

Evolving Military Service and Social Inclusion in South Korea

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This paper explores changing patterns of inclusion and exclusion in South Korea, using military service as a tool of measurement. Two central assertions guide this study. First, military service as a gatekeeper to Korean society. Second, an investigation of conscription policies offers insights into broader patterns of societal inclusion. The research explores the reciprocal relationship between cultural values, formal institutions, and societal shifts. Analyzing historical context, legal reforms, and social attitudes, the study argues that the changes in military service reflect broader shifts in society. The decoupling of military service from economic benefits signifies a weakening of patriarchal norms, enabling increased female workforce participation. Acceptance of mixed-race individuals and conscientious objectors reflects a growing societal openness. However, military service remains a symbol of social acceptance, highlighting its enduring cultural significance. As South Korea embraces multiculturalism and ideological diversity, military service serves as a dynamic barometer, capturing the nation's evolving identity, and enduring values.

Keywords: South Korea, Conscription, Military Service

From South Korea's inception in the postwar period, concerns of national security have made the militarization of its society a necessity in the eyes of political leaders. The country therefore invested heavily in the development and maintenance of a large standing army. One of the most demanding elements of the strategy was and continues to be national military service, which requires all eligible South Korean men to serve under arms. While the length of service has fluctuated over the decades, it has remained a cornerstone of the South Korean experience and has deeply affected conceptions of citizenship and belonging. This achieves objectives well beyond national preservation, and has served as a means of ideological training, rite of passage, and a central duty in a citizen's entrance to the body politic.

This paper makes two central assertions about military service. First, due to its centrality in political, social, and economic life, military service acts as a gatekeeper to South Korean society for young men. This first assertion is not novel to this paper and rests on a significant body of scholarly literature. Second, by examining the change of legal parameters of military service we may garner insights into the evolving landscape of inclusion and exclusion in South Korean society. That is, by observing *who* is allowed to participate in the institution and the benefits it confers, we may gain understanding of how the South Korean government, and by extension, South Korean society grants legitimacy and belonging to different social groups. These two assertions underpin the methodology of this research.

The paper begins with a section on the

background of military service and a survey of relevant scholarship on the topic. It then proceeds to explain the theoretical context and methodological approach. These sections are followed by a presentation of findings and concludes with a discussion thereof.

Background

The Republic of Korea (ROK) emerged from World War II as an independent nation, estranged from its northern half, and given only minor consideration by the major powers except as a front line in the nascent Cold War (Cummings, 1997). Simmering tensions between North and South would eventually erupt into a war that devastated the peninsula and highlighted the need for continued mass participation in national defense (Kwon, 2018; Moon, 1991). Even after armistice, South Korean society continued to be characterized by heightened levels of militarism, including military service (Moon, 2005).

The obligation of military service stems from the 1948 Military Service Act. Article 39 reads, "All citizens shall have the duty of national defense under the conditions as prescribed by an Act." All South Korean men, with few exceptions due to mental or physical disability, were required to serve a term of three years in the military (Kim, 2020). The Military Manpower Administration spearheaded the training of conscripts, fired civil servants who failed to serve, limited foreign travel, and even implemented collective punishment on the families of draft dodgers (Tikhonov, 2009, Moon, 2005). While initially evasion rates were high (17% in 1957), strict

enforcement and punishment increased participation until, by 1974, evaders only represented .1% of eligible males (Tikhonov, 2009, Mun, 2007).

The Park Chun Hee administration's determination to enforce service yielded one of the distinguishing features of South Korean conscription – its near total adherence among the eligible male population, with no accommodation for conscientious objectors and limited dispensations for avoiding service. While other nations with mandatory military service created space for higher education or conscientious objector status, state in South Korea demanded near ubiquitous participation (Choi & Kim, 2015). Yet even though conscription reached most of the male population, it was by no means the majority of the citizenry. Women were not obligated to serve, and those deemed physically or mentally unfit for service were excluded (Choi & Kim, 2015).

Those conscripted undergo ideological training. Whereas volunteer forces ostensibly select for patriotic and motivated soldiers, conscript forces recruit all citizens, regardless of nationalistic political persuasion (Burk, 1992, Choi & Kim, 2016, Poutaara & Wagener, 2011). Given the ideological struggle with the North and paranoia about communist sympathizers within its ranks, the ROK military invested both time and resources to ensure the loyalty of their troops (Joo, 2015). This ideological training appears to be effective, as military service is highly correlated with a number of political beliefs including sympathetic views towards the United States, support for the Government, and awareness of the threat posed by North Korea (Joo, 2015).

Military service was also gateway to the labor market. Beginning in the 1970s, the completion of military service was a precondition for employment in the civil service (Moon, 2002; 2005). The “extra points” system, instituted with the Employment Support Act and subsequent Honorable Treatment Act gave bonuses to veterans when applying to public service exams and universities (Moon, 2005). The act gave veterans an additional five percent of total points on exams. The effects were significant.

The Honorable Treatment Act extended these benefits to qualitative and nonwritten examinations. Many non-state corporations followed suit, though not legally obligated to do so. Males, and specifically veterans, were significantly more likely to hold positions in both private and public sectors (Moon, 2002; 2005). Those five percentage points was often the difference between pass and failure among the highly competitive applicants (Moon, 2002; Moon 2005).

Researchers have identified the extra points system as having significant downstream effects on South Korean business and corporate culture. By giving disproportionate representation to those who completed military service, companies imbued themselves with a pseudo-military culture. Hierarchical, patriarchal, and highly regimented, this militarized corporate culture reproduced military experiences in microcosm well beyond the years of service for veterans (Ramirez, 2010; Choo & Yoon, 2021; Moon, 2002). Some companies required regular physical training alongside regular business obligations. (Moon, 2005). This militarized working culture further bled in politics. Male politicians often use photographs of their days in the military as a signal of masculinity and strength to the voting public (Moon, 2005; 2018).

The ubiquity of service, ideological training, and economic benefits garnered by completion have produced a culture in which military service is a significant event in the lives of veterans. Seongsook Moon's 2005 book *Militarized Modernity and Gendered Citizenship in South Korea* asserts that citizenship itself is a tacit exchange with the government, wherein men exchange military service for citizenship, belonging, and economic participation in wider society. Researchers have noted the tacit acceptance of military service among political activists during the period of democratization of the 1980s and 90s. Despite strong rejection of authoritarian rule, advocacy of civil liberties, gender equality, and demands for peace on the peninsula, the end of military service never emerged

as a significant demand of protesters (Cho, 2007). Those who served accepted the bargain.

The converse is equally true. Those who do not serve in the military have seen political, social, and economic ostracization from the body politic. While young men saw their career and social prospects improved from service, women, minorities, and dissidents have been likewise marginalized (Moon, 2002; Kwon, 2013). Moon notes that the use of military service not only contributed to a militarized society, but exacerbated patterns of gender inequality through hypermasculine workspaces and the extra point system (Kwon, 2013; Moon, 2002). Through their exclusion from mandatory military service, so too were they excluded from the benefits (Moon, 2005). Yet military service has changed significantly in the last 25 years. Reforms to service have fundamentally altered the exclusionary role of conscription. Thus, we turn to the central question of this paper: How do the changing parameters of national military service reflect broader patterns of inclusion in South Korean society? To answer this question, we must turn our attention to institutions, and examine how theories of institutional change have conceptualized the interplay between culture, society, and legal structures.

Theoretical Framework

Broadly conceived, Economist Douglass North defined institutions as the “rules of the game” (North, 1991). Institutions constrain action through both formal means such as laws, regulations, and the enforcement mechanisms thereof as well as informal structures, through norms, values, and culture, which also regulate the behavior of individuals, albeit in different ways. How formal and informal institutions evolve and influence one another has been the subject of interest to economists and political scientists.

Williamson (2000) proposed a framework for understanding different levels of institutional analysis. Williamson conceives institutions as a nested

hierarchy, with largest level one being the deep traditional, cultural, and normative informal institutions. Level two is comprised of the formal institutional environment, with the constitutional organization of executive, judiciary, and legislative functions and their relative distribution among political entities. How these organizations and institutional responsibilities are carried sits on the third level, as bureaucracies implement higher order formal rules. Williamson’s final level is the distribution of resources within the institutional system. Williamson argues that each level has a recursive relationship with the others, as culture and tradition shapes how actors design their political and economic institutions which in turn influence how those macro-level institutions are enforced at lower levels. Other researchers have further described how changes cascade through the institutional environment, with changes to one having downstream effects on the function of others (Lewis & Steinmo, 2012).

As an economist, Williamson is primarily concerned with how formal constitutional rules constrain and shape governance, and thus focuses on the design and implementation of rules on levels two and three. However, this paper is principally interested in the relationship between level one informal institutions, that is, the cultural values and traditions surrounding belonging and inclusion, and the lower levels as represented by the statutory regulations of military service. Williamson’s framework describes the causal relationship between social conceptions, traditions, and values and formal institutions.

Methods

This paper utilizes a longitudinal case study approach to examine how a specific South Korean institution, Military Service, carries evidence of the evolution of conceptions of belonging and participation within ROK society. To this end, it applies thematic analysis of relevant statutes in the Military Service Act, its interpretation by the judiciary with broader trends in the South Korean economy,

society, and politics (Bryman, 2016, Dawson, 2020).

Data collection was performed through publicly-available government databases. The South Korean Ministry of Government Legislation maintains an online archive of legal statutes currently in place as well as previous iterations of laws. This archive includes annotated copies of statutes accompanied by relevant jurisprudence, court rulings, commentaries, and information on their implementation and interpretation over time. This paper also draws upon relevant Supreme Court and Constitutional Court publications, testimony, and decisions, also publicly available on government sites. Finally, historical and legal research has offered significant secondary documentary evidence for the claims made here.

Data analysis was performed through a thematic analysis of both the evolution of the Military Service Act and associated statutes as well as the jurisprudential interpretation of these laws over time. Thematic coding identified relevant subpopulations within South Korea affected by the laws, what constraints and exclusions were applied, what benefits were offered for service, and how those delimitations have evolved over time. These codes underwent thematic analysis to identify relevant implementation trends in the Military Service Act.

Changes to Military Service

Since democratization in the late 1980s, Military Service has undergone a series of reforms that has increased the scope of inclusion. This reflects an ideological loosening and greater respect to ethnic and ideological minorities as well as a decrease in the advantages given to those who complete their service. These reforms reflect first a weakening of the ties between economic participation and service, increased participation from multiethnic population, and finally, ideological dissidents.

The first pillar of the Military Service Act to be weakened was the conflation of service with economic participation. The extra points system, which

made completion of service a significant advantage in the labor market, came under scrutiny in the 1990s. Activist groups and civil society organizations especially feminist organizations, derided the system as discriminatory, sexist, and reflective of a bygone era of military rule (Moon, 2002). This resistance was in part response to a political gambit to expand the system by the Blue House to include accelerated promotion and pay increases for veterans. The case was brought before the Constitutional Court in 1999, with the court ruling the practice unconstitutional and a violation of employment equality among citizens (Moon, 2002, 19Hun-Ma363). The courts further ruled that due to the low rates of female participation in the military, the law unconstitutionally discriminated on the basis of gender (19Hun-Ma363). Through loosening the economic benefits conferred to veterans, the courts invited increased female participation in the workforce by lowering barriers. This ruling also had implications for others who were excluded for other reasons.

Other changes have occurred in the realm of inclusion and exclusion. A 1972 edict barred those who were “Clearly and externally identifiable[y]” of mixed race from serving in the South Korean military (Iwabuchi et al., 2017; Korean Law Information Center). Ostensibly, this provision was to protect mixed-race individuals from discrimination and ostracization in the military community. This discrimination, it was argued, would undermine military cohesion and discipline, ultimately neutering effectiveness and compromising national security. In 2006, the courts ruled that mixed race citizens, while not obligated to serve, could volunteer for service. In 2009, they were granted full equality in the military service system. By 2012, mixed race South Koreans were serving as officers in the military (Kim, 2012). Later in 2012, the oath taken by new recruits changed its language from “The Korean people” to “citizens,” reflecting a broadened conception of citizenship beyond ethnicity (Iwabuchi & Kim, 2016). These policy developments herald shifting conceptions of belonging and understanding

in South Korea. As immigration to Korea has increased, the nation has faced issues with racism, discrimination, and multicultural integration. Indeed, beginning in 2019, military training included multicultural awareness training, a tacit recognition of increased diversity within the ranks as well as demands to respect the cultures of multicultural conscripts (Korean Law Information Center).

In addition to expanding the scope of participation in military service, the ROK government has expanded its conception of what constitutes legitimate service. Until 2018, South Korea remained unique among liberal democracies in its demand that all eligible candidates for military service participate in the military, regardless of moral and religious objection. Whereas the majority of her peer countries have provided avenues for alternative service or entirely opting out of participation, South Korea rejected the efforts of activists for decades. As of 2017, South Korea had imprisoned 19,000 objectors, representing over 90% of global objector convicts (Hwang, 2018). The legal basis for these imprisonments was article 88 of the Military Service Law, which states “any person who has received a notice of enlistment for active-duty service or a notice of call for non-active-duty service can be penalized if he fails to enlist in the military or fails to comply with the call within a given period without “justifiable cause” (Kim, 2020). In 2018 Supreme Court ruled that the lack of alternative service violated the South Korean constitution and demanded that the National Assembly take steps to provide nonmilitary avenues of service. In 2019, the National Assembly passed a law that allowed conscientious objectors to apply to the Military Manpower Association for alternative service (Gibson, 2020). While the numbers of participants in alternative service remain low, conscientious objectors are currently performing their military service in hospitals, prisons, homeless shelters, and as firefighters (Oh, 2021).

Discussion

Military service in South Korea has undergone significant changes since democratization which have reflected broader changes within South Korean society. This section postulates that the changing parameters of service act as a barometer of broader shifts in South Korean society. This assertion rests on the theoretical framework of Williamson (2000), who argues that formal and informal institutional change reflects upstream changes to broader cultural conceptions that affect constitutional and statutory institutions. That is, evolving cultural values cascade “downwards” through the system, affecting how formal institutions of government operate.

The first sign of change within military service came from the 1999 constitutional court ruling that the extra points system was unconstitutional. The policy has been widely cited as instrumental of both reinforcing strong gender bias in society and the workforce, as women were excluded from work spaces through artificially depressed test scores and excluded from the hypermasculine corporate culture (2005 Choo & Yoon, 2021; Moon, 2005). Yet this patriarchal hold has steadily weakened. Governmental efforts as well as economic realities have steadily increased female workforce participation in South Korea, although it remains lower than many Western nations (Kang, 2017). The decoupling of service and employment has partially enabled these changes.

The 1972 policy of banning mixed-race Koreans from service betrays a deeper pathology of belonging and race in South Korea. South Korea has long held a self-conception as “one nation, one blood, one people,” and this understanding of the nation a sort of homogenous extended family has drawn stark dividing lines between who is a part of the nation and who is not. Polling shows a significant majority of Koreans (87%) believe in the critical importance of blood in South Korea (Yoo, 2017). The presence of foreign troops on South Korean soil brought with it an inevitable mixing of the populations, yielding

mixed race children. These individuals fell outside the imagined community.

This discrimination and ostracization is evident in the exclusion of mixed-race men from serving in the armed forces. By denying them the privilege of serving, the government by extension denied access to many of the formal and informal benefits of inclusion. Formally, the lack of service denied mixed-race individuals access to employment and other benefits through the “bonus points” system. Mixed-race Koreans also suffered informal cultural exclusion by being denied the rite of passage available to others (Iwabuchi et al., 2017). For decades, many among the South Korean body politic failed to see the problem with this policy, assuming that being relieved of the intrusive obligation of service would be a benefit rather than a burden. Those of mixed-race did not see the issue this way. Li and Jung (2017) wrote of one citizen’s struggle with this denial. “For [him]... that exclusion was symbolic of South Koreans’ discrimination against bi-racial citizens... He could never get a full-time job, not only because of his looks but also because of his lack of military experience, and that he has rarely been financially stable as a result” (Yi & Jung, 2017). Allowing mixed race individuals into such a central institution signals a growing acceptance and willingness to accommodate diverse populations into the greater Korean society.

Finally, the 2018 judicial ruling to provide alternative service for conscientious objectors demonstrates a growing acceptance of ideological diversity in line with global norms. The ruling represents a significant shift in South Korean policy for two principal reasons. First, the previous legal justification of prosecuting objectors was predicated on the significant security challenges posed to South Korea. These challenges necessitated a state of constant military preparedness. The court has deemed this to no longer be the case, signaling a transition from the militarism that dominated the 20th century towards a society focused on nonmilitary issues (Hwang, 2018). Furthermore, it signals

a shift towards a more pluralistic society, wherein those of varying ideologies, religions, and values are welcomed to participate in state institutions.

Data on public opinion surrounding the military remains difficult to find and parse. There is a dearth of longitudinal studies on public opinion by non-biased sources. The resulting polling data is often mismatched and difficult to compare, though several macrotrends are identifiable. Faith in the military’s ability to protect the nation has steadily declined, as has the perception of equity of the military service system. Furthermore, there are growing perceptions that the system is unfair, that it is an onerous burden on the population, and that conscientious objection is a legitimate position vis a vis conscription (Choi & Kim, 2017; Hwang, 2018). These trends in public opinion are evinced in a growing tendency among South Korean families of means to avoid the draft, whether through medical exemptions or avoidance through immigration and dual citizenship (Choi & Kim, 2017).

Yet the inclusion of ethnic minorities and conscientious objectors also demonstrates the deep attachment to service as a signal of inclusion. It is notable that the institution itself remained in place during this period of expansion. That is, ethnic minorities were able to earn their place alongside ethnic Koreans *through the same avenues of acceptance* (military and civil service). Service remains, at least for the moment, a central symbol of social acceptance, even if the parameters of this acceptance have expanded. The case of multicultural conscripts and conscientious objectors demonstrates both a growing acceptance of multicultural Korea in the context of national service.

Conclusion

National military service in South Korea functions not only as a policy of national defense. It is also a deeply personal sacrifice young men make, willing or not, in service to their country. This experience may be seen as a burden, but for many young men

it signals entrance to adulthood. As South Korean society negotiates an increasingly multicultural, interconnected, and ideologically diverse 21st century, its institutions will inevitably reflect the broader environment. As a longstanding policy that affects, directly or indirectly, the entire population, conscription offers a useful barometer of the evolving nature of South Korean society.

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