Blending of Femininity and Feminism in Contemporary South Korean Workplaces

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For young working women in South Korea today, employment is characteristically marked by instability. With a view to examining their “gendered” experiences in the workplace, this paper analyses the ways in which South Korean working women develop affective bonds with their co-workers. Finding themselves having to constantly change jobs, young women exhibit a tendency to perform cheerful, motivated, and exaggerated feminine versions of themselves to their co-workers as they seek social intimacy. Their pursuit of collegial intimacy (or its facade) should be viewed in a dual context: on the one hand, in relation to the impact of neoliberal precarity on young women; and on the other, within the feminist critique of marriage as an institution essentially serving the state’s interests. Working women’s pursuit of social intimacy in the workplace go hand in hand with pursuing feminist ideas and practices as well as taking a distance from heterosexual norms and marriage. Among these practices are the “Escape the Corset” movement and the “4B” (Four Absences: non-dating; non-sexual-relationship; non-marriage; and non-birth”) campaign online, the latter currently being one of the most radical forms of contemporary South Korean gender politics. Drawing on extensive interviews with young working women, this presentation investigates women’s struggles to gain financial independence and corporate citizenship through negotiating challenges at work, gendered selves, and feminist politics.