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

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CONCLUSION

By positioning waste pickers within the broader socioeconomic environment of South Korean development, this dissertation has shown how a developing nation-state produced and maintained an urban underclass. Addressing waste picking as a form of labor and an agent of industrialization and development, the case studies—waste picker camps and the Nanjido landfill—demonstrate how labor forces outside the formal, organized, or institutionalized sector—albeit rarely recognized as such—bore the brunt of the country's high-growth era. Yet, the combination of modern waste management, growing environmental awareness, and urban development alienated waste pickers.

The case studies demonstrate how a developing state appropriated the labor of the urban poor at little or no cost, labor that was frequently disregarded and forgotten. Each chapter examines the ways in which waste pickers were pushed out of society: institutionally (i.e., modern waste management), socially (i.e., discursive effects), economically (i.e., mandatory domestic recycling), and spatially (i.e., urban redevelopment). Each chapter reveals how waste pickers endured and navigated violent development processes while knee-deep in waste, without being necessarily rewarded by the state's version of development. Rather, what arose out of development—intensified urbanization and professionalization of waste management—alienated them from their place of living and their source of labor.

Throughout the development of municipal solid waste management from the postwar period to the early 1990s, we saw that handling waste evolved from a largely informal and labor-intensive practice into a public service and a civic duty. This reconfiguration was tied to the contradictory characteristics of waste as both nuisance and resource. The changing status of waste redefined recycling labor: what used to be the subsistence activity of the urban poor was transformed into a professional sector that required technical expertise, while household recycling was domesticated and undertaken by citizens.

Bureaucratic and technological approaches to the waste problem paid little attention to the urban poor and especially their labor. The discovery of waste's

profitability resulted in waste being enclosed, removing informal waste pickers' means of production and subsuming their labor to the benefit of the state or capital. Furthermore, institutionalization and professionalization of waste management introduced new ways of thinking about and dealing with waste and, on this basis, it integrated recycling practices into the realm of daily life.

Institutional changes coincided with the discursive sphere, which helped expand and reinforce stigma around waste pickers and their labor. The initial subjection of waste pickers engendered different terms, categories, and meanings that spanned the state, the public, and waste pickers themselves. Once waste pickers were associated with ideas of deviance, their labor practices were imbricated with their social standing, generating narratives anchored in moralizing. We saw that these narrative threads were all interwoven in state discourses, popular and literary representations, and, to a certain extent, waste pickers' self-identification, if only to appropriate and resist the prevailing representations imposed on them. With redefined notions of waste and its management, the discursive sphere gradually shifted away from ideas of social deviance and moral personhood toward recycling and environmentalism, a new set of narratives around recycling that further marginalized waste pickers.

The collective living of waste pickers between the 1960s and the early 1990s, whether coercive or autonomous, illuminates the relationship between state regulation and the regulated population. From the perspective of the state, it could control their collectivity and conceal the existence of the urban underclass. In some instances, their communal living made them more susceptible to false indictments and other abuses, while in others, as the number of waste collectors rose, particularly in the landfill, they gained a voice and negotiating power. In both cases, dwelling frequently in unlicensed tenements in empty lots rendered them subject to eviction.

The establishment of the Work Reconstruction Camp and subsequent camps imposed a series of exclusions on waste pickers: housing waste pickers in camps (social exclusion), isolating them from the changing economies of waste due both to the police and intermediary buyer exploitation and the emergence of household recycling (economic exclusion), and urban development and eviction (spatial exclusion). In the veneer of vagrant regulation and its seemingly corrective focus, waste might have been only tangentially related to the actual inception and operation of waste picker camps.

However, their subjection to the police, combined with the unpredictable and irregular nature of waste work, rendered waste pickers vulnerable within the informal recycling economy. By the late 1980s, as redevelopment and gentrification of urban areas gained steam, waste picker camps were no longer compatible with the changing use of urban space. What remained after years of police control was a cycle of criminalization, displacement, and pauperization. Despite the guise of protecting waste pickers, state intervention ironically led to a yet more mobile population that reproduced and perpetuated the peripheral population.

In contrast to waste picker camps, in Seoul's Nanjido landfill waste pickers autonomously organized their labor and dwelling. The Nanjido Landfill was operational from 1978 to 1993, spanning both the expansion of Seoul and the creation of a modern waste management system. The changes in landfill housing, from shacks dispersed around dumpsites to a few shanty communities to the prefabricated housing complex, reveal why the state intervened in an informal, unlicensed housing and what were its consequences. On the one hand, formalizing unlicensed housing allowed the state to appropriate waste pickers and their labor, especially when the city lacked an immediate solution to its disposal problems. On the other hand, it placed waste pickers in an interstitial space where their dwellings were recognized but their labor was not. This liminality made them susceptible to other mechanisms of marginalization, ones that were not always intentional but incidental, which further dispossessed waste pickers.

Waste pickers may comprise a small segment of the urban poor, and waste picking was merely one of the odd tasks undertaken by the urban underclasses However, their collective living arrangements allow us to track their trajectory—the drags of development—over three decades during the country's development era. It reveals how their lives intertwined with everyday material practice, the social process of disposal, and development's inevitable social, economic, and spatial inequalities. It advances our understanding of how marginal populations were created and erased from society, an erasure that extends beyond the literal demolition of their living quarters. What remains, however, is the incessant production of waste. And this history is being reiterated with a different demographic in the very place where waste pickers were once made to disappear.

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What transformed South Koreans' everyday waste practices was the 1995 implementation of a volume-based waste fee system (VBWF, *ssŭregi chongryangje*). This pay-as-you-throw disposal scheme required the purchase of standardized garbage bags and the source separation of recyclable materials, thereby mandating household recycling. By the 1990s, mandatory household recycling appeared to obscure the presence of waste pickers. When they reappeared in the mid-2000s, their demographics changed: the majority were elderly.[411] Some competed for free newspapers in Seoul, Incheon, and Pusan subway stations, snatching newspapers and stuffing them into polypropylene woven bags, taking advantage of free subway rides for the elderly.[412] The elderly newspaper collectors at metro stations evoked pity for their advanced age and dire poverty, they also prompted complaints from and conflicts with passengers. In its 2007 raid, the Seoul Metro inspected 191 collectors.[413] Yet, when their working area was confined to subway carriages, their labor intensity was lower than street collection. Their sales system also reduced the burden of their backbreaking labor and public exposure: local junk depots waited for the collectors and purchased materials at the station's exit. By the early 2010s, their subway stint gradually vanished with the expansion of smartphones that contributed to the decline of newspapers.[414] As these recyclers have moved above from the underground, they

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[411] These reports appear more frequently in local newspapers nationwide: "Kyŏngjenan-.toesaranan sonsure haengsang," *Maeil sinmun*, October 3, 2001; "P'yejirado chuwŏya yŏnmyŏnghaji …," *Chŏnbuk tomin ilbo* September 24, 2005; "P'yep'um sujip 'himgyŏun hwanghon' kalsurok chŭngga," *Kangwŏn tomin ilbo* November 23, 2005; "Haru 5000 wŏn wihae… himgyŏun 'insaeng sure'," *Ch'ungbuk ilbo* November 24, 2006; "P'yeji chumnŭn noin manajyŏ kyŏngjaeng ch'iyŏl," *Yŏngnam ilbo* July 30, 2008; "Uri kyŏt'ŭi t'umyŏng in'gan 1. p'yeji chumnŭn noindŭl," *Chemin ilbo* January 26, 2011.

[412] "Chihach'ŏl yŏksa p'ye chisujip silbŏ ilkkundŭl k'ŭge chŭngga," *Tonga ilbo*, February 18, 2005; "Chihach'ŏl mugaji chumnŭn noindŭl kŭ kodalp'ŭn haru," *Chungang ilbo*, December 23, 2006.

[413] "Chihach'ŏl muryo sinmun p'yeji sujip tansok? simindŭl ch'anban ŏtkallyŏ," *Kyŏnghyang sinmun*, May 5, 2007; "Muryo sinmun p'yeji sujip mothandago?," *Chungang ilbo*, April 28, 2007.

[414] "Kŭ mant'ŏn sinmun chuptŏn noinŭn ŏdiro kassŭlkka," *Sŏul kyŏngje TV*, August 26, 2015.

have became more visible. More and more elderly waste pickers hobbled around the streets, hoisting loads of various recyclables or dragging carts filled with cardboard boxes; it created a new urban landscape of waste.

The presence of elderly waste pickers is not new. While the elderly have always been a part of waste picker population in South Korea and elsewhere, whether for their thriftiness and frugality or making a living, it is worth asking why they have emerged as the majority of waste pickers, what kind of attention they have received, how it varies from other demographics, and what it implies. In South Korea, the OECD country with the second-highest recycling rate and highest relative elderly poverty, the elderly found waste-picking as a last resort to survive.[415] Without a substantial state pension or social welfare, impoverished elderly had no choice but to scavenge recyclables, if only to earn meager, instable, insufficient income for their living.

The visible dominance of the elderly population in the informal waste economy brought yet another moniker and changed the contents of the attention. Unlike waste pickers in the past, this new name, wastepaper/wastepaper-collecting elderly (p'yeji sujip noin or p'yeji noin/ŏrŭsin), does not seek to tame the concerned population. Rarely were they openly criticized for potential deviance (e.g., being thievish), stigmatized for their work, moralized for their poverty or their inability to assist themselves. Instead, we saw extensive discussion over the extreme poverty of the elderly population, the dearth of other opportunities suited to their physical abilities, and insufficient and inadequate social welfare schemes, criticism that pointed towards society at large and the government rather than individuals.[416]

Newspapers periodically published investigative reports on elderly waste

[415] OECD Environment Statistics Database (Waste: Municipal Waste, Edition 2020; accessed on 24 May 2023), https://doi.org/10.1787/52fe37f0-en; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), *Pensions at a Glance 2021: OECD and G20 Indicators* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2020).

[416] These criticisms align with the elderly poverty and the precariousness of elderly jobs. Yun-Young Kim, Seung-Ho Baek, and Sophia Seung-Yoon Lee, "Precarious Elderly Workers in Post-Industrial South Korea," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 48, no. 3 (2018): 465-484.

pickers, most of them collecting street refuse and curbside recyclables.[417] Institutional attention followed suit. From the mid-2010s, local governments, including Seoul, P'yŏngt'aek, Pusan, Inch'ŏn, and Kyŏnggi-do, as well as a governmental institute, produced reports exploring relevant policy options in their respective jurisdiction.[418] Their recommendations are summed up as follows: providing short-term safety measures, and for only those who work solely for subsistence, compensating their income through subsidy arrangement or social enterprise cooperation. The key to these measures is categorizing elderly waste pickers into those who are destitute and those who use waste-picking as a supplement to their income; only the former are eligible for assistance.

The reappearance of waste pickers was hardly novel, nor were the responses. Whoever dealt with waste pickers, regardless of their motivations, we observed striking similarities in their interactions with waste pickers: the contestation between sympathy and antipathy, the distinction between "deserving" and "undeserving" waste pickers, and the impulse to eliminate waste pickers. This desire for erasing waste pickers from the urban landscape implies both their absence (making them disappear) and their invisibility (masking the urbanites' view). Both engage in discursive violence that eliminate their presence and contributions literally and figuratively.

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[417] For English reports, see Darryl Coote, "For South Korea's poor, cardboard is big business," *The Korea Observer*, July 28, 2014. http://www.koreaobserver.com/for-south-koreas-poor-cardboard-is-big-business-darryl-coote-22516/; Se-Woong Koo, "No Country for Old People," *Korea Expose*, September 24, 2014. http://www.koreaexpose.com/voices/no-country-for-old-people/

[418] Sŏul T'ŭkpyŏlsi, *P'yeji sujip ŏrŭsin tolbom chonghap taech'aek* (Sŏul: Sŏul T'ŭkpyŏlsi, 2018); Pyŏn Kŭm-sŏn, Song Ki-yŏn, Yun Myŏng-ho, *P'yejisujip noin silt'aee kwanhan kich'oyŏn'gu* (Koyang: Han'guk noin illyŏk kaebarwŏn, 2018); Kim Hyo-il, Sŏ Po-ram, Kim Hŭi-jŏng, *P'yŏngt'aek-si p'yejisugŏnoin saenghwalsilt'ae mit taeŭngbanganyŏn'gu* (P'yŏngt'aek: P'yŏngt'aek pokchi chaedan, 2018); Yi Chae-jŏng, Kim T'ae-ran, Pak Sŏn-mi, *Pusan Kwangyŏksi p'yejisugŏ noin chiwŏnbangan maryŏn yŏn'gu* (Pusan: Pusan pokchi kaebarwŏn, 2019); Kim Ch'un-nam, Nam Il-sŏng, Pak Chi-hwan, Chang Paek-san, *P'yeji chumnŭn noinŭi saenghwalsilt'aewa chŏngch'aektaean yŏn'gu* (Suwŏn: Kyŏnggi pokchi chaedan, 2020); Yang Chi-hun, Ha Sŏk-ch'ŏl, *Inch'ŏn-si chaehwaryongp'um sujimnoin mit changaein silt'ae chosa* (Inch'ŏn: Inch'ŏn Kwangyŏk-si koryŏng sahoe taeŭng sent'ŏ, 2021); Pae Che-yun, Kim Nam-hun, *P'yejisujip noinŭi hyŏnhwanggwa silt'ae: GPS-wa iŏk'a, p'yejisujip nodongsilt'ae pogosŏ* (Koyang: Han'guk noin illyŏk kaebarwŏn, 2022). Korea Labor Force Development Institute for the Aged is a quasi-governmental research institute under the Ministry of Health and Welfare.

The suggested solution, especially that of removing elderly from waste picking, fails to see them as a vital part of urban waste ecology as well as the potential impact of removing their labor would be. In their 2022 report, Korea Labor Force Development Institute for the Aged (Han'guk noin illyŏk kaebarwŏn) estimated the number of elderly waste pickers at approximately 15,000 nationwide, whose labor retrieved approximately 60% of waste paper in urban residential areas.[419] They sell their materials to nearby junk depots (*komulsang*) accessible on foot, who typically purchase from 20 to 40 elderly waste pickers on average.[420] The proposed solution could bring about significant changes to the current urban waste economy, which currently recovers more than half of the recyclables. What would happen to the livelihood of small junk depots if elderly waste collectors were no longer available? Who would collect recyclables from the streets? And will local recycling facilities be able to manage the increasing volume?

As long as we continue to generate waste, there will be individuals willing to work with waste for their survival. We saw marginal population in different period took up the job, such as war orphans, rural migrants, urban poor, and the elderly poor, whether as a ladder up, a supplementary income source, or a survival strategy. The recent shift towards the elderly again demonstrates the parallels between material discards and socially excluded, as well as their connection to waste through their labor and symbolic associations. This social process that define and redefine the (material) refuse and the (socially) refused highlights the contingent nature of how waste becomes problematic. Current responses to waste, however, disregards its political character, be it urbanization and industrialization, capitalist production and its externalities, public or private provision of waste management, or the margins of societies that frequently linked with waste by laboring them or disproportionately bearing its harms—reasons that demand us to redirect our attention.

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[419] In the Seoul Metropolitan Government's investigation, there were 2,417 elderly waste pickers in 2017. Sŏul T'ŭkpyŏlsi, *P'yeji sujip ŏrŭsin*.

[420] Junk depots often maintain a list of their customers, including elderly waste pickers in their area. It is also a place where they gather to sell their materials and take a brief break. In its first comprehensive investigation in 2017, the Seoul Metropolitan Government visited each junk depot and surveyed elderly waste pickers under its jurisdiction. Sŏul T'ŭkpyŏlsi, *P'yeji sujip ŏrŭsin*.

Ironically, the relative focus on the demographic characteristics of waste pickers—a tendency that continued from the 1960s onwards—takes our attention away from the structural causes. The continued reproduction of waste pickers signals the ever-increasing amount of recyclables, which, according to Max Liboiron, "are just disposables by another name."[421] The overwhelming emphasis on the current iteration of waste pickers, as well as its discursive effect, silences questions of waste generation that must be addressed first: what to do with waste and recyclable generation, who would engage in waste labor through what kind of arrangements, what labor conditions they would require, and most importantly, the social provision of waste disposal and recycling.

[421] Max Liboiron, "Modern Waste as Strategy," *Lo Squaderno: Explorations in Space and Society*, no. 29 (2013): 9-12.