The Cultural Production and Consumption the Value of the Fit Body in Korea

: Focus on Fitness Field, Cultural Intermediaries, and Power Relations

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Abstract

This study aims to examine how the Korean body has been civilized and constructed historically, in addition to analyzing how fitness culture has developed in this particular context. In order to facilitate discussion, I will use Elias’s “The established and the outsider figuration” as well as Bourdieu’s ‘cultural field’ and ‘habitus' concepts to investigate the workings of the socio-cultural mechanism in the field of fitness. Next, in order to examine the meanings of Korean consumer body culture that is currently being consumed, I will analyze it from the perspective of consumption culture per the literature review; including content analysis through the use of select newspaper articles. In particular, I will focus on fitness, which has played a key role in the image of the Korean body being produced and consumed culturally. Further, by conducting these interviews we can examine the specific roles of broadcasters and personal trainers as ‘new cultural intermediaries (Bourdieu, 1984 : 359)” of fitness in producing fitness culture in Korea. In the case of media sector, I will examine existing dynamics through analyzing (1) production fields where fitness-related programs are produced and (2) fitness media discourse that are widely broadcasted. Finally, through interviews I will investigate body power relations between the established and the outsider within the fitness centres.

Background

The promulgation of the Danballyeong Act\(^3\) in 1895 served as a turning point that rapidly transformed neo-Confucianism, an ethic and worldview that had dominated the nation for more than two millennia. At that time, Koreans maintained the myth that all parts of their bodies – from their hair to their skin – were bestowed upon them by their parents, and therefore they believed that they should not damage any part of their bodies and would instead opt for death. The most traditional Korean clothing, the hanbok, does not reveal the body shape at all. Indeed, as is the case in most women’s clothing, the silhouette of the breasts is concealed using ribbons that flatten out the torso. The width of the skirt is so large that an outside observer would be entirely unable to tell whether the wearer is plump or slim. An aristocratic lady always held an ornamental silver knife on her person; and would kill herself if her body became exposed or dishonoured. In traditional Korean society, changes to the body or its exposure meant instant death. Working out the body in Korea was a means through which to discipline one’s mind, but it was never seen as a sort of isolated or ultimate purpose. One hundred years later in today’s consumption-driven society, the body is being considered as something which requires constant attention, time and money.

Currently, the people of Korea desire the same universally slim figure regardless of sex, class or age. According to the OECD report (2009)\(^4\), despite the fact that Koreans have the lowest average BMI in the world, most people in Korea regard themselves as being overweight according to this survey (Food and Drug Administration, obesity study on consumer behaviour research and efficient use, 2009). In Korea, a fat body is considered to be an unenlightened body; and thus such body structures are thought of as shameful and embarrassing things. For example, a female college student who had recently graduated from a prestigious college and had excellent abilities tried killing herself (Kukmin Ilbo, 2002. 8.7); thus exhibiting the extent to which this narrow definition of acceptable body structure pervades the collective conceptualization of beauty and acceptability; and it begs the

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\(^3\) The ordinance of prohibiting topknots.

\(^4\) OECD, Society at a Glance 2009.
question of whether we should begin to reconsider the superficiality of our appearance-oriented culture. On the other hand, people with slim bodies are typically seen as more sophisticated and civilized, and thus given easier entrée into the world of the established class.

Research Questions

1. How has the notion of the fit body been produced throughout Korean history?
2. Who are ‘new cultural intermediaries’ of fitness in Korea, and what kind of roles do they play?
3. How has the value of the fit body been produced through fitness related programs?
4. Who has the relative body power at fitness centres?