Taking up space: waste and waste labor in developing South Korea

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Chapter 2. THE DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTION OF WASTE PICKERS

"You were treated like a piece of trash in the past, but as of today, you will begin your journey of reformation," said Yu Tal-yŏng, then head of the Reconstruction National Movement (*chaegŏn kungmin undong*), to encourage residents at the 1962 inauguration of the Work Reconstruction Camp (*kŭllojaegŏndae*, hereafter WRC).[179] In his speech, Yu identified waste pickers as no different than "a piece of trash," needing reform and rehabilitation through the WRC. Similarly, Pak Sin-o, a member of the WRC Reformation Committee, made the association between waste and people more explicit: "The activities of the WRC recycle not only waste material but also human garbage (*in'gan p'yep'um*)."[180] In these two examples, "trash" refers less to material objects and more to human characteristics or social categories. As we will see in this chapter, the meanings and uses of the word "trash" unfolded on descriptive, prescriptive, and euphemistic levels, and ensuing discourses shaped and consolidated perceptions of waste pickers.

This chapter analyzes the linguistic and discursive sphere created around waste pickers. I examine how and why distinct terminologies, classifications, and meanings became associated with waste work; what prompted the increase in terminology; and how state bodies and their administrators, social reformers, middle-class citizens, and waste pickers themselves responded to such discourses, whether by reproducing and reinforcing, or resisting and reclaiming them. Focusing on waste pickers throughout the modern history of Korea, I rely on a variety of textual sources, including archival documents, newspaper and magazine articles, literary works, as well as the essays and petition letters of waste pickers and their superintendents.

After the Korean War (1950 - 1955) and throughout the second half of the twentieth century, waste pickers were entangled in two seemingly unrelated

[179] Kyŏnghyang Sinmun, 1962.05.14

[180] Pak Sin-o, "Kŭllo ro saenghwal ŭl chaegŏnhaja," *Saegajŏng* 124 February (1965), 23.

forces. On the one hand, waste pickers were subjected to state control,[181] first under the Park Chung-hee regime's (1961-1979) vagrant regulation measures, which continued well beyond the Park era.[182] On the other hand, waste was rediscovered as a resource, its management became a professional sector, and recycling practice returned to the domestic sphere. To incorporate these changes, this chapter situates waste pickers within two fields of scholarship: a broader literature on discipline and social control during the South Korean authoritarian regimes, and waste studies that question how we define waste and its attendant meanings and effects.

Scholars of modern Korea have investigated how military regimes regulated marginalized populations. These studies largely focus on vagrancy regulations, with the term "vagrant" encompassing war orphans, shoe shiners, juvenile delinquents, vagrants, and rag pickers.[183] This fluidity that predated the postwar period.[184] During

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[181] Yun Su-jong, "Nŏngmajui wa kukka: nŏngmajui chiptan suyong ŭi yŏksa," *Chinbo p'yŏngnon* 56 (2013): 265-96: 265-96; Pak Hong-kŭn, "Sahoechŏk paeje ŭi hyŏngsŏng kwa pyŏnhwa: nŏngmajui kukka tongwŏn-ŭi yŏksarŭl chungsimŭro," *Sahoe wa yŏksa* 108 (2016): 227-61.

[182] Kim A-ram, "5·16 kunjŏnggi sahoe chŏngch'aek: adongbokchi wa 'puranga' taech'aek ŭi sŏngkyŏk," *Yŏksa wa hyŏnsil* 82 (2011): 329-65; Yi So-yŏng, "Pŏbi puch'akhan 'purangin' kip'yo wa kŭ hyogwa: hyŏngje pokchiwŏn kiŏk ŭi chaehyŏn kwa kwagŏch'ŏngsan nonŭi ŭi yeesŏ," *Han'guk pŏp ch'ŏrhakhoe* 17, no 2 (2014): 243-74; Chŏng Su-nam, "1960-nyŏndae 'purangin' t'ongch'i pangsik kwa 'sahoejŏk sinch'e' mandŭlgi," *Minjujuŭi wa inkwŏn* 15 no. 3 (2015): 149-85; Ch'u Chi-hyŏn, "Pakchŏnghŭi chŏngkwŏn ŭi 'sahoeak' homyŏng: hyŏngsa sabŏp ŭi hyoyulsŏng hwakpo chŏllyak ŭl chungsimŭro," *Sahoewa yŏksa* 117 (2018): 201-35; Yu Chin, "Kŏriŭi ch'ian kwŏllyŏk kwa 'sŏndo ŭi t'ongch'i kisul: 1960-nyŏndae ch'ŏngsonyŏn poho chŏngch'aek kwa puranga · ubŏm sonyŏn," *Sahoewa yŏksa* 123 (2019): 85-126.

[183] Historian Young Sun Park notes that while the lack of clarity in the term "orphan" is universal, it took on an added meaning in the 1920s in Korea and began to include delinquents and vagrants who were deemed "undesirable children." This shift in discourse not only confounded terms pertaining to orphans, but also altered the institutionalization and placement aims of orphanages. Young Sun Park, "Rescue and Regulation: A History of Undesirable Children in Korea, 1884-1961" (PhD diss., University of Southern California, 2018). For the changes in the term vagrant, see: Kŭn-sik Chŏng, "Nosugin tamnon kwa chedo ŭi yŏksajŏk pyŏndong," In *Han'guk ŭi nosugin* ed. Ku In-hoe, Chŏng Kŭn-sik, Sin Myŏng-ho (Sŏul: Sŏul Taehakkyo ch'ulp'an munhwawŏn, 2012), 375-410.

[184] Likewise, it is not unique to Korea. Historian A. L. Beier notes that vagrancy was more concerned with one's status than one's actions, and that the development of vagrancy demonstrated "a common response to managing poverty, labor, and social norms," Only when the category itself is fluid and

the colonial period, the term "vagrant" described a broad spectrum of individuals, from descendants of former aristocrats *yangban* to itinerant beggars, paupers, and vagabonds; its implication shifted from unwillingness or refusal to work to moral degeneracy and a threat to societal order.[185] Studies examining vagrants under the authoritarian regimes refer to its legal definition defined in the 1975 ordinance on vagrants.[186] This legal definition was, nonetheless, ambiguous, which allowed arbitrary application of the term and prompted subsequent discursive shifts. Since the term "vagrant" tends to incorporate a range of social actors into a single category, it prevents a close examination of a subset of the broadly defined vagrant population, in this, case waste pickers.

This conflation resulted in part from an emphasis on the state's role. In studies that specifically analyze waste pickers, for instance, waste pickers are portrayed as victims of state violence, collapsing them into a homogenous group.[187] This emphasis

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ambiguous is a status crime possible. In the study of vagrant figures in the eighteenth-century Anglophone world, literary scholar Sarah Nicolazzo characterizes vagrancy as a paratactic, proliferating, and expansive category; it can catalogue indefinite forms of deviance, granting the state the power to capture the urban populace under its jurisdiction. Sarah Nicolazzo, "Vagrant Figures: Law, Labor, and Refusal in the Eighteenth-century Atlantic World" (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2014); Anthony L Beier and Paul Ocobock. *Cast out: Vagrancy and Homelessness in Global and Historical Perspective* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2008), 3.

[185] Cho Kyŏng-hŭi, "'Onjŏng' kwa 'kyohwa' ŭi singminjuŭi - 1910-yŏndae chosŏnch'ongdokpu ŭi sahoegujesaŏp kwa kŭ imgye," *Yŏksa munje yŏn'gu* 25 (2011): 235-71; Yu Sŏn-yŏng, "Singminji ŭi sŭt'igŭma chŏngch'i: singminji ch'ogi purangja p'yosang ŭi hyŏnsil hyogwa," *Sahoewa yŏksa* 89 (2011): 41-84; Ye Chi-suk, "Ilche sigi chosŏn esŏ purangja ŭi ch'urhyŏn'gwa haengjŏng tangguk ŭi taech'aek," *Sahoewa yŏksa* 107 (2015): 73-96; "Ilche ha purangja ŭi t'ansaeng kwa kŭ t'ŭkching," *Han'guksa yŏn'gu* 164 (2014): 29-58; So Hyŏn-suk, "Kyŏnggye e sŏn koadŭl: koa munje rŭl t'onghae pon ilche shigi sahoe saŏp," *Sahoewa yŏksa* 73 (2007): 107-41.

[186] Naemubu, "*Hullyŏng che 410-ho: purangin ŭi sin'go, tansok, suyong, pohowa kwihyang mit sahu kwallie kwanhan chich'im*," (Sŏul: Naemubu, 1975). Sociologist Yi So-yŏng argues that this ambiguity granted the police the authority to detain even ordinary passersby in confinement/internment facilities. Yi So-yŏng, "'Kŏnjŏn sahoe wa kŭ chŏktŭl: 1960-80-nyŏndae purangin tansok ŭi saengmyŏng chŏngch'i," *Pŏpkwa sahoe* 51 (2016): 23-54.

[187] Yun, "Nŏngmajui"; Pak, "Nŏngmajui."

on state regulation is based in a narrow understanding of the state as solely "the government," its bureaucratic organizations and associated administrative bodies. For political theorist Timothy Mitchell, the state comprises both its formal structures and institutions as well as what are commonly considered to be its effects.[188] Mitchell suggests that state power encompasses and transcends the rigid boundaries of the state, economy, or society. This conception of state power allows us to consider its effects beyond the scope of its execution and immediate reach. Indeed, state power was not confined to executing street crackdowns on "deviants" or establishing waste picker camps. It also lay in the ways in which people treated waste pickers in their everyday interactions, most notably the manner in which ordinary citizens reiterated the state's depictions of waste pickers.

While waste pickers belonged to a subgroup of the population that the state deemed "problematic," they were also distinguishable from others by their symbolic associations with waste. Recent scholarship in waste studies indicates that the ways we see and understand waste are historically and spatially contingent. The sociologist Zsuzsa Gille highlights that the materiality of waste is also constituted by social and cultural factors.[189] The lexicon of trash is not static: some terms emerge while others disappear; some take on a derogatory meaning while others are replaced by new euphemisms.[190] Trash-related terms—what Elizabeth Spelman calls "trash lexicon" and its "semantic siblings"—convey a particular relationship between trash and human characteristics and

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[188] Timothy Mitchell, "The Limits of the State: Beyond Statist Approaches and Their Critics," *American Political Science Review* 85, no. 1 (1991): 77-96.

[189] Gille suggests "waste regimes" for analyzing the production, representation, and politicization of waste. Different times, places, and material compositions may result in the production of waste, but these variables influence how waste is understood and managed. Zsuzsa Gille, *From the Cult of Waste to the Trash Heap of History: The Politics of Waste in Socialist and Postsocialist Hungary* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007), 9, 34.

[190] In Egypt and Brazil, for instance, the reevaluation of waste pickers' labor led to the introduction of formal occupational titles, but these titles were never adopted by the workers. Jamie Furniss, "What Type of Problem Is Waste in Egypt?," *Social Anthropology* 25, no. 3 (2017): 301-17; Carolina Ana Sternberg, "From 'Cartoneros' to 'Recolectores Urbanos': The Changing Rhetoric and Urban Waste Management Policies in Neoliberal Buenos Aires," *Geoforum* 48 (2013): 187-95.

qualities,[191] for instance, the reclamation of waste materials and the reformation and rehabilitation of human nature.[192] The languages of waste also expanded waste-related metaphors to encompass other forms of precarity and dispossession.[193]

These studies show who makes and unmakes the meanings of waste and why, suggesting that waste is indeterminate. This indeterminacy, in linguistic, discursive, and cultural definitions of waste, also resonates with the material dimension of waste: they all underline the contingent nature of how waste becomes problematic. Waste pickers' identities were primarily shaped by their material livelihood—including the physical abuse of the police, the economic deprivation, and the waste heaps that surrounded their shacks. Nonetheless, their material circumstances alone tell us little about what sustained their symbolic associations with waste; it is through language and discourse that it becomes possible to understand why a certain group is labeled waste or associated with waste, as well as how such meanings and framings circulate in society.

This chapter follows the linguistic and discursive construction of waste pickers that took place in South Korea between the 1960s and 1990s, when the work itself was not perceived to be a proper occupation but rather a "deviant career."[194] It is divided into three sections: state discourse, vernacular and literary discourses, and waste pickers' self-identification. I begin by situating waste pickers in the context of the authoritarian regimes and their social controls, particularly the creation of waste picker camps, and how these camps and subsequent narratives about them helped to establish waste pickers as deviant. The following sections discuss how popular and literary interpretations

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[191] Elizabeth V. Spelman, *Trash Talks: Revelations in the Rubbish* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 7.

[192] Catherine Alexander and Joshua Reno, "Introduction," in *Economies of Recycling: The Global Transformation of Materials, Values and Social Relations*, eds. Catherine Alexander and Joshua Reno (London: Zed Books, 2012), 1-32.

[193] Zygmunt Bauman, *Wasted Lives: Modernity and its Outcasts* (London: Polity Press, 2004).

[194] Jeff Ferrell, Empire of Scrounge: Inside the Urban Underground of Dumpster Diving, Trash Picking, and Street Scavenging (New York: NYU Press, 2006).

were intertwined with state discourse, either reacting or reproducing institutional discourses in essays and literary works written by ordinary citizens and writers. I then move on to how waste pickers appropriated or resisted the prescribed meanings of the terminology that referred to them. Through weaving together discourses generated from different positions and for different purposes, this chapter demonstrates how these distinct narratives frequently reflected each other, reproducing and reaffirming the state's disciplinary technologies and its normative ideals.

STATE DISCOURSES

Establishing the Perceived Deviance of Waste Pickers

In the second half of the twentieth century, post-war South Korea saw the rise of uprooted populations including war orphans, refugees, beggars, waste pickers, and vagrants. Becoming a waste picker was often a consequence of life on the street without a job, a home, or any close kin. Newspaper reports portrayed waste pickers as vagrants, beggars, or even members of street gangs; the Ministry of Internal Affairs, for instance, categorized waste picking as one of the street occupations (*kadu chikŏp*), which were associated with vagrancy and deviance.[195] Despite being categorized as an "occupation", waste pickers operated informally without an established waste economy or a waste management system.

The 1962 inception of the Work Reconstruction Camp (WRC, *kŭllochaegŏndae*), a police-led camp that accommodated waste pickers, reinforced existing stigmas about waste pickers. The WRC designated waste pickers as potentially harmful to the social order and in need of reform and rehabilitation through labor. It also introduced a new term, reconstruction inmates (*[kŭllo]chaegŏndaewŏn*), part of a particular vocabulary that referred to waste pickers. As a state-devised term, "reconstruction inmates" replaced the vernacular word "rag picker" and was used as a

[195] Naemubu, Kadu chigŏp sonyŏn silt'a e chonghap punsŏk kyŏlgwa pogo (Sŏul: Naemubu 1965). BA0084439.

formal occupation category: it appeared on administrative documents during the WRC's operation between the 1960s and early 1990s, only to disappear when it was disbanded. Although the state had sought to create a new occupational name, in the end it reinforced the negative associations of "rag picker."

The state's initial depiction of waste pickers as a social ill prevailed in state discourses. Despite the ostensible emphasis on seeing waste picking as an occupation, various governmental bodies reiterated pervasive stereotypes of waste pickers, rarely treating them as actual laborers. Responses to the First Oil Crisis (1973) provide one such case. Shortly after the Oil Crisis and seeking to find ways to save resources and reclaim waste materials, both the Economic Planning Board (EPB) and the Ministry of Science and Technology (Kwahak kisulch'ŏ, MST) examined the then-current recycling system. While the EPB dismissed the contribution of waste pickers as negligible,[196] the MST, in their 1975 report *A Study on the Effective Use of Solid Waste* (*P'yep'um chawŏn ŭi hwaryong ŭl wihan chosa yŏn'gu*), addressed the contributions of the "reconstruction inmates" who recycled 32,000 tons of paper in 1973 alone.[197] Regardless, the social stigma that stuck to the WRC—what the MST described as "a group that was no different from social cancer"—shadowed their crucial economic role.[198] Such pejorative characterizations of waste pickers frequently occluded the acknowledgement they deserved for their labor.

If the EPB or the MST acknowledged the work of waste pickers, the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs (Pogŏn sahoebu, MHSA) treated them as objects of regulation and control. In *Guidance for the WRC Waste Pickers* (*Rag Pickers*) (*kŭllojaegŏndae (nŏngmajui) sŏnto taech'aek*), its 1978 report, the MHSA described waste pickers as "vagrants who are former criminals, gangsters, or people without family or relatives." The report continued, stating that they "have difficulty finding a different job due to their weak social

[196] Ch'ongmuch'ŏ, *Chongi sobi chŏryak undong chŏngae* (Sŏul: Ch'ongmuch'ŏ 1974), BA0139631.

[197] Kwahak kisulch'ŏ, *P'yep'um chawŏn ŭi hwaryong ŭl wihan chosa yŏn'gu* (Sŏul: Sŏul T'ŭkpyŏlsi, 1975).

[198] Kwahak kisulch'ŏ, *P'yep'um*, 95-96.

standing (*sinpun*), low or almost nonexistent degree of education, and an adversarial disposition that fostered self-defeating and self-destructive attitudes." The MHSA argued that these demographic characteristics made it hard for the state to "track their identity (*sinwŏn*), take preemptive measures against their potential felonies, and prevent any permeation of 'impure elements' (*pulsun puncha*)."[199] In this narrative, the MHSA equated waste pickers' social status with their individual traits and character flaws, denouncing them as beggars, vagrants, or spies, to justify state intervention into their lives. Waste pickers were characterized through an open-ended, expandable list of characteristics and identities, unified by the notion that they were harmful to society as a whole and required regulation.

Establishing the WRC allowed the military regime to categorize and control waste pickers, but this state intervention engendered the larger discursive sphere around waste pickers, one that aligned with the authoritarian regime's desire for social control. The term "reconstruction inmates" may imply that the state intended to elevate waste pickers to the status of proper citizens. However, archives reveal the state authorities themselves rejected this idea, denouncing both their character and the value of their labor. Officially categorized as a problem population, waste pickers formed part of a marginal population outside of society requiring disciplinary control.

The Selective Institutionalization of Waste Labor

Beyond disciplining waste pickers, waste labor and its terminologies also evolved. As South Korea experienced economic development, waste management was gradually institutionalized, the waste economy expanded, and new waste-related occupations appeared in both the public and private sectors. As I explain below, this formalization of labor redeemed certain types of workers, including municipal waste collectors and truck drivers, while leaving waste pickers in the informal sector.

One way to observe institutional changes is by examining changes to occupational terminology. *The Dictionary of Occupations in Korea* (*Han'guk chigŏp sajŏn*), first published in 1969 by the Ministry of Labor's (*Nodongbu*, MoL) Human

[199] Pogŏn sahoebu, *Kŭllojaegŏndae (nŏngmajui) sŏnto taech'aek* (Sŏul: Pogŏn sahoebu, 1978).

Development Institute, offers insight into the different names of occupations and industries under the Korean Standard Classification of Occupations and International Standard Classification of Occupations.[200] As shown in Table 2-1, the Ministry of Labor published five editions between 1969 and 2012 that included waste-related occupations, providing a glimpse into what kinds of waste work were created, how they were categorized, and what changes they underwent.

Table 2-1 Waste occupation names in the Korean Standard Classification of Occupations

Year	Occupation listed in the dictionary
1969 a)	Junk depot owner (*komulsang chu*) Intermediaries (*komul chungkaein*) Old materials sorters and separators (*komul chŏngnikong*, *p'yep'um sŏnbyŏl chŏngnikong*) Old-and-waste-materials collectors (*koch'ŏl sujibin*, *komul sujibin*, *p'yemul sujibin*)
1986 b)	Wholesale waste collection and sales (*tomae p'yep'um sujipp'anmaewŏn*) Wastepaper sorters (*koji sŏnbyŏlwŏn*) Wastepaper-throwers (*koji t'uipwŏn*)
1995 c)	No self-employed occupation
2003	No self-employed occupation
2012 d)	Sanitation worker (*hwan'gyŏng mihwawŏn*) Recyclable-materials collector (*chaehwaryongp'um sugŏwŏn*)

a) Inryŏk kaebal yŏn'guso, *Sajŏn*.

b) Kungnip chungang chigŏp anjŏngso, *Han'guk Chigŏp Sajŏn T'onghappon 1 p'an* (Sŏul: Nodongbu, 1986).

c) Chungang koyong chŏngbo kwalliso, *Han'guk Chigŏp Sajŏn T'onghappon 2 p'an* (Sŏul: Nodongbu, 1995).

d) Han'guk koyong chŏngbowŏn, *Han'guk Chigŏp Sajŏn* (Sŏul: Nodongbu, 2012).

This series of terms shows how different types of waste labor were institutionalized and framed. Occupations listed in the first edition of the dictionary (1969) suggest that the waste economy primarily consisted of transactions between self-employed individuals and small businesses, rather than constituting an industry or public sector.

[200] The first edition, published in 1969, listed 3,260 occupation names. The subsequent editions included approximately 10,000 occupation names, more than triple previous editions, reflecting the rapid growth of the economy and expansion of industries. Inryŏk Kaebal Yŏn'guso, *Han'guk Chigŏp Sajŏn* (Sŏul: Nodongbu, 1969).

In 1986, in the first integrated edition of the dictionary, we observe more employed, waged jobs as well as waste processing businesses. In the second and third editions of the dictionary, published in 1995 and 2003 respectively, there were no self-employed forms of waste occupation. In 2012, waste collection and waste picking reappeared in the dictionary: their names were changed to "sanitation worker" (*hwan'gyŏng mihwawŏn*, literally translation: a *person who beautifies environment*) and "recyclable-materials collector" (*chaehwaryongp'um sugŏwŏn*).

The changes to terminology also reflect how the state sought to neutralize the negative connotations associated with waste-related occupational terms. Some changes, such as municipal waste collection, followed the institutionalization of the waste management system, while others were driven by the government. In its 1986 report, *A Report on the Improvement of Occupation Names*, the Ministry of Government Administration (*ch'ongmuch'ŏ*, hereafter MGA) named 116 occupations that needed renaming, including "rag picker."[201] The MGA advised replacing "rag picker (*nŏngmajui*)" with "waste material collector" (*p'yep'um sujibin*)," suggesting that rag picker degraded the dignity of workers and the value of their work. However, it is unclear whether terminology alone could alter popular perceptions. In 1988, Seoul changed the formal title of municipal waste collection workers (collection crews and truck drivers) from "janitor" (*chŏngsowŏn*) to "sanitation worker"; the city also promoted their status from day laborers to directly-employed functional service workers.[202] Yet, as explained in chapter 1, such changes did not necessarily coincide with changes to their labor conditions, thus rendering the new names euphemistic.

Renaming was accompanied by citywide and nationwide promotional initiatives. In November 1988, the *Taehan News* followed one Seoul sanitation worker, a man past retirement age, through small alleys to a transfer station and then to the Nanjido landfill.[203] The narrator shows his wife and son lifting garbage bags into the pushcart and explains that their heavy workloads not only led workers to frequent overtime but also required additional help from their families. The narrator

[201] Ch'ongmuch'ŏ, *Chigŏp myŏngch'ing kaesŏnan* (Sŏul: Ch'ongmuch'ŏ), BG0001328.

[202] "Ch'ŏngsowŏn myŏngch'ing pakkwŏ hwan'gyŏng mihwawŏn ŭro," *Tonga Ilbo*, March 18, 1978.

[203] "Inmul sogae," *Taehan nyusŭ* no. 1724, (November 23, 1988). https://youtu.be/EiuwYdd5tjk. (last accessed on February 24, 2023).

tells the audience that their official title is now "sanitation workers," not "janitors." In the last segment, for ten seconds, the news takes viewers to the dumping fields in the Nanjido landfill, where a district waste collection truck unloads waste and waste pickers wait between the vehicle and the bulldozer. The news does not discuss what happens in the Nanjido Landfill once municipal solid waste is disposed. Instead–notwithstanding the waste pickers and district waste collection trucks in the background–the narrator comments on "the invisible labor of sanitation workers" who keep our streets clean, leaving landfill waste pickers invisible in plain view. This footage, produced to raise awareness of the role of sanitation workers and boost their morale, demonstrates how the state selectively institutionalized and promoted waste labor.

The Work Reconstruction Camp categorized waste pickers as a socially problematic population and coined a new term for them, which helps to explain why waste picking was considered a social status rather than an occupation and why waste pickers were excluded from institutionalized waste management. As we have seen, both the professionalization of waste labor and the recategorization of their occupation occurred selectively; neither necessarily replaced existing names nor the stigmas. As I will show in the following section, this label and its discursive effects outlived the waste picker camps themselves. The state's disciplinary programs and its discursive dimensions also shaped the vernacular language.

VERNACULAR DISCOURSES

Popular Imagination

As I have shown in the case of the state's narratives, waste pickers were frequently portrayed as beggars or vagrants. Both popular and literary texts reveal how state narratives and coinages affected vernacular terms. This section examines three vernacular terms that began to appear in the 1950s and the 1960s to refer to waste

pickers. "Rag picker" (*nŏngmajui*), a vernacular term commonly used to refer waste pickers, began to appear in newspapers in the 1950s, its usage concentrated to the 1960s and 1970s. A combination of rag (*nŏngma*) and a suffix that refers to a job title ([*j*]*ui*), "rag picker" was never a benign descriptor. It always carried negative connotations due to its association with street populations as well as waste.[204] Another term, "*sirai*",[205] a shortened form of the Japanese term, *kamikuzu hiroi* (waste paper picker), was a slang expression known and used among street gangs to indicate roles within their factions. The last term, "hoodlum" (*yangach'i*), was an explicitly derogatory expression that was also used in vernacular Korean to denigrate waste pickers. *Yangach'i*, a shortened form of *tongnyangach'i* (a portmanteau of *tongnyang*, the act of begging, and *ach'i*, a derogatory job title suffix), had a direct association with beggars.[206] The meaning of "hoodlum" has shifted over time, from "beggar" to "waste-picker" to yet other identities so that by the 1990s it no longer referred to rag pickers but to bullies or hoodlums.[207]

In the 1960s and 1970s, researchers, religious reformers, and social workers who interacted with waste pickers coined new labels such as "working adolescents,"

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[204] For instance, when the term "rag picker" was used in governmental reports, there was a disclaimer that it is a vernacular term (*sokch'ing*), which meant that the term was not neutral nor formal but a slur. Pogŏn sahoebu. *sŏndo taech'aek*.

[205] Ak'ama Kihu, a Japanese undercover journalist who investigated Seoul's underclass life, suggests a possible Japanese term that would capture waste-pickers' work: *kamikuzu hiroi* (waste paper picker), a name that survived by its shortened form, *hiroi*, then *sirai* in Korean. Kifū Ak'ama, *Taeji rŭl pora: 1920-yŏntae Kyŏngsŏng ŭi mitpadak t'ambang*, trans. Ho-ch'ŏl Sŏ (Sŏul: Amorŭmundi, 2016). Originally published as *Daichi o miro: Hensō tanbōki* (Tokyo: Tairiku kyōdō shuppankai, 1924).

[206] Cho Hang-bŏm, a Korean Linguist, explains this shift as being caused by the decreasing number and visibility of waste pickers and street-based waste picker groups. Hang-bŏm Cho, "Kŏji kwallyŏn ŏhui ŭi ŏwŏn kwa ŭimi," *Urimalkŭl* 61 (2014): 26-27.

[207] The Standard Korean Language Dictionary (2009) defines the word hoodlum (*yangach'i*) as "a person who behaves frivolously and frequently commits evil conduct," thus eliminating the reference to begging. However, it should be noted that the new usage of this term still carried negative moral traits: someone rowdy and inclined to thieving and violent crime, and even belonging to a gang—similar to the moralizing narratives on waste pickers. For this new use of the term hoodlum (*yangach'i*), such as low-level thugs, bullies, or hoodlums, see: Jonson Nathaniel Porteux, "Police, Paramilitaries, Nationalists and Gangsters: The Processes of State Building in Korea," (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2013).

"waste material collectors," or "unfortunate adolescents."[208] While seeking to describe the demographic traits and lifestyles of waste pickers, they either associated waste pickers with deviance and poverty, or depicted them as war orphans or juvenile delinquents in need of protection and reformation.[209] Their perspectives resonated with the state's depiction of waste pickers. Nonetheless, these reformers did seek to erase the value-laden terms and coin alternatives that reflected their own views on waste pickers, whether scholarly, missionary, or philanthropic.

Redemptive perspectives centered around sympathy for the waste pickers' positive qualities: industriousness, independence, and importance to the economy. Some writers argued that rag pickers differed from other street populations. In 1960, a *Kukje Sinbo* article, "'Hoodlums' are also sons and daughters of this country," proposed distinguishing waste pickers (*yangach'i* or *sirai*) from other street gangs (e.g., panhandling, stealing, or snatching): the work of "hoodlums" benefitted the national economy.[210] Similarly, in 1961, *Tonga Ilbo*, a major newspaper, published an investigative piece that identified waste pickers (*sirai*) as one type of beggar (*kŏji*).[211] The author then urged readers to see waste picking as an occupation, not vagrancy, because it benefitted "the poor, resource-deprived country."[212] In both examples, due to their contributions to the national economy waste pickers were deemed more deserving than other outcasts.

Second, waste pickers were seen as worthy when they demonstrated a hard-working and self-reliant demeanor—traits that the state itself highlighted. In a 1966 essay, Kim Tong-gil, a social critic and university professor, praised

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[208] Pu-ja Yim, "Kŭllon ch'ŏngsonyŏn t'ŭksu chŏndo yŏn'gu: kŭllojaegŏndae rŭl chungsimŭro," (Master thesis, Peroean k'ŭrisŭch'yan sinhak taehagwŏn, 1975); Kim, Chong-pok. Pulu ch'ŏngsonyŏn (nŏngmajui) taech'aek - Kyŏngsangbuk-to pyŏn. *Chipang haengchŏng* 25, no. 274 (1976): 86-90.

[209] Public administration, sociology or social work. Yidae sahoehakhoe, "Pusŏchin kkum ŭl moŭnŭn sonyŭntŭl: nŏngmajui e taehan siltae chosa pogo," *Sedae* 2, no. 17 (1964): 173-183.

[210] A few newspaper articles suggested distinguishing waste pickers (*yangach'i* or *sirai*) from other street gangs, as unlike panhandling, stealing, or snatching, their work benefits the national economy. "'Yangach'i to i nara ŭi adŭlttal ida," *Kukje Sinbo*, May 14, 1960.

[211] "Che 3-ŭi sahoe (1) ŏmaŏmahan hŏnpŏp," *Tonga Ilbo*, February 5, 1961.

[212] "Che 3-ŭi sahoe (8) sirai," *Tonga Ilbo*, February 14, 1961.

the waste-pickers "rummaging through all the streets and alleys of Seoul" as valuable, honest, and patriotic workers.[213] Another report on the Korea Ant Association (*Han'guk kaemihoe*, KAA), a private waste picker organization, expressed a similar viewpoint: despite being juvenile delinquents who were the target of societal contempt, waste pickers aspired to be self-reliant and led "a wholesome and rewarding life."[214] Likewise, high-school teacher Yi Ŭn-suk shared her reflections on her elderly tenant. Despite Yi's initial "unpleasant" impression of the tenant as having a "uncivilized attitude and threadbare appearance," Yi changed her mind after learning about the tenant's "job": the tenant was a rag picker who extensively saved and was self-reliant.[215] These examples, all written from the perspective of middle class intellectuals, reevaluated waste pickers primarily through the corresponding social value of their labor. However, hardly any attention was paid to why waste pickers were pushed to the edges of Korean society and how their marginality fostered inequality.

Contrary to such sympathetic approaches, negative portraits emphasized three characteristics alleged to belong to waste pickers: dishonesty, laziness, and untimeliness. Essays published in the Rag Commune newsletters (*nŏngma kongdongch'e*) reveal how middle-class individuals viewed waste pickers:[216] the Commune was located in Seoul's affluent Kangnam district, and locals contributed to a section entitled "Two Perspectives on Seeing Rag Pickers" (*nŏngmajui rŭl ponŭn*

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[213] Kim Tong-gil, "Nŏngmajui," *Saegajŏng*, no. 141 (September 1966): 60-61.

[214] The piece was published in 1977 in *Saekachŏng* (New family), a protestant-affiliated popular magazine." Nŏngmajuidŭl ŭi moim: Han'guk kaemihoe rŭl ch'ajasŏ," *Saegajŏng*, no. 262 (August/September 1977): 115-7.

[215] This essay was published in *Saemt'ŏ*, a Catholic-affiliated popular magazine in 1990. Yi Ŭn-suk, "Saemt'ŏ kajoksil: nŏngmajui halmŏni," *Saemt'ŏ* 21, no. 4 (1990): 116-119.

[216] The Rag Commune (*nŏngma kongdongch'e*) was founded by a long-term waste picker and consisted of waste pickers, a college student activist, and Yun P'al-byŏng, a patron/benefactor who himself had lived a life on the streets and established the commune. It aimed to end exploitive gangmaster-underling relationships and create a community where everyone shared the equipment necessary for their work, had equal rights and responsibilities, and was compensated fairly for their labor. Mun Yŏng-sam, "Kongdongch'e rŭl sijakhamyŏ," *Nŏngma* 1 (October 15, 1986), 3-4. Song Kyŏng-sang, a college student at the time, joined them in a managing role and edited the newsletters. The commune issued five newsletters between 1986 and 1991. Each issue has essays, commune member interviews, testimonies, and articles about recycling, the waste industry, or surveys of waste pickers.

tukaji sigak).[217] One writer, Kang Yŏng-ae, recalled suspecting that early-rising rag pickers stole rather than worked; when she watched waste pickers quarreling with neighborhood watchmen, she ascribed the conflict to the waste pickers.[218] Kim Kyŏng-ok, another contributor, similarly argued that "waste pickers are damaging the urban landscape and child upbringing." Kim then inquired: "why do we still have to deal with rag pickers when the country is rapidly becoming a developed country (*sŏnjin'guk*)?"[219] While conceding his lack of knowledge, another writer, Kim Chong-ho, voiced his astonishment: "the majority of waste pickers were lazy and lacked the willpower to live a life" because "anyone can now live more than a middle-class life with sufficient effort."[220] These writers urged the government to intervene by providing waste pickers with alternative jobs or removing them. They believed that waste pickers posed a threat to safety and well-being, and criminalized their presence. Attributing the fact of being a waste picker to the pickers' own actions, they called for waste pickers to be eliminated and rendered invisible in the daily life of the city.

Popular portrayals of waste pickers showed two dynamics. Waste pickers were tolerated–albeit ostensibly–provided they conformed to the state narratives. Complacency alone, however, could not eradicate their stigma. Antipathetic narratives recited and reinforced the authoritarian state's negative depictions of waste pickers. We also find similar processes, namely the exclusion of waste pickers, in their literary representation.

Literary Representation

[217] This series was published in all five issues of the newsletter, each including two to three contributors who wrote about their experiences or opinions of the rag pickers; most of the writers were residents who lived near the rag commune, with two exceptions of a waste-picker and a member of the neighborhood watch scheme.

[218] Kang Yŏng-ae, "Nŏngmajui rŭl ponŭn tukaji sigak," *Nŏngma* 2 (May 15, 1987), 35.

[219] Kim Kyŏng-ŏk, "Nŏngmajui rŭl ponŭn tukaji sigak," *Nŏngma* 2 (May 15, 1987), 34.

[220] Kim Chong-ho, "Nŏngmajui rŭl ponŭn tukaji sigak 2," *Nŏngma* 1 (October 15, 1986), 15.

Literary portrayals of waste pickers reveal another dimension of vernacular discourses.[221] My analysis draws on three short stories on waste workers published in the 1970s and three novels on the Nanjido landfill published in the 1980s.[222] I first examine how waste work and its workers were represented and how waste was used as a symbol to criticize modern society. I then discuss in detail four works, three short stories and one novel, that connect male waste work and female sex work: Hong Sŏng-wŏn's *Snowy Night* (1979, *Sŏrya*), Mun Sun-t'ae's *Janitor* (1975, C*hŏngsobu*), and O Yu-kwŏn's *Junk Depot* (1975, *Komulsang*), Chŏng Yŏn-hŭi's *Nanjido* (1985, *Nanjido*). While all three imply that some waste pickers can achieve reformation through working with waste, the pairing of male waste work with female sex work calls into question their prospects of social mobility.

In literary portrayals, waste workers often appear as alienated from the industrialization and economic development of the 1970s and 1980s. In Yi Sang-rak's *The Daughter of Nanjido* (1985, *Nanjido ŭi ttal*), the male narrator works with

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[221] These works can be categorized as underclass literature. Literary scholar Kim Sŏng-hwan argues that mainstream literature, be it labor literature (*nodongja munhak*) or *minjung* literature (*minjung munhak*), marginalized the experience of the underclass, who occupied an invisible social stratum. This constraint in conventional literary forms led to the emergence of reportage, *rŭp'o*, a literary genre that blended journalistic investigation and narrative non-fiction to better convey the voice of an otherwise unseen populace. In this way, representing marginalized human experiences constituted a double critique of both the brutal modernization process and a mainstream social and literary movement that failed to capture subaltern lives on the urban margins. Sunghwan Kim, "The Boom in Nonelite Writings and the Expansion of the Literary Field," in *Toward Democracy: South Korean Culture and Society, 1945-1980*, eds. Hyunjoo Kim, Yerim Kim, Boduerae Kwon, Hyeryoung Lee, and Theodore Jun Yoo (Berkeley, CA: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California Press, 2021), 258-271; Kim Sŏng-hwan [Sunghwan Kim], "Hach'ŭngmin sŏsa wa chubyŏnbu yangsik ŭi kanŭngsŏng: 1980 yŏndae nonp'iksyŏn ŭl chungsimŭro," *Hyŏndae munhagŭi yŏn'gu* 59 (2016): 403-442; Kim Ye-rim, "Pinmin ŭi saenggye yulli hogŭn t'agwŏlsŏng e kwanhayŏ," *Han'gukhak yŏn'gu* 36 (2015): 51-80.

[222] Literary scholar Yi Chŏng-suk indicates that underclass narratives, which she refers to as "the genre of the 1970s", focused on the social group whose members were displaced from wage labor in capitalist or agrarian economies, and whose "jobs" were at risk of disappearing as industrialization and modernization proceeded. The underclass subjects in these literary works include vagrants, day laborers, shoe-shiners, porters, prostitutes, and rag pickers. Yi Chŏng-suk, "1970-yŏndae Han'guk sosŏre nat'anan kanan ŭi chŏngdonghwa." (PhD diss., Seoul National University, 2014), 77.

private garbage haulers to recruit day laborers from "blood-sellers lined up in the blood bank, vagrants around Seoul Station, and the like."[223] Waste picking was but one of the many odd jobs—including blood-selling, begging, peddling, panhandling, and scavenging—that the urban underclass would take on. Workers would typically move between these jobs to sustain their living. The novel's characters included subjects such as a war orphan and refugee, a disabled veteran, a war widow, a rural migrant, and an evictee. All were part of the street population and loosely categorized as members of the "urban underclass."

Occupying the lower rungs of society, waste pickers were frequently moralized by fictional characters. Take Yu Chae-sun's *Nanjido People* (1984, *Nanjido saramdŭl*), for example.[224] Yun Yŏn-ju, the novel's narrator, is a college student who fled to Nanjido after being tortured for her student activism. Working as a waste picker in Nanjido, she realized that she had thought herself superior to her fellow waste pickers whether due to education or demeanor. Despite this self-awareness, she preserved her sense of difference. When a waste picker criticized her for her elitism and hypocrisy, she brushed it off as a "poor people's complex." She depicts the Nanjido waste pickers lacking self-control including money and having no commitment or patience in their work (216-217). In *The Daughter of Nanjido*, one elder similarly criticizes the tendency to "always return to Nanjido whenever you failed in the outside world" (244-45), implying that waste picking is an improper job. While these narrators were themselves waste pickers, they reiterated typical prejudices towards the urban poor consistent with the state's justifications for controlling waste pickers. Nonetheless, their work ethic and relative moral worth allowed them to criticize others.

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[223] Yi Sang-rak, *Nanjido ŭi ttal* (Sŏul: Silch'ŏn munhaksa, 1985), 40.

[224] *Nanjido People* is a reportage novel by Yu Chae-sun, based on journalistic research and her non-fiction piece, *Searching for the Nanjido Landfill* (1980, *Nanjido ssŭregi hach'ijang ŭl ch'ajasŏ*). Yu merges fictional and non-fictional accounts, incorporating actual events and actual people, including the names of some individuals. Yu Sun [Yu Chae-sun], "Nanjido ssŭregi hach'ijang ŭl ch'ajasŏ," in *Saram wie saram itta* (Sŏul: Tongailbosa, 1982): 109-159; Yu Chae-sun, *Nanjido saramdŭl* (Sŏul: Kŭlsure, 1985).

Waste also serves as an allegory to critique the rapidly developing Korean society as well as the reformation of the individual. In Chŏng Yŏn-hŭi's *Nanjido* (1985, *Nanjido*), the protagonist of the novel, Chŏng-ki, lives with Ŭn-suk's family in Nanjido.[225] Chŏng-ki, a former gang member turned waste picker, believes that the landfill cured his dishonest and thieving character. Ŭn-suk, the female narrator, is around nineteen and lives in Nanjido with her mother, grandmother, and two younger brothers. After completing high school, she worked as a waitress at a Japanese restaurant where she also provided sexual services to a man in his seventies. Upon leaving Nanjido, Ŭn-suk learns that societal waste (i.e., extravagance and moral decay) is no better than the material discards deposited in the landfill. Reprimanding Ŭn-suk for her sexually degrading herself for seemingly selfish ends, Chŏng-ki attempts to save her as part of his romantic pursuit. However, she leaves Nanjido once again, this time seeing her job as a means to rescue the people of Nanjido. Back in the old man's hotel room, Ŭn-suk suggests him she would do anything if he promised to offer financial support for the medical needs of the Nanjido dwellers. When he dismisses her plea, she commits suicide. Here, Chŏng-ki's own rehabilitation not only aligned with the conventional reformation narrative but also provided greater moral authority to criticize Ŭn-suk's debasement. In contrast, Ŭn-suk's sexual sacrifice, without a patriarch or adult male in her family to benefit, was regarded as neither filial nor virtuous. Although Ŭn-suk decides to use her sex work to help the Nanjido dwellers, when this (ostensibly) nobler, less self-serving aim fails, her "defilement" ceases to serve any purpose and she takes her own life.

In literary works, rural migrants often portrayed as engaging in either waste job or sexual labor. In Hong Sŏng-wŏn's *Sŏrya* (1979, *Sŏrya*), a father and daughter each worked in a junk depot and a restaurant, where the daughter began working as a restaurant hostess providing sexual services.[226] Chang, a day laborer, relocated to Seoul in search of his daughter, who had disappeared in Seoul. The story sets in a junk depot where three tile setters worked there intermittently during the off-season, while the remaining four, including Chang, worked there regularly. One evening, the waste

[225] Chŏng Yŏn-hŭi, *Nanjido* (Sŏul: Chŏngŭmsa, 1988).

[226] Hong Sŏng-wŏn, "Sŏrya," *Munye chungang* 2 no.1 (March 1979): 140-154.

pickers gather at a nearby restaurant to celebrate the birthday of a worker at a junk depot. When Chang overheard the voice of a new waitress in the next room, he immediately missed his runaway daughter, whose image of scarlet lips at a drinking table came to mind—only to find out shortly thereafter that the news waitress was indeed his daughter. In Mun Sun-t'ae's short story *Janitor* (1975, *Chŏngsobu*), we follow the story of a rural migrant couple.[227] Nam-su, a city janitor, arrives in the city of Kwangju from a rural village when he lost his home and blacksmithing job due to highway construction. Sun-ja, an orphaned prostitute stricken with late-stage cancer, meets Nam-su while soliciting in a park. Using all her savings and her pimp's connection, she secures Nam-su a janitor job.[228] Nam-su, unaware of the severity of her sickness, imagines removing Sun-ja from the brothel. When his superintendent, who has been bribed by a factory owner, orders Nam-su and other janitors to unload waste next to thatched-roof houses where the poor live, the janitors acquiesce for fear of losing their jobs. Feeling as if the garbage of the rich is "bulldozing" the homes of the poor, Nam-su digs up trash mountains and dumps it next to the factory yard, an act of conscience that costs him his job. In this ending, the protagonist exploits waste to criticize the growing divide between the haves and have-nots.

Junk Depot (1976, *Komulsang*) stages intraclass gender dynamics through an episode between male waste pickers. O Yu-kwŏn's story follows three men whose lives were entangled with the Korean war: Jjakkui, a single man in his late thirties who became an orphan when his leftist parents were executed; Ttŏksoi, a veteran who became infertile during the war and was subsequently unable to restart a family; and Elder Ttogul, a man in his sixties whose life was ruined due to accusations that he was an anti-communist

[227] Mun Sun-t'ae, "Chŏngsobu," in *Kohyang ŭro kanŭn param* (Sŏul: Ch'angjak kwa pip'yŏngsa, 1975).

[228] It is worth noting that neither Sun-ja's prostitution nor Nam-su's janitor role was criticized or moralized in the story; rather, Nam-su's goal of returning to his hometown with Sun-ja indicates class-based affinities (i.e., those of rural migrants) that surpass gender differences or stigmatized jobs.

landowner.[229] Working as waste/junk collectors (*komul changsu*), they share a rented room in a junk depot, where they sell what they collect. One day, Ttŏksoi encounters a woman in her thirties who, while negotiating a price for her broken pot, playfully asks whether he would purchase human trash (*saram komul*). The woman becomes a prostitute after leaving a fraud marriage but remains determined to find someone and marry again. Back in the junk depot, Ttŏksoi explains her story and asks Jjakkui, a single man in his late thirties, if he accepts a bride if he arranged one. Ttŏksoi and Elder Ttogul encourage Jjakkui to start a married life in a similarly dingy room in the junk depot; both think they could benefit from her domestic labor. The three men in the story, who found waste work as a survival strategy, occupy the bottom of the social ladder; their social position is unlikely to afford them either wives or families. When Ttŏksoi tries to match Jjakkui with the prostitute, the men do not judge her being a barmaid and a prostitute. Instead, they support Jjakkui's marriage strictly for their own potential benefit—that the woman might fulfill their domestic needs.

The literary narratives I have examined demonstrate two characteristics. One is the way that waste work can bring repentance to and reform individuals. Whether male waste workers reflecting on their own transformation or narrators criticizing other waste pickers for their lax work ethic and moral weakness, these were all told in lay people's voices, internalizing perspectives that effectively reproduced the state's claims and narratives. The parallels made between male waste work and female sex work constitute the second characteristic.[230] This literary motif, which itself mirrors the Joint Wedding (*hapdong kyŏron*) program in the 1960s and 1970s, seems to suggest a similar uplift of their lives.[231] Although it hints at the class affinities between

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[229] O Yu-kwŏn, "*Komulsang*," *Hyŏndae munhak* 259 (July 1976): 34-53.

[230] Pairing prostitutes and other working class or underclass males in literature is not entirely new. For instance, analyzing commonalities between military labor and sex work, Jin-Kyung Lee indicates the similarity between their respective social positions. In the case of military labor and military sex work, they are both in a militarized environment and use their bodies as commodities; for both, simply having a functioning body equals their monetary value. Jin-kyung Lee, *Service Economies: Militarism, Sex Work, and Migrant Labor in South Korea*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

[231] The Joint Wedding was a state-led forced marriage scheme that matched waste pickers with Seoul's Women's Protection Facility. Historian Kim A-ram indicates that the Joint Weddings were held for disabled veterans during the 1950s and extended to rag picker camps. Kim claims that the state

male waste pickers and female prostitutes, it obscures their uneven, gendered relationships.[232] Marrying otherwise vagrant individuals could prevent potential problems related to vagrancy and reduce the state's fiscal burden, such as the operation costs of labor camps and protection facilities. This heteronormative family model serves the state's interests rather than the interests of the individual. This arranged marriage scheme did not offer real possibilities for social mobility, implicitly perpetuating their social status on the margins of the society.

SELF-IDENTIFICATION OF WASTE PICKERS

Despite difficulties uncovering the voice of waste pickers, some available sources provide waste pickers' own accounts. In petition letters written to state authorities, newspaper op-eds, essays in magazines, and newsletters for a more general audience, waste pickers identified and advocated for themselves. Through various types of written materials, waste pickers narrated themselves in three ways: their moral standing, their labor and its contribution, and their self-identification in relation to broader social and structural perspectives.

First, waste pickers portrayed a willingness to comply with dominant

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compelled them to begin new lives and ignored the fact that waste pickers had replicated "family-like" structures in their street groups. Such an interpretation not only romanticizes the exploitive and violent characteristics of street groups, but also disregards the gendered burdens of the state-led marriage and family model. In the context of the Joint Wedding, women were frequently mobilized to provide domestic labor and to "normalize" men who were otherwise deemed problematic. Kim A-ram, "Kajok i chilmŏjin kuho wa chahwal: 1950-60-nyŏndae haptong kyŏrhon kwa kŭ chuin'gong," *Yŏksa munje yŏn'gu* 33 (2015): 84.

[232] In her analysis of what she terms "poverty-affect" (*kanan chŏngdong*) in the literature of the 1970s, the literary scholar Yi Chŏng-suk suggests that prostitutes represented a distinct socioeconomic category that was uprooted by industrialization and, like many others, yearned for a better life. In the 1970s, "prostitute narratives" emphasized the agency of prostitutes, who resisted the inherent commodification of their bodies and sexuality in sex work. The similarities between prostitutes and their male customers stemmed from their shared experiences of being uprooted, desiring to escape poverty, and being constrained by capitalistic and hygienic limitations. See Yi, "*Kanan*," 77-92.

moral standards, if only to advance their own needs. For instance, they appropriated "reconstruction member," a formally devised term to replace "rag picker," to resist common stereotypes they faced. In his letter to a newspaper in 1966, Cho Sŏng-ki, an inmate of the Work Reconstruction Camp, urged an end to waste pickers being called hoodlums. Reminding readers of the new name, "reconstruction inmate," Cho claimed that waste pickers worked diligently, saved their incomes, and lived under a strict routine and schedule, arguing that "waste-pickers are not as malicious as some civilians (*sahoein*) might think."[233] Likewise, Kim, another WRC member, criticized the tendency to cast waste pickers as thieves or beggars, arguing that "rag pickers do have dignity as human beings."[234] While these claims seemed to comply with the state's justifications for establishing waste picker camps, the formal terms of their work nonetheless gave them a chance to reclaim their personhood and work ethic.

Petition letters show how waste pickers and their managers further inverted the language of the state to advocate for their needs.[235] In 1976, Pak Ha-yŏng, a manager (*kwal'lijang*) at the Korea Work Reconstruction Welfare Organization (KWRWO, *Han'guk kŭllo chaegŏn pokjihoe*), a waste picker organization run by the Police Veterans Association (*Taehang'min'guk chaehyang kyŏnguhoe*), filed a letter with the Ministry of Internal Affairs (*Naemubu*):

> Now, we have gained confidence as dignified members of society (*ŭijŏtan sahoein*) and as individuals with occupations (*chikŏpin*); we are grateful that we have cast off our past as ex-convicts and that we have become citizens (*simin*) collecting recyclable materials at night and catching thieves and burglars; we have grasped the spirit of New Village (*Saemaŭl*), sweeping the streets of our neighborhood in the early mornings; we have gained self-

[233] "Yangach'irago purŭji malla," *Kyŏnghyang Sinmun*, 1966.09.05

[234] "Nŏngmajui ŭi pyŏn," *Tonga Ilbo*, 1964.04.22

[235] In the petition letters submitted by other types of waste picker camps during the mid-1970s, it was often the managers, not the waste pickers themselves, who actively positioned waste workers as repentant individuals, and thus as deserving members of society (sahoein). I was not able to confirm from the sources whether the managers were also waste workers or not.

> esteem and pride from the fact that the materials we collect will be recycled and then contribute to the national economy. We, the three thousand inmates who have grown from parasitic waste pickers to industrial workers (*sanŏp ŭi yŏkkun*), promise to become hard-working, genuine citizens.[236]

In this letter, Pak recited the state's narratives: becoming hardworking individuals, fostering "the spirit of New Village (*Saemaŭl*)," and maintaining the cleanliness and tidiness of their neighborhood. By refuting prevalent stereotypes, Pak positioned waste pickers as deserving members of society.[237] It may seem the writer merely took up the state's language, emphasizing becoming a hard-working, productive, self-reliant individual—a key tenet of the authoritarian regime. However, when the state designated waste pickers as a deviant population, and its discursive effect spanned society, waste pickers had little other option to have their voices heard than to position themselves as docile and obedient subjects. Written as a petition, their seeming conformity was a ploy to solicit financial support.

At the Rag Commune, this moral claim served to support waste pickers' autonomy. Kim Ch'a-kyun, a leader of the commune, admitted how he and his colleagues distanced themselves from past lives in which they stole or exploited others.[238] Mun Yŏng-sam, a former gangmaster who had lived off his

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[236] Kyŏngch'alch'ŏng, *Han'gukkŭllo chaegŏn pokchihoe chiwŏn yoch'ŏng e taehan hoesin* (Sŏul: Kyŏngch'alch'ŏng, 1976). BA0185302.

[237] This emphasis on cleanliness also appears in another letter published in a newsletter of the JOC (Jeunesse Ouvrière Chrétienne, Young Christian Workers, *Han'guk Kat'ollik Nodong Ch'ŏngnyŏnhoe*) in March 1962. A WRC member writes: "[A]fter joining the JOC, we keep our bodies and garments clean, as well as our neighborhood; we have decided to clean the village we live in to demonstrate that we are not vagrants; we ensure that we plan and accomplish in our lives as JOC members by contributing to society". Waste pickers displayed cleanliness to show their reformation; by caring for their physical bodies and immediate surroundings, waste pickers were no longer a nuisance in the social landscape. Cleanliness, in this context, was employed to restore their new identity as a deserving citizen. Han'guk Kat'ollik nodong ch'ŏngnyŏnhoe, *Han'guk Kat'ollik nodong ch'ŏngnyŏnhoe 25-yŏnsa* (Sŏul: Pundo ch'ulp'ansa, 1986), 67-68; *Han'guk Kat'ollik nodong ch'ŏngnyŏnhoe 50-nyŏnŭi kirok* (Minjuhwa undong kinyŏm saŏphoe, 2009), 27-28.

[238] Kim Ch'a-gyun, "Che 2-chagŏpchang ŭl sinsŏrhamyŏ: kŭraedo saraya hagi ttaemune," *Nŏngma* 4 (1988), 4-8.

underlings' labor, pledged not exploit others' labor and to respect equal rights in the commune. He would "stop living only for himself, but for other waste pickers whose lives were as deprived as his own."[239] Such reformation and self-discipline should not be seen as conforming to the state's regulation. It primarily served to encourage waste pickers to create a community.

Second, waste pickers emphasized the value of their labor and their contributions to society. After the 1973 Oil Crisis, waste collectors realized that their livelihoods were in peril due to resource conservation campaigns and fluctuating raw material costs. Kim Ch'ang-su, the leader of the 150 waste pickers at the Hyŏpsinwŏn camp in Kwangju-si, submitted a series of petition letters in 1976, 1977, and 1978. Kim wrote that despite being "a warrior who contributes to national economic development" and a "hidden contributor to industrial development," waste pickers were excluded from economic development's benefits. Instead, they were "treated with contempt and disdain by society, abandoned as human garbage, but fighting to survive."[240]

In the 1980s, the government intervened directly to develop a waste management system, establishing pilot household recycling programs as well as the Korea Recycling Corporation (Han'guk chaesaeng kongsa, KRC). Cho Kil-sŏng, a waste picker at the Rag Commune, eloquently criticized the KRC's activities: as someone "whose life depends on old materials and whose life is synonymous with trash," he sensed a tinge of "emptiness and hollowness" upon learning of the then-emerging government recycling programs that would serve only to marginalize waste pickers further.[241] In its quest for professionalization and institutionalization, the government predictably looked down on the labor practice of waste pickers without

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[239] Mun Yŏng-sam, "Sijakhamyŏ," 3-4.

[240] In 1977, waste pickers were able to collect only roughly 19,000 metric tons (5 million kwan) of materials, compared to 30,000 metric tons (8 million kwan) the previous year (5 million kwan). Kwangju kwangyŏksi, *Chahwalgŭllodae unyŏng hyŏpchomun* (Kwangju: Kwangju kwangyŏksi, 1980), 147-152.

[241] Cho Kil-sŏng, "Han nŏngmajui ga marhanŭn ssŭregi taech'aek," *Wŏlgan Mal* (September 1992): 200; Yun P'al-byŏng, "Yŏrŏbuni kkumkkunŭn arŭmdaun sesang, urinŭn silch'ŏnhago itsŭmnida," *Chinbo p'yŏngnon* 5 (2000): 217-249.

considering their potential role in recyclable collection. As waste pickers were not considered to be an occupation, there was no place to register their knowledge and expertise, nor their social, political, and environmental consciousness. Cho reminded readers that their waste picker status obscured their work ethic and recycling performance, staking a claim for the social necessity of their work despite the dominant narrative's disregard.

In addition to the institutionalization of recycling, scrap import also affected domestic secondary material prices and the livelihood of waste pickers. In the 1970s, in response to the Oil Crisis, the government proposed a system of centralized import control to regulate the price difference between imported and domestic recyclable materials.[242] Regardless, scrap import continued without much supply and demand management and, by the 1980s, waste pickers criticized this situation in essays or cartoons published in Rag Commune newsletters. Figure 2-1 shows a protestor on the left shouting against the import of scrap metal, while the person to the right is seated on an elevated seat, indicating their position of authority, who states they will import even more scrap metal to imprison the protestors. A satirical depiction of waste pickers who were frequently framed and imprisoned, and often subject to unfairly severe charges, this caricature critiqued both the government's scrap import policy and its unjust criminalization of waste pickers.

[242] Kwahak kisulch'ŏ, *P'yep'um*. I discussed this in detail in chapter 1.

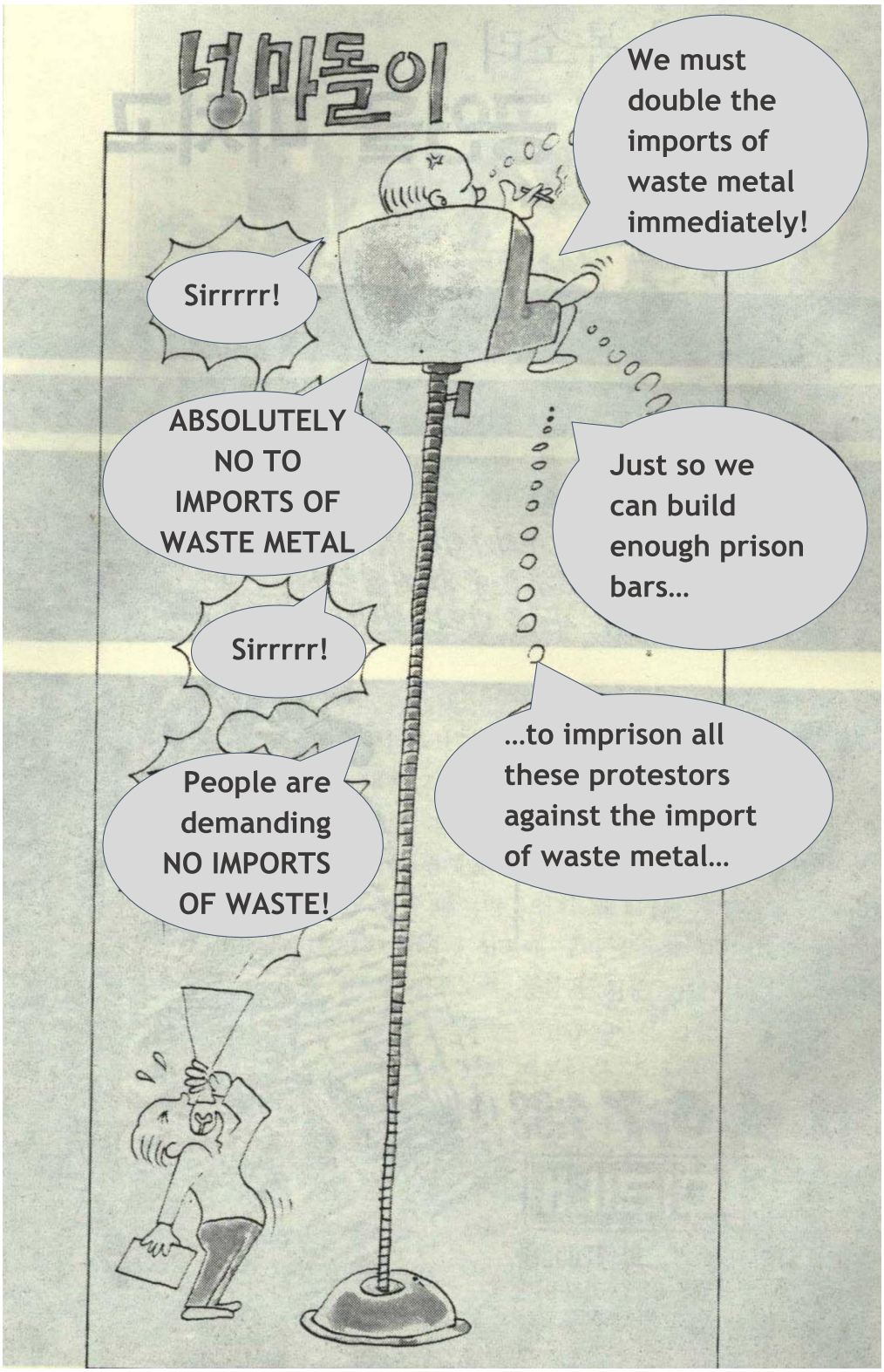

Figure 2-1 Scrap metal import protest

Source: "Nŏngmadoli," Nŏngma 4 (1988), 31.

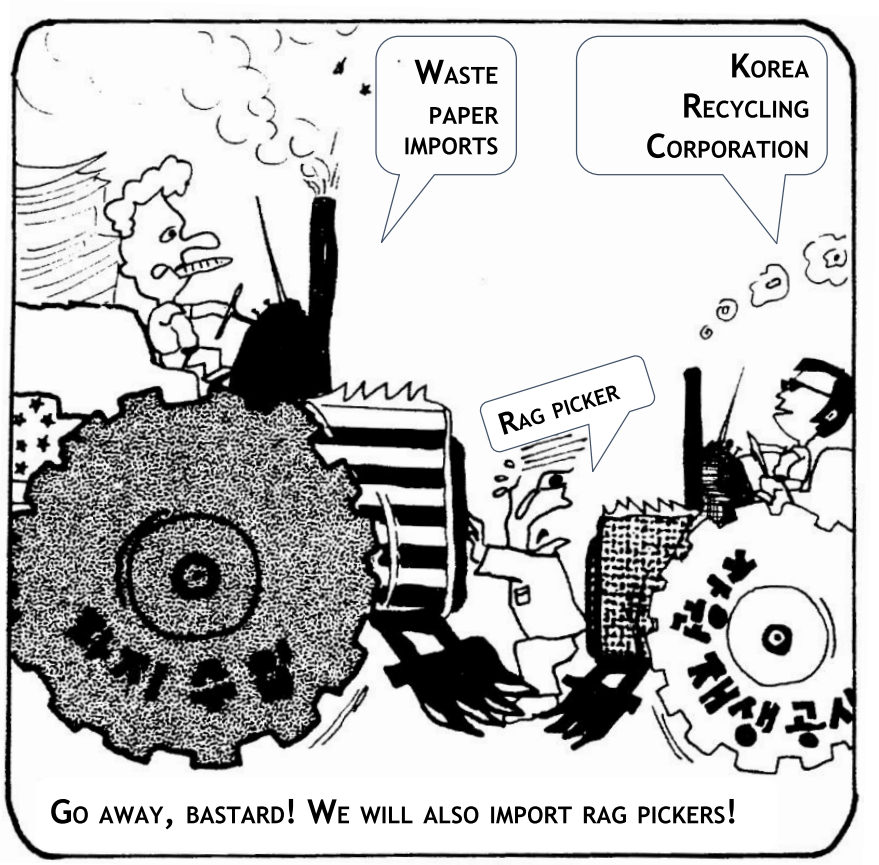

Figure 2-2 Importing Rag Pickers

Source: "Nŏngma manpyŏng," Nŏngma 5 (1991): 27.

Figure 2-2 illustrates a waste picker trapped between wastepaper import forces and the Korea Recycling Corporation. Both are depicted driving compactors, with one of the compactors bearing the Stars and Stripes, suggesting that wastepaper import was linked to anti-American sentiment. A waste picker is wedged between their wheels and excavating buckets, emphasizing the threat that waste pickers confronted. One of the compactor operators contends that they will also import rag pickers, from which we learn that this image satirizes the scrap import policy by insinuating sarcastically that the government might source waste pickers from abroad as well.

Finally, waste pickers argued their presence stemmed from social and structural causes. Yi Tong-ch'ŏl, a waste picker at the Rag Commune, indicated that many rag pickers had been orphaned during the Korean War and many more had been abandoned by their families . Given these origins, Yi argued that "rag pickers should be seen as a consequence of other people's actions, rather

than as a result of their own shortcomings, thus society must take responsibility."[243] Similarly, Cho Kil-sŏng, a Rag Commune member, stated that many rag pickers, without education and skills, lived on trash heaps because they did not want to be criminals and had few other alternatives besides death.[244] Both waste pickers attributed the prevalence of rag pickers to historical and social causes, such as being uprooted and lacking social ties, and demand that society should change the way it sees them. Being a rag picker was not entirely the fault of the individual, they argued, but instead was entwined with broader social forces, a situation that Korean society should recognize.

For some waste pickers, recognizing of their moral standing and the value of their work led them to reflect on their marginal position. Mun Yŏng-sam suggested that no one wanted to become a waste picker and that no waste pickers intended to live on the lowest stratum of society. He urged that "waste pickers have the right to live a humane life despite being abandoned and shunned by society," and that "waste pickers are no different from civilians (*sahoein*), in their struggle for living."[245] Questioning why waste pickers are never treated as human beings,[246] Song Kyŏng-sang observed that waste pickers were systemically excluded from society due to their criminal records or lack of education, reducing them to lives of vagrancy or day labor. These experiences of discrimination and exploitation came from their childhood as orphans, with no next of kin, and the stigma of life on the streets, all circumstances that were beyond their control.

Let us return to the newspaper opinion piece I discussed, which pleaded to stop labeling waste pickers as hoodlums. After more than two decades, it is noteworthy that waste pickers at the Rag Commune appropriated the derogatory term "hoodlum." Kim Ch'a-kyun recalled an anecdote during a drink with members of the commune: "We personified the term *yangach'i* as if it were a three-syllable Korean name, used the first letter *yang* as a family name, and combined it with a honorific

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[243] Yi Tong-ch'ŏl, "Nŏngmajui rŭl ponŭn tukaji sigak 1," *Nŏngma* 1 (October 15, 1986), 14.

[244] Cho, "Ssŭregi taech'aek," 200.

[245] Mun, "Sijakhamyŏ," 3-4.

[246] Song Kyŏng-sang, "Modakpulgaesŏ," *Saegajŏng* (January 1988): 100-101. Also see: Song Kyŏng-sang, "Kkaejin kŭrŭt to ssŭlmoga itta," *Nodong munhak* (April 1989): 28-30.

title *sŏnsaengnim*. …. We [the commune members] call each other 'Mr. Yang' (*Yang sŏnsaengnim*), hoping to respect one another, even if only within our world."[247] Originally, the term hoodlum denigrated an individual's personhood beyond occupation. By reversing its pejorative connotation into an honorable, respectable one, waste pickers reclaimed their self-worth.

CONCLUSION

This chapter investigated the language and discourses surrounding waste pickers. Not only did the WRC establish the perceived deviance of waste pickers, it also gave rise to associated labels and discourses. Institutional changes, especially the emergence of public and private sector waste management, spawned new waste-related occupations as well as neutralizing terminologies designed to reduce stigma. However, most of these terms were either tautological or euphemistic. This selective formalization of waste labor entailed promoting certain types of waste labor through public campaigns and news footage, which in turn reinforced the stigma associated with waste pickers. Popular and literary narratives demonstrated that the state's disciplinary programs and attendant discourses outlasted the camps themselves. The popular imagination either lauded or criticized waste pickers for their work or personhood. Whether motivated by sympathy or antipathy, lay people—scholars, social reformers, or middle-class citizens—reproduced commonly held stereotypes. In literary representations, narrators exploited both material and metaphorical waste to criticize the country's growing polarization. On the one hand, waste could bring waste pickers repentance and reformation; on the other, by pairing male waste work and female sex work, it insinuated few possibilities for uplifting their lives and social mobility. Finally, while the self-identification of waste pickers may appear to have made moral claims that subscribed to dominant normative values, by establishing their moral standing they sought to uphold their autonomy and reclaim the value of their work.

[247] Kim Ch'a-kyun, "Che 2-chagŏpchang," 5-7.