

Abstract Dissertation

‘Aspiring to the Good Life in Seoul: Ethics and Economics in the Narratives of Young South Koreans’

In my dissertation *Aspiring to the Good Life in Seoul: Ethics and Economics in the Narratives of Young South Koreans*, I show how young people living in Seoul realize their aspirations towards a good life.

In my thesis, I examine how young Seoulites negotiate contradicting values and practices in order to pursue a good life and argue that living a meaningful life means to find a balance between their aspirations and those of their wider social setting.

My dissertation is based on a 12-month long fieldwork in Seoul, South Korea, from September 2012 to September 2013 during which I employed the methods of interview and participant observation together with practices of an Anthropology of the City to do research and collect data.

In my theoretical perspective, I was inspired by recent discussions in the Anthropology of the Good (Robbins 2007) and Economic Anthropology (Maurer 2015). I formed a framework where I combined the concept of aspirations with the concepts of imagination, design and planning, anticipation and hope (Appadurai 2013, Miyazaki 2004) to illustrate the local frame of social and cultural ideas about the form and content of, and the capacity of young Seoulites to strive for, a meaningful life. Yet, to understand how these young people did negotiate and balance between different notions of the good life, I focused and combined these concepts with conceptualizations of ordinary ethics (Lambek 2010) and the everyday use of money (Zelizer 1997).

The young people I met were in their early twenties to early thirties and studied at one of Seoul’s numerous universities or were working men and women in different occupations, and lived either with their families or alone. They belonged to South Korea’s middle classes and I focus my research especially on the four themes of education, marriage, consumption and work which were important issues regarding the lifestyles of Seoul’s middle classes.

These young people critically judged and evaluated how they should live in the context of middle-class values and transferred value through using money as means of payment: they imagined educational pathways that differ from the normative social understanding of how education should be and reworked the meaning of success, they planned and designed their marriage so that they could enact a certain kind of independence in the context of this socially approved way to form a family, they used the acquisition of certificates and the consumption of fashion as means to anticipate their futures, and put effort and energy into their hopes of finding a desirable job or achieving professional skills and knowledge.

In times where anthropological research increasingly stresses the hardship and suffering young people are going through due to neoliberal economic changes, my perspective on the meaning and value young people give their practices and a focus on the pragmatics and social embeddedness of economic practices is an important contribution.