "head-oriented style." In a head-oriented style, the main point or arguments of a document should come at the beginning of a document. In a "tail-oriented style," or *migwalsik*, the main argument comes at the end after a long narrative introduction. The book argues that it is best to adopt a head-oriented style, for two reasons: one, so that the busy reader, such as one's boss, can both see (visually) and get to (sequentially) the point quickly and easily; two, that it shows off one's

main contribution more readily. While this is advice for younger workers, it also reflects the ways that the experts of HR and Performance Management also structured their reports.

Some of this work to make one's own mark is aided by the use of previous PowerPoint documents saved in secret from work at previous companies or gained through good connections. Such templates can provide ideas for narrative structure, visualizations, or analytic methods. Team Manager Jang and another team manager who later replaced Team Manager Park both had experienced more than a decade worth of elite consultant and expert PowerPoints in their previous jobs and had become engrained to the aesthetic styles and narrative structures commonly used in corporate PowerPoints. Younger employees at Sangdo often drew on previous reports and styles shared on team-internal back-up drives. In the case of Limelight, a small marketing company (discussed in Prentice [2015]), one manager literally stored presentations from previous projects onto CDs and hard drives that he kept by his desk. Excellent PowerPoint skills for small companies could be demonstrated through indexical linking to elite PowerPoint styles like those of McKinsey, through translating foreign companies' PowerPoints into Korean, or directly citing reports from big companies.

In this light, "gods" and PowerPoint skills more generally come off as secondary kinds of reckonings in relation to other modes of identification within a company. Ironically, as neoliberal forces seemingly penetrate into calls for individuating action and competence even further within the workforce, the official modes of reckoning such linkages remain semiotically obscure, or at least interactionally vague. This is to say, that it hard to reconstruct individual effort and performance if the main medium of work is PowerPoint. This makes concepts such as "gods of presentation/PowerPoint" interesting in that it represents a concept linked to perceived institutional identities of natural performance, but one separated from actual institutional

mechanisms of evaluation. We can see it existing in a meta-relation to actual modes of evaluation that *underspecify* the causal links between work such as PowerPoint (and others) and the particular grades employees receive. What makes a good “god of presentation” is not just the linking between the aesthetics of a presentation and the aesthetics of an individual (in typical evaluation formats), but the particularly successful pragmatic effects that such skills seem to have in engendering good responses from bosses.

Conclusion: PowerPoint in/as the corporation

In this chapter, I have argued that PowerPoint software and PowerPoint presentations mediate different kinds of social relations and management processes inside Sangdo Group, from the team unit, organizational knowledge, organizational decision-making and the subjectivity of PowerPoint creators. Given its perhaps unique role in mediating across a range of processes, are corporations or is management nothing but the sum of its PowerPoint presentations, either by what they represent on paper or by where they circulate? Beginning with work by Michael Silverstein and Greg Urban (1996) as well as Debra Spitulnik Vidali (1996), “textual fragments” have had a special role in mediating large-scale social forms, like institutions, publics, or communities. Decontextualized textual objects like newspaper headlines, catchphrases, documents, or audiotapes have been shown to circulate and mediate relationships among putative strangers, who by virtue of some type of participation (reciting, reading, listening, re-writing, sharing or analyzing) become members. The process of entextualization (as a mode of decontextualizing some text) works together with processes of “recontextualization” to allow instances or fragments of the “same thing” to appear to occur in multiple sites. It is the decontextualized and objectified text that invokes “any” participant that has served as the basis for modern political

imaginaries (Habermas 1989, Warner 2002, Urban 1996, Cody 2009) as well as many other kinds of institutions.

In South Korea, in the 1980s, the notion of civic society or *minjung* (“people-centered”) that stood outside of the state and represented the people came into being precisely through a range of literary and artistic events from the construction of a *minjung* literature to reading groups, poetry clubs, and songs (Lee 2007). Similarly, Harkness has shown that Christian churches in Seoul, are communities mediated by an imagined sharing or partaking together in the “word of God” (Harkness 2010).

In the case of bureaucracies, administrative bodies, and modern offices, large-scale forms of sociality have been mediated not by generalized texts available to putative strangers to participate in but by documents that inscribe the details of what those strangers are putatively doing. Modern documents, as (Hull 2013) and others (e.g., Riles 2006) note, are a banal but ruthless technology for tracing and individuating action through a complex array of graphic techniques, around which bureaucratic-administrative institutions are built. In a very broad sense, it is documents that document their contextual and circulatory surround to create a decontextualized record of where and how they moved — giving shape to or performing a bureaucratic entity. That is, they create an iconic trace on paper of some referential content of the surround in which it passes (e.g., “time submitted,” “authorized signer”), and render that content into a visualized record of activity that appears to legitimize the authority of the institution through objectification and depersonalization.

At the outset, it seems that PowerPoint represent the apotheosis of a specifically corporate kind of sociality: a collectivizing, but non-individualizing modality, in which there are no contextual cues (“I at this time”) nor impersonal references (“Manager Hong Gil-dong at 11:35 AM”): PowerPoint appears as a timeless, unknown, unauthored, and uncited, not to mention globally circulating software and document much like our imagination of the Janus-faced nature of corporations themselves. (The

parallels are perhaps too tempting: PowerPoint files even *merge* with others). In other ways, though, PowerPoint does not resemble the kinds of organizational technologies we assume from large capitalist organizations: techniques that are calculating, rationalizing, and individuating. Managerial genres, as this dissertation has been arguing, are never quite as coterminous with organizational forms — they mediate and align with them in heterogeneous ways. As a software platform that creates hybrid text-visual texts that incorporate multiple genres, PowerPoint challenges our assumptions about the coterminous relationship between institutional knowledge practices, technologies, and genres. But then again, we should not expect all corporations to act in a corporate way (to twist a phrasing from Latour). PowerPoints exist in on a spectrum of managerial genres closer to something like meetings (Van Vree 1999, Schwartzman 1989). Meetings are widespread through government and business as a genre of collective social gathering vital to the maintenance of certain aspects of organizational life, such as demonstrating the demeanor of manager types or providing a venue for the simulation of collective participation. As a form, they are not necessarily performative of the organization but play other roles. “The meeting form,” Schwartzmann writes, “is crucial for organizations because it allows individuals to engage in a variety of expressive activities while they *appear* to be engaged in instrumental behavior” (Schwartzman 1987, 86).

For sure, PowerPoint operates in a different modality than meetings (though sometimes they serve as an occasion for calling meetings or their production becomes the topic of meetings). PowerPoint functions less around modulating individual tensions within the organization through the simulation of democratic decision-making. In this chapter, I’ve argued that PowerPoint mediates different forms of sociality: among team members, PowerPoint as a platform is a mode of individual (but not individualizing) collective activity around which reciprocal relations of tutelage and evaluation can emerge. Among teams as distinct units separate from their members, PowerPoint documents can

also serve as conventional narrative vessels for conveying field-relevant expertise. Outside of teams but within managerial hierarchies, PowerPoint files can become embedded in a genre of hierarchical reporting (encompassed metapragmatically in terms like *bogoseo* and physically in folders) which are a conventional interactional model for evaluating organizational knowledge. Between organizations, PowerPoints are objects of both routinization and ordering (where they can become subject to manipulation, plagiarism, or hoarding by those who leave companies). In South Korea more generally, PowerPoint stands for a narrative skill that is necessary to have acquired to demonstrate corporate literacy for desiring applicants, even when such icons of individual performance are not as frequent in actual corporate life.

While PowerPoint does not necessarily individuate workers in their contribution to work, they do become individuated at other times in office life. Many modes of individuation are not problematic — like ID cards, business cards, or bureaucratic tracings. But individuation becomes problematic at a very particular time: the distribution of money, bonuses and dividends. This becomes one of the complex challenges of HR workers and other team managers, who are tasked with individuating and dividing up employees by performance grade and determining their corresponding bonus. In the next chapter, I take up genres of monetary distribution. the problems to link work documents like PowerPoint with individual performance and monetary distribution, in the next chapter.

Chapter 5: Distributing Emoluments: The Relational Politics of Salaries, Bonuses, and Dividends

Distributing Corporate Largess

Gifts doled out on Worker's Day (*geullojaui nal*) are an annual rite and obligation for major Korean corporations and their large labor forces. Given out on or before the national holiday on May 1, Worker's Day gifts, more than other holiday hand-outs, come to instantiate a company's success in the prior year and hint at its fortunes going forward. The size of the gifts – be it a TV, a gift certificate, or a gift box – give off an indication of this success, with the larger the gift indicating a more profitable year. These gifts also point back to the largess (or lack thereof) of a chairman or CEO who symbolically stand as the principle gift-givers and arbiters. But to receive a gift puts one into a comparison with others over quality and quantity. For employees who receive gifts, the size or prestige of a gift can mark the relative prestige of their company as a lucrative place to work. For one day then, gifts become a radical, if ephemeral, site for social comparison across companies, a point of bragging or lamenting among co-workers or high school friends who have gone to work at different companies. Even inside the Sangdo Group, Worker's Day gifts were an object of intrigue the year I worked there. More than the objective differences like balance sheet figures, gifts granted a brief glimpse into the nuances of intra-group social comparison: Sangdo First employees received a simple gift certificate while

Sangdo South employees each received a new television or the equivalent in in-store credit. Those at Sangdo Holdings, myself included, received a smaller gift set. Worker's Day gifts are one of the few occasions in which all (regular) employees at a corporation receive the same gift, bringing employees into a shared identity via a common material form. United by a shared gift, it also brings them into comparison with those from other companies, even those within the same conglomerate.

This chapter deals with moments of distribution in corporate life and the way such moments construe relations, both in terms of materiality (a gift card, an appliance, a salary, a bonus, a dividend) and sociality (inclusions/exclusions, differentiations). In the contour of the broader dissertation, this chapter concerned with how hierarchy and authority are embedded into genres of participation and how political projects work through or around such genres. Other chapters have dealt with such modalities in written, technical or interactional encounters, investigating the roles and responsibilities that they entail within Sangdo or South Korean society more broadly. This chapter looks at modalities of *distribution*; that is, how participation is *accounted* for in acts like gift-giving, salary-disbursement, or dividend-distribution. With a suggestion from Stephen Gudeman's review of anthropological economics (Gudeman 1978), I consider distribution as a necessary (but often overlooked) component of system of production. My argument centers on the idea that moments of compensation in the form of monetary or material goods – seemingly the *raison d'être* of corporations and employees alike – are not naturally determined, based on precise calculations of labor spent or investments made. Salaries, bonuses, or dividends may be simple to calculate or be claimed as natural, but an ethnographic perspective reveals that their calculation and distribution are fraught with social tension.

Moments of individual reward draw correspondences between people and money (or people and things) in ways not normally encountered in everyday social life. Money indeed figures into everyday office life – handling expenses, buying lunches – but not in such a way as associating it with individual value across an entire community of employees or stockholders. Distribution is also problematic because the creation of such correspondences between people and money exposes those who determine such distributions to accusations of greed, favoritism, or incompetence. CEOs contemplate qualities of large gifts; Human Resources teams develop salary ranges and bonuses; CFOs announce dividends. Yet judgments about such decisions can also become comparable – to other companies, to better standards, to more generous leaders.

Focusing on distribution ethnographically highlights both the plurality of modes of distribution, claim holders, and events that mediate payments and people. In line with my discussion in Chapter One which was concerned with how political transitions in authority within Sangdo Holdings translated into areas of disciplinary expertise, my concern in this chapter again encounters such translations. How does one convert labor into reward or rewards? What kinds of ways or means are socially appropriate to convert labor? Where managerial expertise represents conventions within areas of control (like HR and finance) this chapter also looks at the kind of obligatory conventions that structure distribution. But instead of managers trying to manipulate documents or processes to demonstrate their expertise, in this chapter we encounter managers trying to manage, evade, or conceal efforts that reveal aspects of distribution. Resonant with the broader themes of this dissertation, this chapter shows how efforts to create a new political order where employees are rewarded for their individual labor are met with objections – most notably by employees themselves. Thus, rather than approaching this topic from the point of view of corporate hoarding vs. rightfully owed payments, I argue that distributionary practices

are socially risky because they generate interpersonal comparisons – who got what first, on what basis did they get it, how much relative to others, and who decided. Thus, a form of distribution is as much a technical and professional feat of calculation as it is a social genre that must be planned around and planned for. This chapter then engages with the ways that “emoluments” (here, anything that is considered a payment) actively threaten the relationships that they are presupposing to pay. Combined with a new effort to pay employees for individual effort, the distribution of emoluments is not a neutral act politically, but can cast new perspectives on the value of labor and the economic assumptions behind social relations.

Returning to the example of the Worker’s Day gifts of 2015, gifts meant to be signs of company success can become embroiled in cross-company politics. Inside Sangdo Group, for instance, where around a dozen companies gave out gifts to their respective employees, the gifts were a big deal. Gifts were a hallmark for regular employees at each subsidiary company yet what the gifts would be in any given year was kept a secret. Because gifts could vary in quality or quantity every year, they were the subject of rumors internally. Revealing the yearly gift was a moment when everyone in the group would become acutely aware of the relative success of their company vis-à-vis prior years as well as those of other companies. Within Sangdo Group, however, each subsidiary had a different managerial philosophy that manifested in their gift selection. Certain CEOs saw gifts as *motivational* while others saw them as a sign of *excess spending*. The release of gifts revealed a high degree of information, both presupposing (of company success) and entailing (of future value as a workplace), concretizing in material form suspicions about different workplaces while creating a new space to read the augurs of the future.

In this way, gifts became a site for intra-group politics to play out, especially between the two biggest subsidiaries, Sangdo First and Sangdo South. These were the two companies with

the largest employee bases and highest revenues in the group. Sangdo First had been the original “mother” company of the group, until it was split into a holding company and an operations company in 2001. Sangdo South, a company originally belonging to another conglomerate, was acquired in the mid-2000s, becoming a “Sangdo” company by merger.¹ Where Sangdo First had long been the symbolic anchor of the group, it had recently seen a downturn in annual revenues, at the same time as Sangdo South was seeing an uptick in its revenues. These diverging trajectories between companies – one going down and one going up – seemed to be materialized in the qualities of Worker’s Day gifts each company gave out. Each employee at Sangdo South – the outsider company – was set to receive a new HD television or something else redeemable for a value of 500,000 won (equivalent to \$500) at a major electronics chain. Sangdo First employees, on the other hand, were set to only receive a 100,000 won gift certificate (equivalent of \$100). This reflected the orientation of the CEOs of the respective companies: the Sangdo South CEO had come up through the company ranks and gave relatively larger bonuses as a mode of satisfying employees, motivating them, and perhaps implicitly staving off strong labor union protests. The CEO of Sangdo First on the other hand was a member of the owning family; he had married one of the founder’s daughters and had long served as an executive in the company. This aligned him with the owning family’s fiscally conservative philosophy which saw gifts as costly symbolic gestures. In other contexts, the philosophies of the two CEOs overlapped and diverged in many ways but the gifts created an iconic contrast between the two men, as much as it did between the employees.

¹ Interestingly, Sangdo South had been bought and sold a few times via merger and acquisition. Its original company had been started before Sangdo First’s, in the 1940s (thus making it “older” in historical time than the parent). Nevertheless, it was the historical foundation of Sangdo First in the 1950s that represented the “start” of Sangdo Group in internal and external marketing materials.

Outside of the CEOs and HR teams, Team Manager Jang at Sangdo Holdings was perhaps the only one who knew what the gifts would be that year. He was one of the few who regularly interacted with all the other HR managers across the group. He told me that the HR managers tried to keep the gifts under wraps because there was concern among them that Sangdo First's gift would seem inadequate compared to Sangdo South's. Given the tensions between the two companies over other comparative matters – working time, salary, and benefits – the contrast between the gifts could be taken as a sign within a wider field of changing claims to superiority within the group.² Hence, effort was made to keep the respective gifts secret until their official announcements to minimize the risk of employees reading too much into them. Worse, unions could use the information to make protests over equitable pay within the group.

What did members of Sangdo Holdings, the owner of the group's companies and top of the Sangdo Tower, receive? Each employee was given a gift box containing shampoo bottles, soap bars, and rolls of toothpaste. Given that Sangdo Holdings was the *manager* of operating companies and not a revenue-generating unit, it made sense for them to receive a gift relative to their earned revenues (which were largely nil). There was also little fanfare in handing the gift boxes out, to boot. Members of the General Affairs team distributed the large boxes to those who were still in the office before the holiday; owner-CEO Ahn had already left for a business trip. The boxes were a garish pink color – and not a few managers on the floor declined to take the gifts at all. Ki-ho, by virtue of his low position on the team was obligated to warmly receive it, while Team Manager Jang politely declined. I, in the market for symbolic objects, eagerly accepted. Not only cumbersome to carry, they were not particularly the kind of gift that a well-

² The two companies also were represented by separate unions, meaning that favorable payments from one could affect the other's contract negotiation.

suiting businessman would want to advertise as his gift on the subway back home. Ki-ho surmised afterwards that the gifts were likely a surplus from some other gift event that the General Affairs team was trying to unload. In some ways, Sangdo Holdings employees were lucky to even get a gift; for Sangdo IT, the IT arm of the group and in perennial revenue-trouble, its employees received no gift at all.

The case of gift-distribution shows how a simple gift in recognition of labor can take on higher order meanings beyond the material value of the gift itself. The value of a gift (even when there is a fixed cost to it, like a gift certificate) is compared against other gifts, shared at similar moments and the under the same conditions. These generate both interpersonal readings of value and characterological readings, like the qualities of a company itself or an individual CEO (thrifty, generous, etc.). They can be used to way to predict other events or activities – such as a sign of changing company politics or the state of a market. While gifts seem to project backwards and forwards, they nevertheless are *emergent* perspectives. The Worker’s Day gift, for instance, *prompts* comparisons to other companies in the Sangdo Group or in South Korea more widely (with Samsung being a particular favorite to which employees compared their relatively low salaries or bonuses). Different modalities of distribution generate different perspectives: salary and bonus payments – also distributed to individuals – create interpersonal judgments between people, rather than between companies. Dividends too cast shareholders (a category which can also include employees) as investors seeking a passive reward.

In this light, distribution highlights the way that corporations become disaggregate collective property or profit into individual rewards. Disaggregating wealth into individual values that are comparable – both qualitatively and quantitatively – generates different moments of social reckoning along competing axes of comparison. As I discussed above and will discuss

more throughout the chapter, these moments are accompanied by acts of managing, framing, or concealing interdiscursive readings: keeping secrets about gifts, omitting key parts of a process, or closing off meetings.

Hoarding Wealth

The intersection of wealth and concealment has often been framed theoretically through the notion of *hoarding*. David Graeber (1996) notes that hoarding occurs precisely at moments where capital or material goods have been converted back into visible mediums of exchange, such as profit in the form of money, that have unlimited exchange functions. The mere possession of surplus money prompts hiding, burial, or concealment of a cache because of the concomitant exposure to debt or return-gift claims. In this perspective, the corporation as an entity is a particularly effective vehicle for hoarding capital surplus that should be doled out to shareholders, tax authorities, or employees. Resistance to doing so is a way of keeping profit for itself. Even today many global corporations, like Apple or Google, are accused of hoarding instead of distributing profit rightfully back to shareholders in the form of dividends, to sovereign states in the form of taxes, or to employees in the form of monetary and non-monetary benefits. Indeed, from the macro-view of merchant history, hoarding in financial markets seems like a consistent feature, a constantly evolving dialectic playing out between hoarders of wealth, those with claims on such wealth, and sites/modes of concealment (see also Peebles 2008). In the US, hoards play out in off-shore tax havens, shell companies, and entity shields that protect corporations from legal claims. In South Korea, hoarding is also prominent as a moral discourse among large companies, but plays out in a different register: the most common are corporate

“slush funds” (*bijageum*) used by chairmen which have led to myriad political scandals and “circular shareholding” between subsidiary companies which was a method for hiding the amount of capital in a given conglomerate.³

Yet hoarding may not be the best way to understand the forms of emolument distribution that I am discussing here. In one sense, salaries, bonuses, and dividends, in the end, *do* get distributed and with a rather precise regularity in most offices around the world. Emoluments like these stem from the financial and moral obligations to reward, in different forms, those who have stakes in a business, whether based on an employment contract or financial claim. In another sense, though, hoarding often takes the point of view of individual actors with identifiable and quantifiable surpluses. In cases of distribution in large corporations or organizations where revenue and profit are highly detached from individual acts of labor and individual acts of investing, there is no natural connection between what is contributed and what is owed. All stakeholders have some economic claim, but what material or temporal form should that take? What is the rightful amount for a Human Resources staffer to be paid in salary compared to an annual bonus or educational benefits? Should a shareholder receive the same dividend every year or one varying by profits earned? Such concerns can escalate to large-scale political or institutional conflicts, such as those between management and unions or management and institutional shareholders, about what is properly owed or not. But in a basic sense, problems of distribution reflect a core anthropological dilemma: any kind of emolument derives meaning based on its position within a history and structure of other relations, not just in relation to a given input. These interrelationships can include token-type standards (such as an industry

³ Circular shareholding – discussed in Chapter One – hides the actual amount of capital owned (or not owned) within a given group. Because companies own parts of each other, it is hard to delineate who owns what. Other kinds of hidden transactions are noteworthy among conglomerates (known as *naebugeorae*) but do not align with the classical concept of hoarding.

average), token-token standards (what other employees get), historical standards (token today versus token last year), or proportional standards (the amount of token A in relation to token B). The point being that any concern around money or material distribution generates *some* axis of social comparison to serve as the ground for distribution. It is perhaps no surprise that such issues are contentious, even among regular salary-earning workers.

Like formal ceremonies, these ways of reckoning relations are rare and special events; they are not articulated in everyday office life, which is defined by other kinds of relations of participation (team position, rank, attendants at a meeting) not explicitly marked by money. Comparison comes into view at certain events, in certain modalities, and to certain actors; that is, distribution never just exists across time but becomes articulated at different moments, not unlike Christmas presents or Worker's Day gifts. In the case of monetary distribution, otherwise unarticulated office relations are turned into money relations. However, it is not merely the *articulation* of those relations that is problematic for social relations; the participant structures surrounding calculations, making announcements, or being responsible for reporting can also create emergent sites of hazard. Though events distributions are largely inevitable, they seem to ensnare recipients and distributors every year.

Corporations and white-collar labor provide a useful site for thinking about the old anthropological problem of distribution for a few reasons: first, white-collar labor, not just in South Korea, has an explicit (class) concern with accumulating money for both capital and self; that is, they are not a community being invaded by the money form, such as Paul Bohannan's account of money on Tiv exchange (Bohannan 1959). Second, even though they are imagined iconically as operating by a singular logic of profit or desire for wages, modern organizations have *many* kinds of distribution. Their preponderance merits consideration – what are all these

forms of distribution doing individually and collectively?⁴ Third, in contrast to ideas that profits are naturally calculated or available for reference (like a surplus of yams or cash hidden under a mattress), the mode of calculating profit and its attendant proportions of distribution are highly variable, subject to dispute, and an object of both technical and ethical concern. Profit, it must be stated is not merely out there to be distributed evenly among rightful claimants; it too is a particular modality with its own institutional conventions. In this light, money in South Korea is not just a new Weberian foil for “other” (non-Western) motivations for economic life and value; while the registers and histories of distribution may be unique to South Korea, the chapter illustrates a more general point germane to modern corporations. Corporations may indeed be efficient at capital accumulation and profit-making, but they are complex sites for reckoning how that capital is converted back to individuals. Given the ceremony and concealment involved in modern corporate distribution, the topic also brings attention to the way that calculations of wealth distribution are always political, and not purely economic, in nature (cf. Hendon 2000).

Why would distribution pose a *general* social problem? Acts of distribution are events which attempt to translate a political claim for an economic good into a discursive context of recognition. The discursive context might align to the significance of the political claim – think here of the ways that award shows operate, ordering the most prestigious award at the end – though each context can have its own structure or way of translating a political claim into a discursive modality. Thus, each modality of distribution affords differences in both the semiotic contrasts embedded in the discursive event as well as the participatory dynamics of the event

⁴ A regular Korean employee at a large corporation might expect any of the following forms:
Monetary: salary, bonus, food/transportation allocation, retirement pay, wedding/child-birth/holiday bonus
Physical: holiday gift-sets, awards or plaques, company tchotchkes, gold bars, gift certificates/points
Temporal: lunch time, vacation time, training/education time
Locational: use of company gym, restaurant, resorts, golf courses
Capital: company stock

itself. Worker's Day gifts, for instance, are an occasion for treating normally differentiated employees as the same – creating an axis of similarity with employees dispersed by space and rank. Performance bonuses attempt to translate performance grades (A, B, C etc.) into algorithms for just recognition – but not all attempts to do so create a successful correspondence.

At the outset, then, What is interesting about distribution is that while it presumes pre-existing distinctions or activities, it is precisely at such moments that the salience of such differences (or non-differences) emerges – like a cheap gold watch given at retirement. As social groups are drawn into relations between object relations, these moments can create interdiscursive mis-alignments with the ways social relations are reckoned in other encounters. These mis-alignments are not always the result of managers framing or concealing. In some cases, the potential for “missed recognition” in a discursive context is something extorted by outsiders. This point will become clear in the last section of this chapter in discussion of South Korean shareholder meetings where seemingly untouchable corporate executives and clean corporate images become susceptible to the risks of pesky shareholders. Like the nature of a shareholders meeting – a regularly occurring, legally mandated, and highly formalized and controlled meeting – it is events, and events surrounding events, that can provide a useful analytic to understand what seem like simple relations between economic goods and individual persons. Distribution is multiply “interindexical” in the sense that it creates indexical-iconic readings of and to others via correspondences in monetary quantities or material qualities.⁵

Implicit in this description has been a case that these events are also sites of hazard accompanied by explicit and implicit activities of managing, framing, or concealing. As a

⁵ This is not to suggest I am uninterested in actual withholding or non-payment of owed wages or retirement payments, common issues with irregular (*bijeong-gyujik*), sub-contract (*hacheongeobchae*) or dispatch (*pagyeon*) labor in South Korea.

metaphor, a term like “hoarding” prioritizes only a distinction between visibility and non-visibility; but in semiotic or interactional senses, there are a number of ways that interactions, information, and contexts, can be manipulated. For instance, I can carefully manage an event to minimize disruption. I can frame an issue to give it more authority and minimize assumptions of bias. I can hide information from *this* person or *these* people by anonymizing certain dimensions. The textual affordances of documents, Excel sheets, or meetings allow for parties to be assembled, responsibility to be diffused, or information to be anonymized. While participants may ideologically focus on key correspondences (between money and persons), event structures generate their own complex kinds of structures – such as Goffman outlined (Goffman 1974). It is these participant structures that prompt careful attention to how information and the correspondences it generates are managed, framed, or concealed.

The Structures of Distribution

Schemes of correspondences (relations between things and people), as well as event structures generated by them, can be complex. Let’s look at an example of annual employee reviews in Korea, one of the key techniques by which promotions are determined and bonuses calculated. Generally speaking, annual performance reviews are based on a relation between a relation: they render fields of expertise (finance, strategy, HR, etc.) and ranks (staff, assistant manager, team manager, etc.) into a common system of grades (S, A, B, C, D) that correspond to the quality of work over a previous year. The letter-grades that evaluate individual performance on a year-by-year basis determine promotions, fitness for a position, and most recently monetary rewards. The direct linking of performance reviews with monetary rewards has been one of the

most salient changes in salary distribution in the “performance era” South Korea post 2000. It emphasizes the link between individual effort as the basis of corporate success and individual remuneration – in place of collective remuneration. Yet a number of other peculiarities have emerged across cases from different companies that reveal the ways that the interindexical readings between employees themselves create interactional entanglements. For instance, I heard the following anecdote from a few informants: in the early years of performance reviews, in order to conduct evaluations, the burden of evaluation would fall on team managers who had the most direct access to the behavior of their employees. This created a moral hazard in which older male managers – those whose inherited status the performance ideology was meant to attack – were now in charge of evaluating their own team members. To avoid upending other team relations, team managers often re-instantiated the hierarchy system and distributed grades by rank (not performance) out of fear of causing team turmoil. If individual team managers became situationally responsible for doling out awards, HR managers too became responsible for deciding how to properly align money values with performance grades. Whereas a team manager might want to *avoid* creating turmoil, HR managers must carefully *frame* announcements for the same purposes. The case of letter-grades and how their proportional qualities get translated into money, bonuses, or other benefits, reveals how relations between relations are more complex than just the translation of people onto monetary or other quantitative value.

In what follows then, I focus on how acts of distributing emoluments generate different kinds of social relations, both in the ways they are directly enfigured in certain schemes as well as the unintended participant structures they generate. I follow managers then as they attempt to align or re-align the distribution of bonuses with existing ideas about hierarchy. Because certain

forms of distribution are inevitable, it is not surprising some are subject to different kinds of informational management, from controlling *what* people know, to controlling *that* people know.

It is a peculiarity that the process by which the corporation is putatively meant to exist (generating money) is one of the most secretive and delicate aspects of corporate life. But perhaps it is not a surprise anthropologically: moments of reckoning relations through money indeed always complicate existing relations, but they also beget more complex genres – like elaborate ceremoniality itself – that attempt to frame material transfers as symbolic ones. To those ends, the chapter moves through three kinds of distribution and three modes of what we might generally label “concealment.” I first address the salary system and modes of technical concealment. I then move onto annual bonuses and the ways that information about proportional distribution is properly managed and framed. And finally, I look at the distribution of dividends and how events of disclosure are carefully managed interactionally. Shareholders meetings provide a useful example of how moments of disclosure can be exploited by outsiders for financial gain. Across these three cases, the chapter moves from emoluments that seem the most regular but most concealed (salaries), to those which are most irregular yet most public (dividends).

Salaries: Technical Concealment and Generic Recognition

To speak of salaries in the context of East Asian corporations is to evoke the image of the “salaryman,” the classic archetype of a national Japanese subject linked metonymically to his regular and standard form of payment (Vogel 1975). To be a salaryman in Japan (or at least in its

academic representations) was once both highly normative of mainstream male subjectivity as well as iconic of Japan's modern turn to capitalist, office-based, managerial work anchored by men (Roberson and Suzuki 2003). Interestingly while the word "salaryman" and the culture of salaried men carried over into South Korea, it has never had the same resonance in Korean Studies as a descriptor of generic national male subjectivity. This is in part due to the fact that Korea never had the same lifelong labor promise as Japan. It also reflects the fact Korean office workers are referred to collectively as *hoesawon* ("company employees"), reflecting an institutional, and not a professional affiliation. More likely, men refer to themselves as metonymic to their companies, like "Samsung man" or "LG man," signaling that *which* company one works for is a more significant indicator of prestige than being a generic class of worker. The more salient discourse in Korea revolves around an implicit value hierarchy of prestigious companies that are more competitive in their recruiting. Such companies also are stratified by the kinds of emoluments they dole out to employees as quantifiable indicators of success.

For all the discussion of the higher order meanings of salary to national imaginaries of economic success in Korea or Japan, we might ask a more basic question: how do salarymen (and women) get paid? That is, rather than assume that salaries are automatically transmitted, in what ways are salaries known, visible, concealed or otherwise mediating of relationships? It is with some irony that fixed salaries, the most basic form of compensation in the modern workplace and a symbolic contrast with hourly-wages, are often the most invisible forms of distribution. And there are three senses which we can think about them as "invisible:" in a technical sense, salaries are disbursed unannounced and unseen through electronic deposit systems linking corporate bank accounts with personal ones. In a calculated sense, salaries are delinked from hourly wages and represent a generic form of labor recognition that is not tied to

individual work units. In a social sense, the salaries of others are officially hidden to any given employee and only circulated in gossip or in personal discussion outside of work.

The English word salary – even as it is imported into the loan “*salaryman*” in both Korean and Japanese – needs unpacking as it can apply to different ways of handling compensation. The words *imgeum* or *bosu* are broad enough to account for the notion of wages or payment across various forms of work. However, it is more common to describe one’s earnings in conversation in South Korea as *wolgeup* (lit: “monthly disbursement”) – a mode to refer to and compare salaries between employees and across companies. *Wolgeup* is also the basis on which end-of-year bonuses are calculated: a 100% bonus calculation would mean an extra month of bonus payment at the end of the year. *Wolgeup* is a common way of referring to salaries within the *hobong* system – or traditional salary system that 75% of Korean organizations are said to still use (discussed more below). Monthly payments are usually standard amounts within designated pay ranges that are fixed by rank, but variable by company. In contrast to *wolgeup* is an annual salary known as *yeonbong*, a relatively rarer model for deciding annual compensation. Companies that use *yeonbong* follow an explicitly American model of individually negotiated and defined salaries that are subject to change each year. In conjunction with these two forms of salary, there are two parallel forms of “bonus”:
sangyeogeum (lit: “bonus pay”) an expected bonus given out in fixed amounts by rank with an amount determined by the Chairman or CEO every year. Another form known as *seong-gwageup* (lit. “performance disbursement”), correlates to an American-style form of bonus based on individual or unit performance grades (A, B, C, etc.). There are strong ideological differences between the “monthly payment” (*wolgeup/sang-yeogeum*) format which is associated with the

Korean *hobongje* system and the “annual salary” (*yeonbong/seong-gwageup*) systems which is closely associated with Western companies or flexible labor policies.

In practice however, any company will incorporate a number of these modes of wage and bonus payment, such as a mix of fixed bonus and performance bonus or variations within fixed monthly payment grades, as part of an entire set of payments or benefits to employees. Wages and bonuses may be iconic of pay for employees, but not for those who work in Human Resources. Among these staff, it is more common to look at these as components that culminate in a total set of costs to a company, known as *ingeonbi*, or “total personnel cost.” *Ingeonbi* is inclusive of a range of costs that include wages, bonuses, various forms of insurance, food and transportation subsidies, retirement pay, education/training, and other material benefits. From an HR perspective, for instance, personnel costs do not always correlate with the traditional/flexible divide marked by the iconic distinctions of the payments themselves. The traditional (*hobongje*) system represents a lower administrative cost and greater long-term stability compared to an individual-salary system which is highly variable year-to-year and requires time to negotiate individually. This perspective on salaries is unique to HR; employees rarely encounter nor interpret their benefits package as part of their entire *ingeonbi*. They are more likely to be attuned to the individualizing and comparativizing forms of payment: salary and bonus (and that which others receive).

It is individual payment and bonus methods that are enmeshed in hidden transactions of a complex technical makeup. At Sangdo Holdings, my own monthly salary as an intern was handled through a third-party electronic payment service, not through the central intranet which stored other email and personnel information. I had to log on each month to see a receipt of my salary, taxes, healthcare and other small benefits to find out the exact amount disbursed.

Notifications for these only came about when the bank informed me via a cell phone alert. Otherwise the corporate payment went off, directly transmitted to my bank account, at the issuance by a member of the HR staff once per month. For me as an employee, other people's salaries were invisible technically; in my other role as an HR worker, they were invisible in hidden files: during my entire time at Sangdo, the majority of which was spent in the Human Resources department, I never once saw even a *figure* of a salary attached to any given name. Among all the records that I was allowed to peruse in the HR department's digital server, I never encountered spreadsheets or figures of salaries of any employee (with the exception of executives, whose base salaries were reported on public financial statements). Detailed personnel records had extensive family records, educational histories, and performance evaluations, but had no information about salary or average or accumulated wages. I never bothered to ask about anyone's individual salaries as a matter of research either.⁶

While various technical artifices and social taboos prevent employees from knowing publicly about individual salaries, this does not mean that salaries are *completely* unknown. And here it is worth distinguishing between *possible* salaries for a given *type* versus a *specific* salary for a *specific* person. Any individual salary is grouped within a range called a payband (*peibaendeu*) that is specified for each rank. A payband specifies a minimum and maximum possible salary for any given rank. Both *hobongje* and newer, modified programs use some degree of payband. The older system of tenure-based pay known as *hobong* affixed different grades within each payband based on tenure. Within a given rank, such as the second-lowest

⁶ There is another dimension to the "invisibility" of salaries that I do not address here, but merits mention. Salaries are often not the sole possession of individual employees. Stories abound of employees who give their first paycheck to their parents as a symbolic return-gift for their years of investment in education. Married male managers also told me that they often forwarded their entire monthly paychecks to their wives who allowed them a small personal allowance of a few hundred dollars per month.

daeri, a person who had been in that position for one year would make incrementally less than a second- or third-year *daeri*. A fourth-year *daeri* would make some increment lower than the rank immediately above, called *gwajang*. In this sense, the *hobong* system translated incremental differences in social status into recognized (and equally distributed) steps in the pay scale. Salary distinctions then closely articulate with tenure. In this way, one could surmise what another employee made – or at least their relative value – without having proof of their actual salary. (Akin to knowing that someone is relatively older or younger, without knowing their specific age.)

In the post-2000s “performance”-era, salaries and bonuses were targets of reform across the corporate world. While this has generally been understood as a shift to “flexibilization,” there is a more concrete way of understanding it with regards to salary and bonus: based on performance, salaries became dis-articulated from rank, as they no longer directly indexed tenure and variable bonuses based on performance and became more substantial than fixed shared bonuses. Based on annual performance grades, salaries could go up or down within a single payband, with a second-year *daeri* possibly earning more than a fourth-year *daeri*. Furthermore, paybands were now not mutually exclusive – the highest *daeri* salary could also be higher than the lowest *gwajang* salary, the rank immediately above it. Team Manager Jang described this phenomenon in the following diagram which I reproduce in Figure 5.1 below.

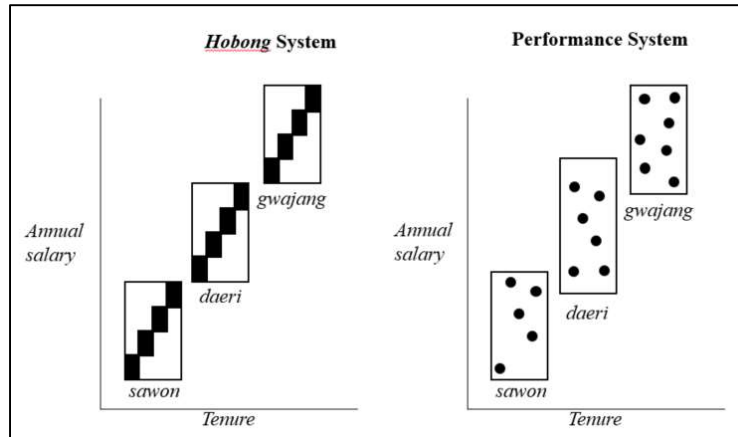


Figure 5.1: Two types of payband structure

This is a comparison of older *hobong* system (L) which articulated salary with tenure, demarcated by years of employment, and the performance system (R) in which any individual's salary is unknown and variable within a given rank. This was articulated by Team Manager Jang on a white board that I have recreated here.

The holding company and the subsidiary could be contrasted precisely along these lines. The former had adopted a version of the performance system, in which salaries were more strictly tied to performance and less tied to rank (the diagram on the right). Thus, even as salary is guaranteed within a payband, any one individual may rise or fall depending on their annual performance year-to-year. (Individual companies of course vary with the minimums and maximums, the formulae for how performance is calculated, and how much or whether anyone can “drop” year to year.) However, the subsidiaries at Sangdo, which had a variety of other performance related measures, were still operating based on a *hobong* salary model. In Team Manager Jang's words, subsidiaries were not ready for such a radical change to a core element of their compensation – though they might eventually. This opinion reflects a view that the subsidiaries were still seen as “behind” in their development of better HR programs compared to the more “advanced” holding company. In reality, the subsidiaries' continued reliance on the *hobong* salary system reflected less their backwards policies, and more that the politics of their HR policies were more complicated – notably by their multi-thousand-strong and long-tenured workforce who were represented by unions.



Figure 5.2: Wage policies making headlines
 From the front page of the *Chung-ang Ilbo*, one of the country’s four major newspapers describing the decision by Hyundai Motors to get rid of the *hobong* system in favor of a performance-based salary system for manufacturing workers. Headline from January 17, 2015

The headline above from the 2015 front page of the newspaper *Chung-ang Ilbo* reflects that changes over salary systems at conglomerates were no small matter in the national news. While many companies had adopted salary or performance based compensation methods, fixed salary system of *hobong*, especially at the traditional companies, like auto manufacturers, represents one of the final symbolic hold-outs for the old system against flexibilizing trends in payments. This is not to say that all companies were inevitably moving towards the salary system – or even a single version of it. Many cases of companies abandoning the performance or annual salary system and going back to *hobong* system are common – e.g., as we saw in the example KT Korea Telecom “reverting” back to the differentiated title system discussed in Chapter Three. It is no coincidence that those two forms – rank titles and *hobong* salaries – are semiotically aligned to appear as the “same” resistance to modern HR changes.

I want to point to why these two systems seem to have such a strong effect on office relations beyond the assumption that they represent the ever-increasing flexibilization of the workforce. Salaries seem to cause a panic not because they go from stable to flexible, or switch from modes of collective distribution to variable individual ones. Rather I would argue that fixed salaries under the *hobong* system provided a stable interpretation of what individuals are worth

in a way that articulates with other ordinal ranking modalities in company life, even if one does not know *exactly* what others are making. The ratio between salaries of given individuals can be proportionally understood to exist, without the presence of specific figures. This provides a way to read people in terms of general distribution. In the performance system, because salaries *might* not articulate, with some low ranks possibly earning more than higher ranks, there is a generalized confusion about what people *might* be worth because salaries, as general anchors of relative value between individuals, have become unmoored from rank.⁷

In this light, the high degree of concealability surrounding *individual* salaries in general might make more sense. Numbers attached to individuals are worth knowing but not necessarily worth sharing or revealing. Titles and ranks inform a general hierarchical ordering, but salaries pinpoint precise quantitative values. Even when articulating with other rankings, encountering others as values on an everyday basis would be to encounter them as financial values rather than as social superiors or juniors. Salaries articulate with other hierarchies that ground office relations. In the performance or annual salary system, then, it is not that the salaries are flexible which is problematic but that they *might not* articulate with the other forms of ranking, the kind of tropic layering of hierarchical images which appears to stabilize South Korean corporate culture. Thus the general anxiety about a junior making more salary than a boss but receiving orders from him.

This section has attempted to explain why salaries are concealed as technical process and as leakable information. Indeed, salaries are artifacts of technological development (a frequent process improving over time), but they are also a monthly *risk* – for reading (or reminding)

⁷ In the terms of Graham Jones' theorization of "secrecy" (Jones 2014), we might think of this as a kind of "intermedial mis-alignment" in that the two mediating systems (salary and rank) do not semiotically align, and in fact seem to contradict each other. When they do align, even in secret, they are not as problematic.

individual value between people – posing a risk of rendering all relationships as financial ones. In this sense, through general techniques like paybands, salaries can be made “generically” visible while individually invisible, akin to a type of technical avoidance register.⁸ One of the reasons that *hobongje*, the traditional salary system, worked was not through guaranteeing a base salary for all employees (in fact it was highly staggered and rigid) but that it provided a concealed way of articulating with other ranking forms in the company. The new salary system – one marked not so much by a radical shift to American style individual salaries but one in which concealment did not reveal as much – was both more appealing to a younger generation of office workers (such as those at Sangdo Holdings) and threatening to those at more conservative companies (such as Sangdo subsidiaries), precisely because it indirectly and invisibly challenged foundational hierarchical norms around status ranking without their radical revelation.

Performance Bonuses: The Ethics of Proportional Distribution

One afternoon in the fall of 2014, three members of the Human Resources planning team, Team Manager Jang, Assistant Manager Min-sup, and Assistant Manager Ji-soon along with me gathered to discuss the next year’s base wage increases and bonuses for the fifty or so Sangdo Holdings employees. Until that year, it had been standard to increase wages and bonuses incrementally, but always in proportion to rank and seniority. As a conservative company in a conservative industry (steel), Sangdo had followed a more traditional approach to bonus

⁸ Note some parallels with Chapter 2 in which companies received satisfaction survey information about their company. While they were shown all the other company’s aggregate results, other companies’ scores were anonymized to say Company A, Company B, etc.

distribution: proportional in amount by rank, and not purely by performance grade (A, B, C), even though performance grades were used for other functions (like promotions and general skill improvement).⁹ That year, however, one of the Sangdo executives had asked the HR managers to develop a new method of bonus distribution based on individual performance grades as a way to motivate employees. The directive was clear but underdefined: the three managers had to figure out how to articulate what such a system would look like and how it would fit within their existing schemes. This meeting was the first attempt to brainstorm what such a system should look like.

About half-way through the two-hour meeting, Team Manager Jang abruptly took a vote from the two younger managers. He posed the question: “Should we earn more than our subsidiaries or should we earn less than our subsidiaries [compared to their rank-based system]. Be honest.” The two junior managers uttered one after the other: “Yes, I think we should receive more.” It turns out this figurative act of formal voting was a joke. The HR managers were in fact deciding their own financial futures as well as that of their co-workers. Even though they were developing the bonus system for the Sangdo Holdings employees (and not the group at large) based on a specifically mandated performance ideology, comparisons to other subsidiaries came sharply into view. As they brainstormed ideas, they were not only evaluating the technical possibilities for a rational distribution that would meet the executive’s wishes; they were working out the ethics of how different numerical formulations would re-color relations between themselves, their co-workers, and conglomerate others.

⁹ That is, while all employees received annual grades, a senior manager who receives a lower grade (e.g., a B) should not receive less *in total* in bonus pay than a junior employee who receives a higher grade (e.g., an A); rather such numbers would be in relation to others at their salary or rank level.

In this section, I focus on the phenomenon of annual performance pay (*seong-gwageup*), a key marker of the “performance era.” In one sense, performance pay is an icon of the new period of the flexibilization of the workforce and its new relationship to variable, not stable, labor. Precisely because it is a variable form of pay, associated with both a company’s annual performance and an individual’s (metricized) work performance, it has commanded a greater role in corporate employees’ basic salary composition in the performance era, replacing more fixed bonuses. (Performances or merit bonuses did exist in the 1990s, but they were smaller in relation to fixed or shared bonuses.) While performance pay could be seen as a sign of weakening unions, flexible labor, and individualized benefits, it was not problematic for workers at Sangdo Holdings. Employees I encountered had all begun their careers in the post-2000s era and were fairly naturalized to performance evaluations and performance pay. Most saw individual performance as a just recognition for what was otherwise a senior-dominated and unfair system of distribution from the *hobong* days, in which the oldest (and seemingly least productive) earned the most. On an internal satisfaction survey, for example, employees responded positively to having a team-based environment and having open relations with their co-workers. They also overwhelmingly indicated that they wanted individual recognition of their individual efforts in the form of bonuses or performance pay.

In my broader interactions with the HR managers at Sangdo, I found they agreed in theory with the idea of performance pay as both reward and motivation; they were employees after all too. They had no Taylorist illusions, however, that calculating performance pay across different professional categories was possible nor even desirable; it was at best an estimating science. Bringing into categorical equivalence the performance of an employee in an accounting department with an employee from a strategy department was bound to be imperfect. Realizing a

system such as this was a technical matter, but one that could be solved, even with problems. The concern of HR managers was not necessarily a technical one based on costs but an ethical one based on proportionality. They were concerned with to whom and in what proportion bonuses should be given out. They were also concerned with announcing the matter in a politically acceptable way, a way that led employees to accept the new terms without harming their own reputation or the dynamics of other teams.

In what follows, I provide examples of these two considerations from two events. The first took place in a planning meeting in October of 2014, mentioned above; the second was a company-wide meeting in March of 2015 when the new performance pay measures were announced by the HR team to company employees. In between these two events were a series of meetings and discussions about the new policy among Executive Cho, the owner-CEO Ahn, and the Chairman – all meetings I was not privy to as a logistical and hierarchical matter.

Analytically I'm not interested in tracing the production or circulation of the policy across documents (see Chapters Two and Four for other examples of that) nor to reveal sensitive information about the actual bonuses distributed. Rather it is to understand how moments of reckoning value in proportional terms generated different modes of interactional or informational concealment.¹⁰ In this case, one event was largely aiming to *anticipate* employee conflicts and the other event was largely aiming to *frame* the new policy to minimize potential conflicts.

In regards to the former, the three HR managers, Team Manager Jang, Assistant Manager Min-sup, and Assistant Manager Ji-soon gathered to discuss the new method of providing individual performance-based bonuses in the fall of 2014. What I draw attention to, based on my

¹⁰ This distinction I borrow from Goffman's notion in *Stigma* in which he discusses how individuals hide their social stigma engage in two kinds of management, by not revealing it (informational) and, when that is not possible, by controlling it as an object of discussion (interactional) (Goffman 1986).

notes from the meeting, is how discussions of different bonus modes generated highly value-charged judgments of social value, worthiness, and political impact on office relations more broadly.

I turn first to how the managers discussed the distribution of bonus pay between their own co-workers at the planning meeting. That is, which class of worker was even deserving of being graded on a performance scale and which class of worker should receive a fixed bonus. The emergent typology in the meeting divided value-creators, such as the strategy, investment, and HR employees, from those who didn't create value, such as the secretarial workers, temporary workers, and the executives' drivers. The HR managers affirmed to each other that even as diverse as their jobs were, value-creators would merit grades that could be used for dividing up a performance bonus, while the latter category would be given equal (and lower) sums or "thank-you" money. Implicit in this was a recognition that performance pay was both a recognition of past work and motivation for future work – something that the secretarial and staff workers were not seen to need.

However, when the HR workers began to compare the relative capacities of different expert managers, ethical distinctions emerged. In their discussions, the HR managers used stereotypical figures of existing workers to mark categorical differences. One figure was a diligent manager in the financial accounting department. He was projected as an embodied type of worker whose work was not seen by others but was important to the company's success. This figure had no direct output in terms of revenue but required a high level of expertise to carry out his work. The HR managers thought this figure was deserving of a higher performance bonus. Opposing this, was the figure of the investment manager, who wanted direct compensation as a percentage of assets managed by him or his team. The HR managers discussed this figure as one

who was primarily interested in money. Worse, he was projected as one who was taking little risk of his own and seeking credit for it – that is, the money invested by his team was not actually their own but the company’s. Any money an investment manager made was purely based on luck or other people’s efforts. Thus, these two manager figures mediated the abstract monetary gaps between performance grades. Confronted with a system that rewarded certain employees and punished others, the HR managers drew on stereotypical figures of those who they saw as deserving a bonus and those who did not, even within the category of full time, regular managers. Note here how the category of worker we might assume has clear performance indicators in the form of money – the investment manager, like a salesman – is precisely the one seen as exceptional and greedy compared to other employees who have little objective output.¹¹

Creating a new system of performance pay metrics would redefine relations not only among employees, but among the headquarters and subsidiaries as well. What if people in the headquarters made more, as Team Manager Jang had questioned earlier? As their discussion moved along, they compared the holding company to the Sangdo subsidiaries. As they began to talk about the subsidiaries, the myriad distinctions between their own employees – staff and experts, humble managers and greedy managers – became consolidated and homogenized along an axis of comparison between companies. One problem they confronted was that Sangdo Holdings as a holding company did not actually have any business – they merely managed other businesses. From the point of view of work and value it is easy to compare employees; but from the point of view of revenues, it is not. How do you properly compensate people that don’t make any money? The HR managers voiced other subsidiary managers teasing the headquarters about

¹¹ For broader discussion of emerging distinctions around “deservedness” in South Korea in regards to social welfare, see Song (2009).

this fact. Such projections anticipated potential objections in the future. In this way, the distribution of money would create a distinction about who the “real” breadwinners were and what an appropriate reward for holding company employees would be.

One of the ways they framed this problem was by imagining other ways that the employees were distinguishable. The managers acknowledged that the employees of Sangdo Holdings who were superior in talent and worked harder than the subsidiaries should be reflected in the average performance pay. Team Manager Jang raised the fact that Holdings members work 1.5 times more productively than those in the subsidiaries, even though they did not produce any revenue. In some cases, this reflected the scope of what they did: handling M&A deals, working on international legal disputes, or analyzing long-term trends. In another sense, they imagined that *any job* at the holding company should be more efficient and effective because of its position at the top of the group and given their elite backgrounds. The HR managers joked that they should be better even at taking out the trash compared to the subsidiaries.

In addition to stereotypes of the imagined quality of the work itself, the managers also compared the subsidiaries relative to their structural prestige. Sangdo Holdings legally owned most of the subsidiaries, and were supposed to act as the de facto leader of the group. They discussed the possibility that if subsidiary employees found out that those in the headquarters earned the same or less than they, then the social prestige of the holding company as a both a group leader and desirable workplace would be compromised. In this sense, regardless of work output, as a matter of maintaining social position within a hierarchically arrayed organization, HR managers argued that compensation should be differentiated so as to maintain the superior

position of Sangdo Holdings. Working at Sangdo Holdings should be seen as more attractive as a workplace and more progressive as an HR leader in setting individual bonuses.

If the stereotypic figures of employees earlier helped the managers assess relative degrees between the As, Bs, and Cs of employees, comparison to subsidiaries revealed that there should be some type of qualitative if not a quantitative difference between them. Projecting out potential conflicts in the form of reported speech, they ultimately acknowledged deference to the subsidiaries, who could justify their own bonus earnings quantitatively. Thus, by the end of the meeting, the HR managers agreed to peg their own bonuses at a rate similar to the average amount given across the subsidiaries. But, they would adopt a more progressive plan about how to *distribute* the money – that is along individual performance and not rank. This, they saw, projected themselves as more progressive relative to the traditional subsidiaries, even if individually they might make less as a collective.

At the end of the brainstorming meeting, the HR managers joked that they would need to hire someone named No Heung-cheol to help announce these decisions to the other employees. I had to look up Mr. No online – it turned out he was a famous comedian on TV. They were already anticipating the possible blowback from employees of even *announcing* the bonus system. Employees might not be privy to the complex organizational politics involved in developing a performance pay system. Based on the meeting that took place six months later, the HR managers probably would have welcomed any comic relief between themselves and the employees whose bonuses they were announcing.

The second event is the moment when this system was announced in March the next year. At the meeting, which Assistant Manager Min-sup told me later was supposed to be an informative (*allyeojuneun*) and not a persuading (*seoldeuk-haneun*) meeting, tensions were

unusually combative between the HR team and the rest of the managers. The meeting began in the large conference room on the thirty-ninth floor normally reserved for executive meetings. The three managers who attended the planning meeting were seated at the front, along with the junior member Ki-ho, who was seated alongside for proxemic support. Assistant Manager Min-sup began the meeting with a PowerPoint projection, one that contained only two slides. The first slide announced the change that instead of a shared bonus for everyone in the company (*gongtong seong-gwageup*) solely, team and individual based bonuses would now comprise half of their bonuses. That is, their total bonuses would be based on three kinds of evaluation: one decided by the chairman that applied to everyone equally, another based on ranked grades of teams, and another based on ranked grades of individuals. Min-sup then went on to the next slide which demonstrated how these changes would affect individual bonuses: using an example of Employee “Kim” who got an S grade (the highest) and Employee “Lee” who got a B grade. In the old system, the bonuses, based on a percentage of a single month’s salary, were the same rate for every employee, such as 150% (1.5 times their monthly salary). Both Kim and Lee would receive 150% of their respective one month base salaries. In the new system, Kim’s would be 300% based on his team and individual grade, while Lee’s would stay at 150%. The point of the demonstration was to show that no employee was ostensibly “losing” money, but those whose teams or selves performed better would be relatively more compensated than the average. (Note here how his explanation using an imagined comparison between two made-up types is a way of specifying *possible* salaries without revealing real ones.)

In this highly formalized and succinct way, the HR team was attempting to present the information in a way that appeared to be decided by the chairman and owning family (known as a group as *hoejangdan*) and not by their own artifice. The chairman and other owners were the

ones who had decided on the development of the system and would decide the yearly amount to be given out, even though the HR managers ultimately created the formulation itself. Each year the chairman could decide what the shared bonus would be, whether it was a simple 100% bonus of a month's wages, or 200%. Despite, or perhaps because of, attempts to present the content in a reduced format, the employees in attendance started to question the HR team. In the meeting, Team Manager Jang took over from Min-sup and fielded questions from junior employees and team managers alike. One of the major concerns, coming from an older male manager, was the "gap" (*gyeok-cha*) between grades: "why was the gap so wide between the S, A, B, C, and D scores?" One whole team even began to argue with the system itself – suggesting that the HR team had not gotten enough feedback from the employees about this system before making it. The strategy team members also chimed in saying that the timing of performance grades and performance bonuses would not align in time with the fixed bonus. By the time the meeting ended, about an hour after it started, the team manager of one team was still complaining to Team Manager Jang about the division of grades, as the other employees filed out. The manager was suggesting the gaps between grades (like S and C) would potentially cause disruption among the members.

Team Manager Jang and the other HR managers were not happy with how the meeting went. In particular they were unhappy because the other employees – their co-workers – forced them to defend a system that the chairman had already approved. The other employees were not privy to the complicated mathematics and political calculations about subsidiary bonuses that went into their methodology. (Those were reserved for another set of PowerPoint slides that articulated how averages would be calculated so that Sangdo Holdings would always make the average of the subsidiaries.) The employees, in other words, were mostly focused on the

interpersonal differences related to the gaps between employees and the maximum and minimum they could earn. Even as the HR managers tried to *manage* the meeting and the release of the information – a system that in theory would not negatively affect any employee – they nevertheless had to disclose more information about the decision-making process. In defending the work interactionally (not just through PowerPoint), Team Manager Jang repeatedly emphasized that these were the decisions of the *hoejangdan* and that the system was benchmarked to the way other companies calculated their bonuses. He also repeatedly cast himself as an employee and not a manager, referring to himself as one of the affected employees. In this way, he attempted to frame the issue not as one of his own expert team, but one grounded in other authorities – both one of personal authority (from the chairman) and benchmarked authority (from other companies).

Like salaries, bonuses too are a matter of individual monetary distribution. In this case, individual values were also concealed but generically known via formulae. Employees would now know that a few among them (the S grades) would be making much more than others, creating a new axis of comparison based on deservedness of performance. In contrast, however, the necessity to announce the bonus terms within the company created a crisis not only between employees, but for the HR managers who had to manage and frame their own role as the expert authorities. They did so by concealing not the numbers, but their own roles. But in this case, an issue of *information* management became transposed onto an issue of *interactional* management – as Team Manager Jang had to navigate the questioning voices of his co-workers.

The HR meeting in front of employees presented a case of otherwise friendly co-workers becoming aware of their relative values via performance metrics. Many of the complaints were about the potential negative effects that such a program would have – on individual recognition,

on team dynamics, or even on basic logistics. At the end of the day, such a meeting was a chance for employees to voice their complaints with little impact on effecting the system overall – yet the risk to ongoing social relations was apparent. For the HR managers, the goal was to introduce a new system with an intended effect of increasing individual motivation, while also implicitly minimizing employee hostility or unnecessary competition between employees. In the third and final section, I turn to another pseudo-public event of distribution – the shareholders meeting. It is this meeting where the threat of pesky voices also threatened an interactional order – but the voices came not from otherwise friendly co-workers but from ne'er-do-well shareholders.

Dividends: Coordinating Disclosures, Foreclosing Extortion

The Chief Financial Officer of Sangdo Holdings brought to session the 2015 shareholders meeting on a Friday morning in March in downtown Seoul in front of a crowd of about seventy-five Korean businesspeople. The meeting began at ten a.m. and moved briskly, fitting in statements from the CFO, CEO, and the financial auditor. Together they provided generic statements on the year's results, the fidelity of the financial statements, and the company's future strategy. Including voting on half a dozen resolutions, the meeting finished quickly, in just under twenty-six minutes. I sat next to Assistant Manager Ji-soon. For Ji-soon, who had been to a few annual meetings before, the affair seemed ho-hum and predictable. From the first bang of the

gavel to voting at the end, the event went largely to script. Quite literally. In my hands, I had a print out of the script for the entire meeting, including the Q&A.¹²

On that very day and at that very time hundreds of other companies around Seoul and South Korea were also conducting their shareholders' meetings. That Friday in March is known in Korea as "Super Shareholders Day" (*syupeo juchong dei*) a reference to the mass number of meetings held each year. In South Korea, the number has been going up. In 2015, over 800 companies held their meetings on March 25, representing 66% of all firms listed on the Korean stock exchange. The biggest and most notable firms, like Samsung's and Hyundai's public affiliates, hold meetings on separate days in part due to their large holdings and foreign and institutional investors. For many of the country's publicly listed but largely unknown firms, Super Shareholders Day is a convenient way to get through one of their few obligatory public rituals. And this phenomenon is not unique to Korea: public companies in Japan, Taiwan, and Singapore also experience the so-called "clustering" of shareholder meetings.¹³ This is in part related to shared commercial code across Asian countries which designates when the fiscal year ends and how soon thereafter companies have to release audited financial statements to the public.¹⁴

Discussion of meeting clustering in these countries has often been framed within a larger discourse of minority shareholder suppression and capitalist collusion. By scheduling meetings at

¹² Of the event the one portion not included was the external auditor's short statement certifying the financial results.

¹³ In Taiwan, in 2008 72% of companies held their meetings on one of two days in June (Liu, Yeats, and Lam 2015). In Singapore, in 2015, 45% of public companies clustered their meetings around the last five days of the month (Teen and Hong 2016). In Japan, in 2013, 41% held their meetings on the last Thursday in June, with 75% holding their meetings in the last week (Ueda 2014).

¹⁴ The release of audited information is separate from the meeting itself. Companies have three months after the fiscal year is over to create financial statements and distribute a list of proposed resolutions. Such proxy statements are released to the public in early March, typically 14 days before the actual meeting, so shareholders can review content prior to voting. Time to release financial statements and the period between the proxy statement and meetings vary by country.

the same time and in different locations, clustered days like Super Shareholders Day in Korea prevent legitimate shareholders with stock in multiple companies from attending their meetings, robbing them of their vote and their opportunity to ask questions of management. This view, often associated with the “shareholder activist movement,” casts the minority shareholder as an ethically proper subject, making claims as a rightful property owner and advocate of democracy and transparency in the face of suspicious managers. This movement has not been absent in Korea. In the late 1990s, minority shareholder activists became famous for confronting the country’s major conglomerates and regulations after the country’s devastating financial crisis via a discourse of minority shareholder rights (Kim and Kim 2001).

But if you ask South Korean managers today what the biggest scourge of annual meetings is, and hence the reason for scheduling their meetings at the same time, they will tell you of so-called called “meeting extortionists” (*chonghoe-ggun* or *juchong-ggun*).¹⁵ Meeting extortionists are legitimate shareholders who use their status as such to make activist-like claims at meetings. Where activists consciously adopt rational discourse and legal measures to bring changes to corporate governance and society at large, meeting extortionists disrupt meetings to blackmail companies for personal gain.¹⁶ Extortionists do this by making noise, or at least the threat of it; that is, by abusing the requisite Q&A sessions at meetings reserved for minority shareholders to

¹⁵ “Meeting extortionist” is an approximate translation of *chonghoe-ggun*; the first two characters are of Chinese origin referring to “shareholders meeting” while the last character, *-ggun*, is of native Korean origin, a productive morpheme to denote a person marked in relation to the noun attached. It connotes someone who is good at a kind of work and depends on it for sustenance. It can take on negative meaning if the noun is not a typical work category. Examples: *sanyang-ggun* (a hunter), *simbureum-ggun* (errand-boy). Meeting extortionists can also be called *hwoebang-ggun* (disrupter).

¹⁶ In Japan, this form of racketeering has historically been more severe. Extortionists, known as *sokaiya*, became linked with Japanese mafia (yakuza) in the 1970s. In the 1970s, yakuza-linked *sokaiya* extorted companies by threatening noise during meetings. Later, as the numbers of *sokaiya* grew, groups would offer protection from *other sokaiya*. By the 1990s, the extortion methods became extreme as company executives were physically assaulted for not paying bribes and on one occasion one was murdered when his company did not pay. The phenomenon is not as extreme today in Japan. Szymkowiak (2002) offers a rich history of this phenomenon through the analytic of protection in which *sokaiya* are both a form of threat and a form of protection.

question managers. They make *soran* (a fuss), cause a *hwoe-bang* (a disturbance), or ask *murihan yogu* (unreasonable requests). In some cases, extortion might include asking non-stop questions just to prolong a meeting and delay voting. Other cases they use questions to attack the competency of managers. Their goal is to earn regular pay-offs from the company by *not* making any more disturbance. And gain they can, going back to the same companies year after year. In a survey, 40% of publicly listed companies said they dealt with problems from *chonghoe-ggun* at their annual meeting. Rumors suggest that individuals can make anywhere the equivalent of thousand to a hundred-thousand dollars in blackmail.¹⁷

To combat the problem of meeting extortionists, individual companies maintain lists of known persons who have disrupted their meetings before and keep money on hand at meetings to ward them off. But cross-company coordination like Super Shareholders Day works by diffusing extortionists' ability to attend multiple meetings and collect payoffs from multiple companies. This form of cross-event alignment works like a DDoS¹⁸ attack on a computer: by flooding the channel en masse, extortionists are denied the chance to attend multiple meetings, while preserving the individual meetings of companies.¹⁹ At the Sangdo Holdings meeting that I attended, I heard notice from other employees that an extortionist had showed up close to when the meeting was finishing. Because the meeting was almost over, by the rules, he was not allowed to enter. And because he no longer posed a threat, the company did not pay him off in monetary form. (I was told they gave him a “material” giftbag of corporate tchotchkes, such as a company USB).

¹⁷ Link to news article (in Korean) titled “Is it a humble shareholder or a extortionist...the best make 100k!” Source: <http://www.ksdaily.co.kr/news/articleView.html?idxno=17186>. Accessed October 15, 2016.

¹⁸ “A Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attack is an attempt to make an online service unavailable by overwhelming it with traffic from multiple sources.” Cited from <http://www.digitalattackmap.com/understanding-ddos/>. Accessed October 15, 2016.

¹⁹ For issues of “phaticity” and interactional abuse more generally, see Zuckerman (2016).

Why are shareholder meetings so susceptible to simple forms of disruption? Shareholder meetings are the culminating event within a multi-stage ritual to affirm financial statements. The primary link shareholders have with a company are its financial reports and statements. Because those reports are mediated by non-owning managers inside a company, a process of verification ensures that the numbers properly align to the reality they purport to represent and that those who produce them are faithful in producing them (Power 1997). This multi-part ritual begins with the act of company literally “closing” its books at the end of a fiscal year. Thousands of transactions from accounting books and ledgers are tabulated into higher order financial statements that give a picture of a company’s financial status. Because of the private nature of this process, designated financial auditors verify the accuracy of the statements. The actual process of releasing the financial statements, that is the numbers themselves, happens *before* a shareholders meeting takes place, when a company issues its ‘proxy statement’ in the weeks prior, allowing shareholders time to review the numbers on paper as well as any resolutions up for vote. Thus, shareholder meetings do not represent the moment of release itself, but are a moment of public questioning about the release.

Shareholder meetings are also sites where companies announce and seek approval on annual dividends (*baedang*) as well. In 2015, Sangdo Holdings gave out a dividend of roughly \$1.75 per share,²⁰ the same dividend that it had given out in prior year since 2012. That is, the dividend was fixed and not based on actual annual revenues, which had varied considerably year to year (mostly to do with the sales of major assets). In this way, an unchanging dividend can be a key point around which extortionists can voice (insincere) concern as a form of a threat. As representative minority shareholders, they can argue that the dividend is too low and

²⁰ Note: not the actual number for confidentiality purposes.

shareholders should be given more. The pragmatic end for them, however, is a *personal* bribe. If they only own a few shares they can earn more from a payoff than an actual dividend payment; likewise, a company might be able to save more in a bribe than in increasing the total dividend amount for *all* its shareholders.

Scholars of East Asian corporations have noted that the basic understanding of shareholding and dividend-payout is fundamentally different in Japan, and by extension, South Korea, than in the West. Many large companies in Japan and South Korea, which share close corporate histories and structures, are still directly owned and managed by family members, with directors being long-time company managers. In this way, investing relations are less connections between profit-driven *strangers* and more a sign of good faith between already connected institutions (Clark 1979). Dividends in South Korea have been notoriously low in the world of publicly traded companies. Up until 2015, Korean companies paid only 15% of profits to shareholders compared to 46% in Hong Kong and 28% in Japan.²¹ Despite recent changes, shareholder meetings have long been perfunctory and pro forma events. One scholar notes that votes in Japan were not even counted; they were merely a call-and-response between the director and shareholder-employees who agreed in unison (Miyajima 2007: 336). As I will discuss below, this was precisely how the scripted event at Sangdo took place as well.

The shareholders meeting was coordinated as an event with other shareholder meetings on the outside. It was also highly coordinated *inside*. First, there was a division of labor of employees from the holding company. Each had different roles, which were pre-assigned together along with the script, the week prior to the meeting. Some employees at Sangdo

²¹ “Higher South Korea dividends fuel hopes for Kospi re-rating.” Cited from <https://www.ft.com/content/1cbb1276-aab4-11e4-91d2-00144feab7de> Accessed March 5, 2016

Holdings had jobs manning the welcome desk to greet shareholders and hand out the day's pamphlet with the enclosed financial statements. Others were in charge of making sure the microphones worked and VIP patrons were seated in the front. Assistant Manager Ji-soon and I did not have official roles, but acted as seat-fillers. That is, we took off the company pins on our lapels and ID badges from our necks and sat in the crowd, playing the role of anonymous shareholders. We even pretended to not recognize our other co-workers. Our job was to correctly shout oral agreement for company resolutions during the Q&A.

More complex roles went to half-dozen mid-level male managers who had speaking parts. Since each of the half-dozen resolutions had to be raised by a shareholder that task fell to the mid-level managers who were each assigned a different resolution to "propose" for ratification. Each of their parts was written out in detail in the script. The basic structure of their responses was the following: a) announcing their real name and status as a shareholder, 2) indicating that they agree about the resolution in the proxy statement, 3) expressing approval of the resolution on [X] issue, and 4) asking the CEO to take a vote on the issue. As the CEO thanked each "shareholder" he called each to a vote, at which time the other shareholders in the auditorium called out in unison that they supported the resolution, shouting "I second that." Following that, the CEO asked if there were any other opinions on the resolution, to which the members of the audience yelled out in unison again, "There are no other opinions."

In this way, the script both plotted out the formal aspects of the shareholders meetings (summary of financial results) as well as anticipated any possible occasion for disruption, by closely linking the call and response formats with natural and authentic interjections by audience members. Potential disruptions here are not innocuous either: if resolutions at shareholders meetings were delayed or not agreed upon, this could cause problems for the election of new

executives, directors, and auditors. In this light, it is not the case that extortionists seemingly break up scripted or formal meetings; rather it is scripted or formal meetings that anticipate potential disruptions.

Shareholder meetings are a requisite genre for public corporations to verify their financial statements and announce their dividends via an interactional genre in which minority shareholders have a legal guarantee to voice their opinions. Translating this political claim interactionally, meetings give those in the audience brief interactional power over corporate directors who must “answer” to them and receive their vote. More to the point of this chapter, it is also an occasion in which one kind of political relation (shareholder : corporation) becomes focused around a monetary reward (dividend) which is announced in a discursive event (the meeting). Shareholder power and shareholder interest is largely non-existent outside these events and outside the capacity to act within such events. What is worth noting is that since shareholder relations are fixed by proportion, they become a matter of *quantity*, rather than proportion: that is, the proper amount that *should* be given to shareholders as a proper reward for their ownership rights, though just owning one share grants a right to speak. A key complaint of meeting extortionists is the amount of dividend given out per share as a legitimate gripe of a sincere investor. This same kind of complaint is often leveled by larger institutional investors who see South Korean firms as a low-dividend economy. South Korean stocks, especially from listings affiliated with the large conglomerates, are often devalued on the market in what is known as the “Korean Discount” among international investors. The lack of interest in dividends by regular (Korean) shareholders (or at least their passive acceptance) suggests that the social relations presumed by shareholding, as Clark (1979) suggested in his work on Japan, is different in Japan and South Korea than in the US, such that shareholding is not a vehicle of claiming ownership

rights but rather a mode of affirming political bona fides, socially equivalent to attending a co-worker's wedding or donating to a charity.²² This also suggests that US shareholders associate dividends as the sole form of surplus that a corporation generates, the activity around which corporate efforts should be directed. The dividend is *the* icon of economic profit.²³

Shareholder meetings reveal that certain occasions for reckoning one kind of relationship create *occasions for* modes of extortion. That is, moments of public disclosure bring certain relations into correspondence which create an opportunity for social judgment or rebuke about the calculation of such correspondence – from extortionists, activists, or powerful hedge fund managers alike. Unlike the case of performance bonuses, in the case of dividends, it is not the actual correspondence between share and dividend (that is guaranteed) but the actual amount given per share. Thus, it is perhaps no surprise that concomitant efforts to manage the challenges to the dividend amount also co-occur. Managing dividends is also a matter of managing events – in this case it is about keeping ill-intentioned shareholders out as much as it is about framing the contents within. Thus, rather than understand the formal exclusions of these events from the point of view of hoarding or hiding, which may after all still be true in the case of American corporations (see Foster 2008, 187-210), we might understand them from the point of view of managing extortion. Extortion in this case is a particular affordance of shareholder meetings: a mandated forum for shareholders to voice their concerns to management. In this case, it is a risk not associated with the virtuous shareholder who wants a just return, but the professional pauper

²² One developmental economist (Wedeman 1997) interprets dividends in Korea as not accruing to shareholders, but an obligation to the government; a protectionist form of extortion that perhaps explains why Korea never saw the rise of other kinds of large-scale institutional extortion like yakuza in Japan. In his terms, South Korean companies pay “dividends” in the form of political charities, a trend beginning in the Syngman Rhee period and extending today through the Chun regime in the 1980s.

²³ Karen Ho (2009) traces the emergence of the movement and intellectual justification for shareholder rights to the 1970s when modern finance sought to assert financial control over economic assets in the US. Prior to this, shareholders and investors rarely asserted political claims as owners.

who goes from company to company. But company managers too fulfill the categorical requirements of regular shareholders and can occupy the space of response in behavioral norms appropriate to the event itself, even as they too might want a higher dividend.

Conclusion: Corporations and the Problem of Surplus

This chapter has looked at how the distribution of emoluments – as a type of corporate surplus – is a necessary component of corporate life, occurring in multiple forms and modalities. As a symbolic conversion of a collective effort into individual reward, distribution is perhaps a fitting end to this dissertation. Yet distributions are not as clean or natural as they may seem. Marx comments in Volume III of *Capital* that it is the distribution of profit that makes “hostile brothers” of capitalists – fighting to decide over the surplus value that they did not labor for.²⁴ As I’ve discussed, obligations to distribute surplus – as an economic reward on a political claim – generate potential hostilities on many sides. These obligations seem to wreak havoc on those both receiving surplus and those distributing it. Reception threatens to make radically equivalent those whose relationships are defined in other modes of office sociality: status hierarchy, teamwork, cohort friends, etc. Distribution also exposes those who are in charge of making the decision – about how much to give, to whom to give, and in what proportion. It casts them as translators of social difference into monetary goods. Even forms of distribution that are not at the level of the individual – such as Worker’s Day gifts, shared by all regular employees – create risks of comparisons to prior years and other companies. Even forms of distribution among

²⁴ See Moseley (2002) for a treatment of *Capital*, Volume III that interprets it as dealing with the problem of profit-distribution rather than the falling rate of profit.

putative strangers and those with low economic stakes – like the extortionists – create a potential for hazard, handcuffing corporate executives and managers in complex schemes to keep out loud noises.

This chapter has intentionally cast a wide net over the idea of distribution, one inclusive of both money and non-monied forms, as well as employment and investing relations. Linking these together analytically are different claims on the corporation and the ways that they are technically conceived and discursively instantiated. I have not grouped these forms of distribution with, say, other kinds of economic exchanges, such as gift exchange among employees or internal sales, for instance. The reason for this echoes a wider theme in this dissertation which is that corporations are not reduced to single genres, events, motivations, or modalities – like the meeting, the culture, or the quest for profit – as much as they may seem so or activists frame them as such. Attempts to reduce corporations to a singular function echo long standing tendencies within Western economic thought to see economic activity as motivated by a basic set of economic behaviors which larger economic institutions can be reduced to or should be oriented to (operational efficiency, profit, cash-flow, etc.).

A perspective on distribution however highlights that economic claims and modes of converting profit are ubiquitous and many. While there may be cases of either extraction or exclusion, a more general phenomenon may be that attendant to each modality of distribution is an attempt to manage, frame, or conceal the ways that surplus is given out. Thus this is not just a matter of event poetics and symbolic alignment of discursive event and symbolic meaning, that happen in conflict-free spaces. Because surplus is an ongoing, comparable and comparative phenomenon, claims can always be argued *about*. Thus it is no surprise that events are managed in the way they are – it is not so much about aligning semiotic modalities as it is about warding

off interactional threats. Certain moments of distribution like salary are technically concealed, limiting the ways that claims can be seen, while others are interactionally controlled.

Either way, the social risks of quantitative and qualitative equivalencing occur across all forms of distribution precisely because moments of distribution bring into correspondence two kinds of relation: social ones and economic ones. Mis-matches occur when the perceived relationships do not align: such as the iconic relationship between economic goods and social categories (a cheap gold watch for a retiring worker), the interindexical relationship within a stratified group (equally dispersed ranks but not equally dispersed bonuses), or the ways that certain correspondences do not align to other correspondences (South Korean shareholders are not treated the same as American shareholders). Such perspectives generate comparisons – or the potential for comparison – in ways that differ from the complex reality for practitioners, like HR managers who see total cost or owners who see a wider network of “dividend”-seekers beyond shareholders.

In line with the broader theme of this dissertation, we can note how efforts to change the political order from modes of distribution systematically aligned with an older corporate South Korea to a newer one hinged on contrasts in modes of distribution. That is, in terms of the difference between *hobong* salaries and bonuses, which are fixed and moved in lock-step positioning to those of the performance era in which individuals are based on individual performance. Implementing these kinds of changes, while discursively forceful in the public imagination, were quite difficult to do in practice for matters of integration, calculation, and interaction. That is, in terms of integration, individual performance metrics had to fit in with a system that rewards employees in many different formats and mechanisms of evaluation. In terms of calculation, numbers had to be authoritatively anchored to proper figures (such as

industry standards) and proper proportions. In terms of interaction, HR managers had to convince individual employees of the value of the new policy – even employees who putatively liked individual rewards.

In closing, I point to how issues of distribution – as much as they seem related to relations of shared and individual gain within an economic community – also connect to issues surrounding the modern legal corporation. One of the legal benefits of the modern corporate form is its ability to pool money in a collective fund the body of which constitutes a separate legal entity. That is, while capital-contributors can add in, trade, or take out capital, they are not connected to any individual property of the entity itself. Unlike a sole proprietorship or a partnership, this provides capital-contributing members a shield against the liabilities of the risks incurred by the organization. And vice-versa. Corporate assets are not subject to claim if one of the capitalists becomes liable to other debtors. The corporation, then, as a legal person, is insulated from the common cross-debt claims in other realms of social and economic life. (It is ironically more a model of a separate legal individual than a biological person.) This is covered under a number of legal principles common to the modern corporation: “entity shielding,” “limited liability,” and “piercing the corporate veil” (Easterbrook and Fischel 1985, Ciepley 2013).

This legal benefit becomes problematic at times of profit distribution. In a collective ownership system, how do you assess who generated the revenue or profit? Even if it were simple to calculate profit from revenues, it is still impossible to disaggregate the collective profit of a corporation based on specific claims, be they those of investors, manual laborers, administrators, or middlemen – a fact not lost on those who work in administrative positions like Human Resources. Though corporations have a legal obligation to reward their shareholders at

least in the US (since *Dodge v. Ford Motor Co.*), the distribution of dividends does not represent a clear translation of profit from goods sold within an annual period; the calculation of profit is based on the decision of managers and approved by a board of directors, who may choose to give (in proportion to stock shares) a low dividend or a generous one, depending on the will of managers, the economic forecast, cash flow estimates, or other institutional pressures (such as pressure from minority shareholders or other companies).²⁵ Corporations exist largely as collective forms of property and liability bearing entity, with an assortment of claims to profit by various stakeholders. But claims to a *general* profit do not always translate to a *specific* kind of profit or reward. As this chapter has argued, such claims are often relative to other forms, other proportions, and other parties receiving. It is perhaps no surprise then that Adolf Berle and Gardiner Means, authors of the one most noted theorizations of property and the corporation of the twentieth century, saw modern corporations – with their millions of disinterested shareholders and central management – as politically communist in nature (Berle and Means 2007, 245). Corporations are often envisioned as singular sites of monetary production and distribution: in the abstract form of “profit” or surplus value extraction, in the shareholder-oriented view of dividends, or the labor-oriented view of wages. One indeed can see the corporation from any one of these views, yet the plurality of modes of distribution is a humbling fact. Given the various politics of membership that are wrapped up in distribution, it is perhaps not surprising that there are so many and so varied ways of construing membership, labor,

²⁵ Even Adam Smith in *Wealth of Nations* noted that profit calculation was not a simple phenomenon to calculate: “Profit is so very fluctuating, that the person who carries on a particular trade cannot always tell you himself what is the average of his annual profit. It is affected, not only by every variation of price in the commodities which he deals in, but by the good or bad fortune both of his rivals and of his customers, and by a thousand other accidents to which goods when carried either by sea or by land, or even when stored in a warehouse, are liable. It varies, therefore, not only from year to year, but from day to day, and almost from hour to hour.” (*WON* 1.9.3)

investment, and time. Manifested into events then, these modes of distributing do not just conceal money, but they conceal the social risks of radical comparison.

Afterword

At the time of writing this chapter, Assistant Manager Ji-soon contacted me via the mobile messaging application Kakao Talk. She was asking for help with a translation into English of a different emolument: “retirement pay” (*twoejig-geum*). She was trying to capture how to say a “special retirement plan” for executives. This special plan would allow one to work for one extra year as a consultant at a reduced salary, or to accept a certain portion of salary as a gift. This was not open to all retiring workers; just executives. This created a two-tiered retirement system: a regular retirement plan and one for executive-level employees. Nevertheless, she was seeking to appropriately brand it in English, so as to make it both prestigious but concealed vis-à-vis Korean. Thus without reducing the value of the executive plan or making, by inference, the regular plan seem undervalued, she was seeking a semantic translation that could conceal the monetary differences. This illustrates the larger argument of this chapter that the framing of differential monetary rewards is pervasive and takes on different kinds of semiotic instantiations: in this case, in the form of semantic massaging.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I offer reflections on three areas I see the data in this dissertation contributing both to the study of South Korean conglomerate as well as the study of language and communication in organizational settings: institutional (semiotic) orders, genres of reform and corporate reflexivity, and language and corporate realities.

Institutional (Semiotic) Orders

Over the course of writing this dissertation, South Korea has witnessed political and capitalist giants fall in quite dramatic ways. President Park Geun-hye was deposed and ultimately impeached after a single electronic tablet was discovered in an abandoned room, containing information that she had secretly shared state secrets with a private confidante and spiritual advisor. Embroiled in that scandal was also the heir to the Samsung Group, Lee Jae-yong. Lee the Vice Chairman of the Samsung Group was discovered to have paid more than \$39 million in bribes to non-profits run by the President's spiritual advisor as a way of currying regulatory favor. What at first appeared to be compulsory bribes paid as a mode of political extortion by many corporate groups (a familiar mode of state extortion in the 1980s dictatorship of Chun Doo-hwan) was later revealed to have had significant benefits for the Samsung Group, in particular. At the time the bribes were presumed to have taken place, Samsung Group was seeking shareholder approval over the merger of two Samsung affiliates, Samsung C&T

(construction) and Cheil Industries (fashion and amusement parks). The merger was touted as a matter of creating business synergies between the two subsidiaries, but it was widely presumed that the goal of the merger was to allow Lee Jae-yong to consolidate greater shareholder power over the entire group. To pull this move off, however, Cheil Industries would buy back the stock of Samsung C&T at a highly undervalued rate (or swap ratio), a move that had to be ratified by shareholders of each affiliate. A key player needed to ratify this move was the National Pension Service (NPS), which held large shares in both subsidiary companies. Approving the move however would individually devalue the shares held by the NPS (and other minority shareholders) in favor of the larger group consolidation. The issue flared in global headlines in 2015 and 2016 as well-known institutional investor Elliott Management voiced its disapproval of the merger. Nevertheless, NPS signaled its approval of the unfavorable swap ratio of the merger which other institutional investors in South Korea followed.

The fallout from the political scandal resurfaced suspicions that the Samsung C&T share price had been artificially lowered ahead of the merger and that NPS executives had been influenced by higher-ups to approve it, including President Park as a result of the indirect bribe given to her confidante. In late 2016, responding to the unfurling scandal, the Samsung Group announced that it would abolish its infamous control tower known as the “Future Strategy Office” (*miraejeollyaksil*) and begin to the process of converting to a holding company structure, as a gesture of good faith corporate governance.¹ Lee himself promised to pull out of the infamous Federation of Korean Industries (FKI, or *jeon-gyeong-nyeon*), an infamous lobbying group through which the leaders of the nation’s top conglomerates craft political positions, or as is more commonly suspected, funnel political bribes. Despite the moves of good faith in the

¹ At the time of writing in mid-2017, Samsung Electronics has rejected the move to convert to a holding company.

public eye, in early 2017, Lee himself was arrested and is currently awaiting trial on bribery charges.

To many, it may seem that these changes reflect serious changes in the broader institutional economic and political orders of South Korea. That is, both the formal institutions themselves (Park-era politics, Samsung-style management), as well as the particular modalities of authority through which an older generation of South Korean elites have ruled. But even in a non-presence, figures still remain visible in South Korean institutions. For many, South Korean institutions often appear to be merely the vessels through which powerful individuals manifest their control, rather than entities that exist outside of them (more akin to Veblen's old notion of "vested interests"). Hence, hints of institutional transition often devolve into fears of secret control around battling parties seeking to maintain their "grip" through highly formalized or invisible mechanisms across competing modalities – shares, bribes, paper companies, fake names, inside men, and so forth. The power of individuals as ultimate principals (in Goffman's term) or super-addressee (in Bakhtin's term) behind these leviathan-like institutions is reinforced by anecdotes which suggest that they rule even away from their particular institutional homes. For instance, Lee Jae-yong is purported to have control even from his prison cell, issuing orders and making decisions.² This is reminiscent of the "hospital management" (*byeong-won gyeong-yeong*) of other infamous chairman who were purported to hold decision-making powers even from a hospital bed. Figures like this are the anthropological ghosts of South Korean institutions: secret actors who cause problems and exert control, even in their non-presence. The mystical nature of this power is encapsulated in an idea of power which originates at the top and extends in a stratified order throughout an organization or institution, not unlike a kin chart.

² Source: <http://www.techholic.co.kr/news/articleView.html?idxno=68572>. Accessed April 26, 2017.

Hagiographic representations of dictator-presidents and corporate chairmen often depict them in such stereotypic fashion. This power is stereotyped both in simple speech acts (like phone calls) which have wide perlocutionary effects, as well as in the deference behavior of those in subordinate positions who orient their own behavior to such powerful actors. Even today, as the militaristic tropes have subsided, family legacies of conglomerate ownership has become more diluted, and management largely professionalized and globalized, conglomerates are still be claimed to be extensions of their founder's personalities or values.³

The resiliency of the political image of the chairman or powerful heads of state seems unlikely to change in the near future – just as a Western fascination with institutions per se as person-like entities is also unlikely to shift. Nevertheless, the modalities by which such institutional authority operates do appear to be changing – with frequency. This dissertation has largely traced how the mechanisms of internal control shift, through the case study of one conglomerate group that was transitioning to a centralized administrative control group. What this dissertation has shown is that the mechanisms of these modalities of control are not based solely around new or Western administrative techniques that create panoptic views at the top or disciplined subjects at the bottom. Rather it has shown how corporate control becomes translated into existing techniques and new projects that are embedded into a complex field of other managers and other documents. In this sense, a company like Sangdo's holding company found itself attempting to *build up* the organizational power that it had a formal political right to. To do so, however, meant building up new pieces of technical surveillance, documentary reporting,

³ I was told by many older informants that I should look to a chairman's personality as a way to understand a *particular* corporation or conglomerate's culture. This idea does get reinforced through internal practices, such as company values, company museums, or company histories, which tie corporate identity to the image of the chairman (or at least a rose-tinted version of him). At Sangdo, the conglomerate also established its three core corporate values based on the personality of the founder. As part of annual evaluations, employees were evaluated to see how well they embodied the values.

shared cultural behaviors, Family Days, casual Fridays and so on – new modalities in a changing South Korean managerial landscape.

Through the diverse cases discussed in this dissertation – from new worker evaluation programs, to surveys, to shareholder meetings – many of the forms of “resistance” to this new order have not come from subsidiaries who actively oppose a centralized command by proverbially “dragging their feet,” but from the complications over the mechanisms themselves. Some of these forms of resistance are technical like the lack of a central records system, for instance. Some are interpretative: Performance Management Team members worried about how the chairman would interpret a document in just the right way that it would convey its intended (first- and second-order) effects or the second-guessing of employees who “correctly” answered a survey. Some are repetitive: like extortionists at shareholders meetings who consistently threaten to make a ruckus and extract payments at each meeting. And lastly, some are counter-productive: efforts to create 360-degree feedback for instance or root out company-sponsored *hoesik* events often ended up creating new forms of moral hazard of the type they were originally intended to eradicate. Thus, we can consider the discursive dimensions of institutional order not as shifts in categories of speech, technical genres, or authoritative performance events, but in the wider bundle of elements that compose any given institutional order and the modes through which such elements are managed. As new modes of control are added or reframed – from IT systems to PowerPoint layouts – they articulate (or do not) with wider understandings of what institutions are or should be.

Genres of Reform and Reflexive Corporations

It is a common move in political discourse in South Korea to call for major reforms of the conglomerates under rubrics of “reform” (*gaehyeok*), “structural adjustment” (*gujojojeong*), or “economic democratization” (*gyeongje minjuhwa*) that apply to all the “chaebol” companies. These calls, beyond being campaign season slogans, are common ways of thinking about how state-society-capital relations should be structured. Can complex conglomerates be democratized or even re-organized? Like my discussion of corporate flattening (*supyeonghwa*) in Chapter Three, the question is not whether or not that is true – certainly things like financial reform and M&As take place – but by what kinds of metaphors and modalities reform is translated and mediated. Competing calls for transparency often translate into more mediation and more discipline, ironically, in the form of more documentation. Flattening involves changing titles. Both of these are semiotic aftereffects of re-formed communicative activities that are intended to entail participatory uptake. Like the discussion of KPIs (key performance indicators) in Chapter One, these mediators often themselves become less a means of reform and more an object of attention and management.

It is also important to remember that reform is not just a matter of societal pressure. Reflexivity is a general feature of all kinds of social action (cf. Lucy 1993) and attempts to reframe activity is as much an internal concern as an external one. An informant working for a major conglomerate lamented that his division had undergone three re-organizations within only a year and a half of him working at the company. Within the case of Sangdo Group, reform was not something that had overt political messages or circulating taglines, but a matter of working *through* different modalities of control that often concealed the mechanisms of control. I argued

in Chapter One, for instance, that even the shift to a new kind of corporate form and re-organization of ownership relations via a holding company had little bearing on the broader administrative structure, changes that were not brought about until the rise of the third-generation of ownership and attempts to centralize administrative planning. Thus, as ideologically salient social hierarchies (like elite families), rank hierarchies (like *bujang*, etc.), or even corporate towers appear to persist in the same form across time, other kinds of modes for organizing these relations rework the functional nature of these relationships in less visible ways to the wider public.

This dissertation has shown that corporate relations often emerge out of the genres of control that mediate them, rather than the static organizational forms that they are presented in. For instance, Samsung's promise to abolish its future strategy office does not mean that the mechanisms of internal surveillance or control used by the group are necessarily abolished in turn. I showed for instance that Sangdo Holdings attempted to create its own future strategy office through the recruitment of expert managers and implementation of new centralized administrative techniques. To the degree that these reforms meet internal opposition, their addressivity is often quite complex or at least indirect. Conglomerate reform may not always begin with articulating problematic areas or even subjects: many attempts at internal reform align with broader societal goals of cleaning up business practice and office life, like attacking "smoking" but not the class of workers who do smoke (such as older male managers). Modes of authority that are grounded in interactional spaces are more pervasive and cannot themselves be eradicated through new political projects. This includes the way that authority and subordination are grounded, for instance, in interpersonal relations.

Linguistic anthropologists, following Bakhtin, have long emphasized how genres are both enduring dimensions of action that provide “orienting frameworks” (Hanks 1987) but are also subject to metapragmatic (re-)framing (Briggs 1993) in the way they are regimented in practice. This dissertation suggests that genres are not just textual dimensions of speech and interpretation but provide participatory structure to interaction. As any corporate office worker knows, a “report” (*bogoseo*) is not just an object of corporate knowledge, but one that can be used to leverage interpersonal control, such as the stereotyped example of a manager who asks for a report as he is walking out the door, begetting a night of working. Reports beget an interactional structure of textual production and evaluation, a structure that is particularly difficult to diffuse and unlikely to disappear. In this sense, reforming genres of interaction is more than demanding new forms of “entextualized reform” (via transparency, indicators, external reports); these modes of authority enact forms of inequality in their implicit participatory structures, structures that were present even among the expert managers of Sangdo.

Another reason that reforms may be complex is political projects are highly intertextual and derive meaning not from panoptic ways of seeing, but via a “relation between a relation” (Evans-Pritchard 1940, discussed in Kockelman 2013). Thus, certain genres, and the particular figurations they depict (like org charts) or the participant structures they create, derive or entail meaning from their alignment or dis/non-alignment with those of other genres. Thus flat-title policies fail not because South Koreans are habitualized to hierarchical thinking in *general*, but because flat-titles conflict with stratified ways of organizing relations (like salary and responsibility). The effect is intertextual (or to be more precise, intermedial) to the effect that the participatory structures of competing genres come to be seen as in conflict. As organizational researchers investigate the inner dimensions of corporate spaces with more frequency, it is

around the broader context of genres and relational groundings which we have to understand any given project. In this way, something that appears to be “Westernizing,” “modernizing” or even “standardizing” an aspect of the corporation, like conducting “town-hall meetings” must be seen within the broader context of other figurations of authority or inequality in the office.

Language and Corporate Realities

This dissertation also raises the question about how we understand the nature of corporate realities. That is, the backdrop against which institutional action appears to take place. I had a Whorfian (Whorf 1956) moment at Sangdo one day during fieldwork, observing a brief flare-up on the HR team. The HR team at Sangdo Holding was in charge of collecting labor statistics from all of the subsidiaries in the group, once a month. They were the only entity that had a total view of the entire workforce across the group. This process was completed by asking subsidiaries to email their statistics each month via an Excel template that had different cells for different labor categories: full-time office worker, full-time manufacturing, administrative worker, and so on. The Excel sheet was supposed to provide an accurate tally of all the employees in the group for the Executive Cho and Chairman to review. One day, the chairman inquired about a seemingly incorrect tabulation. The order came down to Ki-ho, the junior-most employee, to investigate why it had been incorrect. After calling various subsidiaries, it turned out that one subsidiary had not updated two employees to its workforce tally in the prior month. During the course of inquiring on the subsidiaries about how they filled out their categories, Ki-ho discovered that some of them had different definitions of the categories that were supposed to be filled out: for instance, one left off “dispatch” workers from their total manufacturing worker

count. For a brief moment, as categories did not seem to align and suspicions of different practices for filling out the form, the fragility of the total labor number came into view. It seemed that the entire tabulated workforce encapsulated on the Excel sheet could be wrong. However, Team Manager Jang told Ki-ho just to correct the two numbers and send it back to the Chairman with the corrections he requested.

How many workers does a conglomerate like Sangdo have? Such an answer is precisely what Ki-ho and the HR team was trying to figure out; we have no recourse to any outside information about those numbers. In this sense they are a creation, or perhaps a creature, of categorization, that specifies which conditions actors are included or not (Bowker and Star 1999). Conglomerate life proposes so many vagaries of employment that even the nation's highest court has had to weigh in on how to categorize dispatch workers. But this begets other questions about the corporate realities that seem the most stable: what is a chaebol, or a conglomerate, after all? What is profit or expense? Conglomerates, for instance, seem to be the prototypical example of the South Korean corporate form, but they too are creatures of government categorization. Sangdo in fact "became" one in the early 2000s when its assets had surpassed the minimal threshold to be considered a large company. It could, presumably, fall off that list and lose some of the regulatory and tax requirements associated with being a "large conglomerate" or (*daegieop*).

This is not to say that there is *no* organizational reality to economic forms, but that the ways of knowing what basic figures or entities are come into view through certain genres. These genres are often highly unstable and smoothed over in practice by those who are in charge of producing them, even as their textual products – like employee counts or organizational tabulations – gain institutional legitimacy in their wider circulation (in statistics, records,

academic reports, etc.). This is evident when we consider indices or figures that calculate based on opinion-based surveys, the fidelity of which can be quickly eroded if participants are found to have been influenced or biased. Thus, rather than seeking to find a “real” reality behind the corporate numbers, one area this dissertation suggests paying attention to is under what circumstances certain categories come into being. Any given employee in Sangdo can come to stand for any number of other participant: HR worker, office worker in general, Seoul worker, a “member” (*guseongwon*), an older male manager, or even just a participant at a meeting. These role categories are embedded in different practices or genres, and engender different ways of understanding what “objects” of study are. There may be a temptation to contrast “stereotypical” representations of, say, older male managers, with their real instantiations as specific individuals in specific institutional positions. As I’ve shown through this dissertation, however, these categorizations – like the difference between a boss and an older brother – can become salient for objects of interpersonal action or organizational perception.

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