

Colonial Consumerism:  
Capitalist Development and the Internal Management of Department Stores  
in Late Colonial Korea

Jin-seok Oh (Pai Chai University)  
Howard Kahm (Yonsei University)\*

Department stores are large scale retail and distribution organizations that sell a large variety of goods in a large marketplace-style setting, while arranging and displaying products according to category. With the high speed growth of capitalism, large-scale and large-volume production quickly increased with a concomitant increase in consumption. Arising in response to consumer demand, the department store was a new type of distribution and retail organization that appeared around the world in the late 19th century and continued to develop through the 20th century. For this reason, department stores became epitome of retail and distribution organizations within capitalist development.<sup>1</sup>

The first department stores in colonial Korea were established in the 1920's primarily from two sources. First, Japanese department stores established new branches in colonial Korea to penetrate the Korean domestic economy. Second, Japanese stores that had been established during the 1904-1905 Russo-Japanese War expanded and converted themselves gradually into department stores. In the early 1930's, Koreans responded by establishing their own department stores. By the end of the 1930's, Seoul had the four Japanese department stores of Mitsukoshi, Chōjiya, Minakai, and Hirata, as well as the Korean-owned Hwasin [J.

---

\* Primary author is Oh Jin-seok (jamesoh@pcu.ac.kr). Corresponding author is Howard Kahm (hkahm@yonsei.ac.kr). As a preliminary draft, this paper should be not be cited or referenced without the permission of the authors.

<sup>1</sup> For more on department stores in the East and West, see Kim In-ho, *Paekhwajōm ūi munhwasa: kūndae ūi t'ansaeng kwa yokmang ūi sigonggan* [The cultural history of department stores: the birth of modernity and the urban space of desire] (Seoul: Sallim, 2006); Bill Lancaster, *The Department Store: A Social History* (London: Leicester University Press, 1995); Hatsuda Toru, *Hyakkaten no tanjō* [Birth of the department store] (Tokyo: Sanseidō, 1993); Kashima Shigeru, *Depaato o hatsumei shita huuhu* [The couple that invented the department store] (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1991); Susan Porter Benson, *Counter Cultures: Saleswomen, Managers, and Customers in American Department Stores, 1890-1940* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1988); Michael B. Miller, *The Bon Marche: Bourgeois Culture and the Department Store, 1869-1920* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981); Hrant Pasdermajian, *The Department Store: It's Origins, Evolution and Economics* (London: Newman, 1954).

*Washin*, Whashin] department store for a total of five. These stores expanded the retail marketplace through fierce competition and increased sales by developing new sales techniques, initiating the golden age of the department store in colonial Korea.

Previous scholarship has examined the appearance and development of department stores in colonial Seoul in numerous studies. In surveying the entirety of the history of the market and commerce, these studies have examined the operations of the department stores in this period as well as the management structure and practices of each department store. Furthermore, the activities of the businessmen who managed these stores have been minutely traced in business and management histories. Other studies have addressed changes in consumer culture due to the rise of department stores.<sup>2</sup>

However, previous scholarship has largely focused on the vibrant external image of the development of the department store as a distribution apparatus, but they have not examined the various socio-pathological phenomenon that arose in a general sense from capitalist development, but specifically from the operations and internal management of department stores. In this respect, department stores and the complex relationships between managers, employees, and customers encompassed both the positive and negative aspects of

---

<sup>2</sup> Kim Yun-sŏn, “Yŏsŏng sobi chuch’e ūi tŭngjang kwa yŏsŏng ūi sobi munhwa” [The appearance of female consumer subjectivity and the female consumer culture] *Han’guk kŭndae ilsang saenghwal kwa maech’e* [Modern everyday life and the mass media in Korea] (Seoul: Tan’guk taehakkyo ch’ulp’anbu, 2009); Son Chŏng-suk, “Ilche sigi paekhwajŏm kwa ilsang sobi munhwa” [The department store and everyday consumer culture in colonial Korea] *Ilche sigi kŭndaejŏk ilsang kwa sikminji munhwa* [Modern life and colonial culture in the colonial period] (Seoul: Ewha yŏja taehakkyo ch’ulp’anbu, 2008); Pak Ūn-suk, *Sijang ūi yŏksa* [A history of the market] (Seoul: Yŏksa pip’yŏngsa, 2008); Kim Pyŏng-do and Chu Yŏng-hyŏk, *Han’guk paekhwajŏm yŏksa* [A history of the Korean department store] (Seoul: Sŏul taehakkyo ch’ulp’anbu, 2006); Oh Jin-seok, “Ilcheha paekhwajŏmŏbgye ūi tonghyang kwa kwanggyeindŭl ūi saenghwal yangsik” [The direction of the department store industry and the lifestyles of related figures in colonial Korea] *Ilche ūi sikmin chibae wa ilsang saenghwal* [Colonial control and everyday life in colonial Korea] (Seoul: Hyeon, 2004); Hayashi Hiroshige, *Maboroshi no Minakai hyakkaten: Chŏsen o sekken shita Ōmi shŏnin hyakkaten ō no kŏbŏ* [Minakai department store of illusions: the rise and fall of the Ōmi merchant department store king that overwhelmed Korea] (Tokyo: Banseisha, 2004); Oh Jin-seok, “Ilcheha Pak Hŭng-sik ūi kiŏpga hwaldong kwa kyŏng’yŏng inyŏm” [The entrepreneurial activities and management philosophy of Pak Hŭng-sik in colonial Korea] *Tongbang hakji* 118 (2002); Hŏ Yŏng-ran, “Kŭndaejŏk sobi saenghwal kwa sikminjijŏk sowoe” [Modern consumption lifestyle and colonial alienation] *Yŏksa wa pip’yŏng* (Autumn 1999); Hŏ Yŏng-ran, “1920-30 nyŏndae ‘Kyŏngsŏng’ ūi to so maesangŏp” [The wholesale and retail industry of Seoul in the 1920’s and 1930’s] *Seoul sangŏpsa yŏn’gu* (Seoul: Sŏulhak yŏn’guso, 1998); Suenaga Kunitoshi, *Kindai Ōmi shŏnin keiei shiron* [A management history of the modern Ōmi merchants] (Tokyo: Yŭhikaku, 1997); Sinsaegae pyŏnjipbu, *Han’guk ūi sijang sanŏpsa* [The commercial and market history of Korea] (Seoul: Sinsaegae paekhwajŏm, 1992).

economic growth. Fully understanding the rise of the department store thus requires an in-depth examination from the perspectives of those directly involved.

Utilizing a critical cross-sectional approach to the 1930's department store, this paper focuses on the internal space of the department store and undertakes a microscopic examination of the interactions between the diverse subjectivities of manager, worker, and consumer. Using mass media records like newspapers and magazines from the period, the various facets of life within and around the department stores become visible in the memoirs, diaries, and interviews contained in these records. In addition, they illuminate the everyday life experiences and diverse thought processes within the subject positions of the managers, the workers, and the customers.

## 2. The Heart of the City: The Development of Department stores and their Roles

Japanese merchants first entered Seoul in force around 1905. The Japanese Empire had emerged victorious from the Russo-Japanese War and was displaying its aggressive intentions towards Korea. The currency and financial reforms implemented by Megata Tanetarō created an unprecedented financial crisis that forced many Korean merchants in the Chongno commercial district of Seoul into bankruptcy. The Residency-General contracted with Japanese merchants to procure government supplies but the merchants also received large amounts of financial support from Japanese banks. Consequently, the Japanese merchants took advantage of the bankruptcy of the Korean merchants to fill the void in the Seoul market.<sup>3</sup>

By the late 1910's, the commercial sector enjoyed an unparalleled economic boom due to the special conditions engendered by the First World War. Some stores used an

---

<sup>3</sup> Oh Jin-seok 2004.

abundance of capital and advanced management techniques to introduce new sales practices, such as selling a wide variety of goods that were organized by product categories. While these methods did not yet reach the level of the large-scale facilities and conveniences and the subdivision system of the modern department store, they represented the advent of the “proto-department store” that incorporated features that would appear in later iterations.<sup>4</sup>

By the 1920’s, Japan had reached the stage of monopoly capitalism, which appeared in colonial Korea as a specific form of transplanted capitalism. Large-scale industrial production quickly increased, which necessitated the development of a distribution industry to support large-volume sales. As stores adapted, they began displaying the necessary pre-conditions for the rise of the modern department store, namely the structure of the corporation, the expansion of large-scale markets, and a highly differentiated specialization system for goods.

In 1904, the Hirata family established its eponymous store in the Honmachi area of Seoul. In 1926, they reorganized the business as a corporation with capitalization of 200,000 yen and relaunched themselves as the Hirata department store.<sup>5</sup> Chōjiya established itself in Seoul in 1904 and reestablished itself as a corporation in 1921, capitalized at one million yen. In September 1929, it expanded its store located on the Namdaemun thoroughfare and became a department store.<sup>6</sup> Nakae Katsujirō established Minakai Kimono Store first in Taegu in 1905 and then moved it to the Ch’ungmuro area of Seoul in 1911. Minakai was reorganized as a corporation in 1922 and capitalized at two million yen but did not expand its physical premises until 1929.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Lancaster, *Social History*, 7-15

<sup>5</sup> Hyakkaten shinbunsha, *Sekai hyakkaten yōran* [A survey of department stores around the world] (Tokyo: Hyakkaten shinbunsha, 1934); Ōhashi, *Hyakkaten nenkan* [Department store annual] (Tokyo: Nihon hyakkaten tōshinsha, 1938).

<sup>6</sup> Chōjiya shōten, *Chōjiya shōshi* [A short history of Chōjiya] (Keijō: Chōjiya shōten, 1936).

<sup>7</sup> *Chō Man to Minakai* (1935); *Minakai yōran* (1938); *Kabushiki kaisha Minakai oyobi bōkei kaisha gensei* [Current situation of Minakai company and its subsidiaries] (1942), the above three sources are found in Gōkashōchōshi hensan iinkai, *Gōkashōchōshi*, vol. 3 (Gōkashōchō yakuba, 1992); Suenaga Kunitoshi, 6; For more on Minakai, see Hayashi Hiroshige, *Maboroshi no Minakai hyakkaten*.

Mitsukoshi was the largest department store in Japan, but expanded into Seoul in 1906 by opening a temporary store. However, Mitsukoshi established a permanent presence with a custom-built, three-story, Renaissance-style building in 1916 as its Seoul office [*shutchōjo*]. In 1925, Mitsukoshi expanded its physical presence by adding an annex to its existing building. In September 1929, Mitsukoshi elevated and rebranded its location as its Keijō branch [*shiten*] and in October 1930, built a new large-scale building with one underground level and four above-ground levels, with total area of 7,335 square meters.<sup>8</sup>

Korean store owners responded by expanding their businesses into large-scale retail operations. At the time, Ch'oe Nam was operating Tonga Women's Store [K. *Tonga puin sanghoe*] and Sin T'ae-hwa was running Hwasin Store [K. *Hwasin sanghoe*]. In the 1920's, both stores expanded their inventory and merchandising efforts to become "proto-department stores."<sup>9</sup> Tonga and Hwasin began their transformation into department stores in the 1930's, with Tonga Women's Store constructing a 508-p'yōng (1,676 square meters) building with one underground level and four above-ground levels in Chongno, next to the Hwasin store. The store was rebranded as the Tonga department store and opened on January 4, 1932.<sup>10</sup>

Although Hwasin, under Sin T'ae-hwa's direction, committed itself to competing with Tonga Women's Store, Hwasin was pushed into a management crisis by a combination of factors, namely over-expansion, labor-management disputes, and a downturn in the economy. As a result of the crisis, Hwasin was taken over by Pak Hŭng-sik. Pak Hŭng-sik was an entrepreneur originally from Yonggang, South P'yōngan province (present-day Namp'o city, North Korea) who went to Seoul in 1926 and successfully established the Sōnil Paper

---

<sup>8</sup> *The Department Store MITSUKOSHI 1904-1989, Kabushiki kaisha Mitsukoshi 85 nen no kiroku* [An 85-year record of the Mitsukoshi company] (1989); *Sinsegye paekhwajōm 25 nyōnsa* [A twenty-five year history of the Sinsaegae department store] (Seoul: Sinsegye paekhwajōm, 1987).

<sup>9</sup> Sin T'ae-ik, "Tae paekhwajōm chōn" [The large department store wars], *Samchōlli* 3-2 (1931.2).

<sup>10</sup> Sin T'ae-ik, "Pando ch'oedae ūi paekhwajōm ch'ulhyōn – Tonga paekhwajōm ūi naeyong kwa woegwan" [The appearance of the largest department stores in the peninsula: the interior and exterior of the Tonga department store], *Samchōlli* 4-1 (1932.1), 79-82; *Chōsen to kenchiku* [Korea and architecture] 11-2 (1932.2), 18-20.

Company [K. *Sŏnil chimul chusik hoesa*]. On September 15, 1931, he reorganized the Hwasin store with capitalization of one million yen (250,000 yen paid-in). On May 10, 1932, the existing two-story wooden structure was rebuilt as a three-story concrete structure (approximately 500 p'yŏng, or 1,652 m<sup>2</sup>, with 153 male and female workers) and reopened as a modern department store.<sup>11</sup>

However, Tonga and Hwasin were locked in fierce competition with each other because they pursued the same business strategies of targeting Koreans as their main customers. More importantly, they were located next door to each other. They both hired attracted female employees to lure customers and held discount sales to move merchandise. As the competition intensified, Hwasin even gave away houses as part of a promotional campaign. Ultimately, Tonga could not sustain its losses and was taken over by Hwasin on July 16, 1932.<sup>12</sup> After the consolidation, there were four Japanese department stores in the Namch'on area (area south of Ch'ŏnggyech'ŏn), which were Mitsukoshi, Chōjiya, Minakai, and Hirata; and the one Korean department store of Hwasin in the Pukch'on area (area north of Ch'ŏnggyech'ŏn).

In the 1930's, Seoul department stores largely filled three roles. First, the department stores were large-scale distribution centers that fostered a consumption mentality among consumers by transmitting the latest fashions and trends to maximize sales. Consequently, department stores advertised heavily in newspapers and magazines to increase consumer demand and nurture a pro-consumption attitude among the general public.<sup>13</sup> The stores sponsored family and lifestyle magazines, published brochures and pamphlets under their store names, advised shoppers on current and future fashion trends, and even started new

---

<sup>11</sup> *Tonga Ilbo* (1932.5.10); “Pukch'on sangga ū ich'e – Hwasin paekhwajŏm ūi wiyong” [Interesting aspects of the Pukch'on shopping district: the splendor of Hwasin department store], *Sanggong Chosŏn* 1 (1932), 24.

<sup>12</sup> Sin T'ae-ik, “Tonga-Hwasin yang paekhwajŏm hapdong naemak” [The inside story of the merger between Tonga and Hwasin department stores] *Samch'ŏlli* 4-8 (1932.8), 344.

<sup>13</sup> Keijō Mitsukoshi sendenbu Tanaka Takashi, “Hyakkaten no shinbun kōkoku” [Newspaper advertisements of department stores], *Chōsen kōron* 24-8 (1936.8)

trends themselves.<sup>14</sup> The department stores spread the philosophy that families needed the latest items for their lifestyles. Therefore, customers were not simply buying products at the department store, but they were buying the latest trends. According to this logic, department stores could confidently present themselves as trend makers.<sup>15</sup>

On the one hand, department stores enthusiastically utilized various sales strategies like issuing gift certificates and holding discount sales to attract more customers. Regular customers were sent postcards and catalogs in the mail, alerting them to the arrival of the latest products. At the same time, the stores created in-store visual spectacles using product display cases, window displays, mannequins, and neon signs. The stores also drastically upgraded their customer service. The stores implemented a fixed-price system and a product return policy that allowed returns at any time.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, customers were offered free home delivery for their purchases.<sup>17</sup>

In order to provide greater convenience for their customers, department stores offered a variety of delivery and payment options. If customers did not have cash to pay at the store, then they could pay when they took delivery. Customers did not even have to go to the store but could order delivery of goods over the telephone. If customers were only temporarily in the Seoul area, then they could have their goods delivered the train station in time for their departure. If necessary, customers could also arrange for nighttime delivery of their goods. If customers had complaints about the service they received, they were free to leave their

---

<sup>14</sup> Hwasin mijangbu O I-gyök, “Pom chöl hwajangböp” [Makeup techniques for springtime], *Sinkajöng* 1-5 (1933.5): “Pom kwa yuhaeng, yuhaeng kwa pom” [Spring and fashion, fashion and spring], *Yösöng* (1936.4); Hwajangp’umbu chuim O Ha-yöng, “Hwajangp’um üi sönt’æk kwa p’ibu üi söng’il” [Choosing cosmetics and the nature of skin], *Hwasin* (chusik hoesa Hwasin) (1934), (hereafter *Hwasin*); Sikryop’umbu chuim Ryang Jae-söng, “Hyöndaein üi sagyo wa sikryop’um” [Socializing for modern people and food], *Hwasin*.

<sup>15</sup> “Yuhaenggye rül ch’ajösö (sang)” [Finding the fashion world (part 1)], *Tonga ilbo* (1937.6.3).

<sup>16</sup> Cho Pöm-sik, “Kogaek manjok cheil – Hwasin üi p’anmae chöngch’æk” [Customer satisfaction first-Hwasin’s sales policy], *Hwasin*, 39-41.

<sup>17</sup> Cho Yong-guk (paedalgye chuim), “Sinsok hage p’ason öpsi ojön öpsi” [Quickly, without damage or misrepresentation], *Hwasin*, 64-65.

comments at any time in a suggestion box.<sup>18</sup> The department stores strove to create a comfortable atmosphere where customers could enjoy their shopping experience. Customers might have come to purchase only one item, but the department stores believed that providing a good service experience would encourage them to buy other items as well. The first task was to get customers to come into the store by any means necessary and then to make it difficult for customers to leave without purchasing anything.<sup>19</sup>

Department stores pursued sales through direct sales, mail order, and road shows, but they also tried to increase sales by increasing their customer base and adjusting their product mix accordingly. Until the 1930's, most department stores had targeted the upper middle-class and thus offered only high-quality products and select goods. After the mid-1930's however, department stores set their sights lower and began expanding their customer base to the middle-class and even lower. Accordingly, the stores began stocking basic commodities and products for daily use. In particular, department stores began selling food and groceries, which attracted a particularly positive response from customers.<sup>20</sup> In this fashion, the department stores embarked on a “popularization trend” through this time period.

As a result of this business strategy, department stores were able to greatly increase their sales. The five major department stores in Seoul increased their total sales from over 12 million yen in 1935 to over 19 million yen in 1939. While it is impossible to find sales figures for each department store, overall sales can be ascertained from tax liability records.

Table 1. Tax Liability and Sales Trajectory for Seoul Department Stores (1930-1942)

Dept. Stores	1930	1931	1933	1934	1935	1936	1937	1938	1939	1942
Mitsukoshi	2,253	2,465	3,853	4,062	4,313	4,651	5,359	6,261	7,842	16,686
Chōjiya	-	3,038	3,460	4,009	4,379	4,628	4,657	4,935	5,614	14,302
Minakai	1,730	1,730	1,439	1,164	1,598	2,757	3,878	3,957	4,239	9,551
Hirata	1,812	1,853	1,733	1,827	2,012	2,329	2,319	2,653	2,830	4,850
Hwasin	758	670	1,314	1,770	2,388	2,001	2,457	2,990	4,069	10,930

<sup>18</sup> “*Kōri ūi pudu paekhwajōm ūi t’usōham en ōddōn t’usō ga tūlōgana?*” [What kind of suggestions are put in the suggestion box of the ‘wharves of the street’ department stores?] *Sahae kongnon* 2-5 (1936.5).

<sup>19</sup> Mukai Shikamatsu, *Hyakkaten no kako genzai oyobi shōrai* [The past, present, and future of department stores] (Dōbunkan, 1941), 92.

<sup>20</sup> *Chōsen shōkō shinbun*, 1932.11.2, 11.12, 11.27. The market at Mitsukoshi was so successful that it had daily sales ranging from 8,000 yen to 10,000 yen. When constructing its new building, Hwasin devoted the entire first basement floor to its market.



Total	-	9,465	9,465	13,266	15,849	17,487	18,749	21,078	24,855	56,319
Total Sales	-	-	-	-	12,179,001		14,719,461	15,9476,860	19,155,246	

Source: *Keijō shōkō meiroku* for each year

Note: The figures were rounded to the whole number. There is no data for Chōjiya in the 1930's. The tax liability for each year refers to the operations from the previous year.

The relative rankings of the stores show a great deal of movement and highlight the fierce competition between the stores. Chōjiya had the highest tax liability in 1931 but was pushed out of the top spot by Mitsukoshi and remained in second place during the remainder of the colonial period. Hirata was in third place in 1931 but was gradually pushed to the bottom by 1942. However, the rise of the Korean department store Hwasin during the same period was quite striking. Hwasin paid the least tax by far in 1931, but quick growth of sales allowed it to overtake Hirata and Minakai. By 1942, Hwasin was third in tax liability, which suggests third in revenue, among Seoul department stores.

In terms of their second role, department stores were not simply facilities dedicated to commerce, but they were also cultural organizations that provided Seoul urbanites the opportunity to pursue a more culturally diverse lifestyle.<sup>21</sup> Department stores achieved differentiation from existing stores, beginning with their external appearance. To increase their sales area, department stores constructed multi-level buildings with distinctly Renaissance-style exteriors, the beauty of which made them famous around Seoul. In addition, the buildings contained theaters and performance halls that hosted diverse cultural events, including movie showings, musical concerts, and exhibitions. In its sixth-floor performance hall, Hwasin offered free newsreel or movie showings three times a week. In 1940, the hall was enlarged into a dedicated newsreel movie hall that could accommodate 350 people.<sup>22</sup> There were events with the purpose of selling more goods like large sales or displays of popular items, but the department store also held events like lectures, shows, and exhibitions that had no direct connection to selling merchandise. The pretext of these events was to

<sup>21</sup> Hwasin hyakkaten Date Akio, “Hyakkaten ga motarasu bunka” [Culture brought by department stores], *Chōsen kōron* 24-2 (1936.2).

<sup>22</sup> *Chōsen shōkō shinbun*, 1938.1.27; *Chosŏn ilbo*, 1940.3.12

introduce consumers to new modes of living. Although department stores were emphasizing lifestyle improvements in food, clothing and shelter; in actuality, they were promoting a new consumer culture to induce consumers to buy more products. Consequently, department stores functioned as educational institutions that disseminated a bourgeois cultural lifestyle to the lower middle class.

Third, department stores were not only large-scale consumption spaces but they also functioned as entertainment facilities and amusement centers. In particular, the upper middle class used the department stores as areas for socializing.<sup>23</sup> The exterior of the department store was decorated with lights, creating a nighttime spectacle. In 1937, Hwasin completed its new building, which included the first electric news message board in Korea.<sup>24</sup> The interior of the building was also decorated with bright lights and luxurious adornments, as well as modern conveniences like elevators and escalators, which were still rare for that time period.<sup>25</sup> The interior facilities of the department store included a rooftop garden, observation deck, rest areas, tea rooms, and restaurants, which made it a required destination for out of town visitors, as well as Seoul residents. The rooftop garden, which was open to the public, included a greenhouse, fountain, and an aquarium, earning it the title of “a park in the city” [K. *tosi ūi kongwŏn*]. Consequently, the store was a popular destination for families looking for a cultural experience, as well as young couples out on a date.<sup>26</sup> The high-class facilities within the department store created a heady atmosphere for both shoppers and the people who worked there. Customers were encouraged to forget that they were in a store and led to believe they were walking through an amusement park. Department stores portrayed

---

<sup>23</sup> “Ch’unkwang ch’unsaeŭ ūi chongjongsang” [The occasional partner of spring sunshine and spring scenery], *Chogwang* 3-4 (1937.4), 108-112; Han In-t’aek, “Paekhwajŏm pom p’unggyŏng sagyŏng” [The spring scenery and four landscapes in department stores], *Chogwang* 4-4 (1938.4), 31-34; Yi Chong-myŏng, “Uul ttep’atū” [A depressing department store], *Chungang ilbo* (1933.2.21); Kim Ki-rim, “Pom ūi chŏnryŏng” [The messenger of spring], *Chosŏn ilbo* (1933.2.22); Kim Ki-rim, “Pada ūi tokhok” [The allure of the sea], *Tonga ilbo* (1931.8.27-29).

<sup>24</sup> *Tonga ilbo* (1937.10.9).

<sup>25</sup> *Maeil sinbo* (1939.4.12).

<sup>26</sup> Han In-t’aek, “Tep’at’ū chapki” [Notes on the department store], *Sahae kongnon* 2-8 (1936.8), 120-124.

themselves as a “place for urbanites to go for a stroll” and the interiors were described as “extensions of a walking path.”<sup>27</sup>

In particular, department store restaurants were established specifically to draw in more customers.<sup>28</sup> Initially, Hwasin used only a portion of the fourth floor in its East building for its restaurant business but eventually expanded to cover the entire floor. In its new building, the fifth floor was used for the restaurant. The Hwasin restaurant offered various food and drink options, including Western, Japanese, and Korean cuisine. The restaurant was a popular with customers, especially families, and was often complete filled at mealtimes. Hwasin viewed the restaurant business as a critical operation. It sold food tickets (two wŏn and five wŏn) and prided itself on the fact that it was “a unique location for regular men and women to socialize” and “a Seoul attraction.”<sup>29</sup> The Hwasin’s management principles placed particular emphasis on the restaurant business, which distinguished it from Western department stores. Department stores became popular as a destination for young people on dates, a rest area for pedestrians, and a walking course for urbanites. In other words, department stores became a requisite stop in the daily life of all modern urban residents, as well as a must-see destination for visitors coming from outside Seoul.<sup>30</sup> Consequently, the department stores were inundated with waves of people coming and going, thus earning the sobriquets “heart of the city” or the “wharf of the streets” [K. *kŏri ūi pudu*].<sup>31</sup>

### 3. Cutting-Edge Commercial Facilities: Department Store Management’s Perspective

---

<sup>27</sup> *Maeil sinbo* (1936.6.17).

<sup>28</sup> Department stores in this period considered the restaurant business to be critically important and engaged in fierce competition for this segment of the market. “Mitsukoshi Chōjiya Minakai shokudo kassenki” [Restaurant battle between Mitsukoshi, Chōjiya, and Minakai], *Chōsen oyobi Manshū* 317 (1934.4).

<sup>29</sup> “Kyōngsōng myōngmul Hwasin sikdang” [The Hwasin restaurant as a Seoul attraction], *Hwasin* (1934).

<sup>30</sup> T’ae Ch’o, “Sodaegari Kyōngsōng sigol haksaeŋ i ch’ōūm pon Sōul, chaeKyōngch’o ilgi” [The head of the ox, Kyōngsōng: Seoul as first seen by rural students], *Pyōlgōngon* 50 (1932.4).

<sup>31</sup> Sō Kwang-je, “Tep’at’ū hwajang,” parts 1-2, *Chosŏn ilbo* (1933.2.15-17); Kim Chin-sōp, “Paekhwajōm chung” [In the middle of the department store], *Chosŏn ilbo* (1933.2.26); Kim Ki-rim, “Pada ūi hwansang” [The illusion of the sea], *Sinkajōng*, 1-8 (1933.8); Kim Ki-rim, “Tosi p’unggyōng 1-2” [The landscape of the city], *Chosŏn ilbo* (1931.2.21-24).

From the perspective of management, it was not an easy proposition to maintain department stores at the cutting-edge of commerce. Managers had to think tactically about continuously acquiring both a large variety and a large quantity of merchandise, using the latest sales techniques to move the merchandise, and preventing the buildup of unnecessary inventory. Managers also had to think strategically about opportunities for expansion, acquiring the necessary capital, and overcoming any obstacles that might arise. Concurrently, the constantly increasing number of employees required efficient human resource management, forcing managers to consider all the diverse aspects that were fundamental to running a department store. Despite the myriad tasks confronting them, managers were also fiercely proud of their work in supervising a state-of-the-art commercial facility.

The head of the Seoul branch of Mitsukoshi was Miwa Kunitarō (1936.2-1940.1). In his estimation, the modern department store was more than a simple marketplace for selling goods. It was an unsurpassed entertainment facility, a gathering place for the new generation, and an institution to improve cultural life. As the manager entrusted with overseeing this critical location, Miwa was inordinately proud.<sup>32</sup> The Japanese department stores had the large-scale capital and facilities, and were armed with the most advanced management techniques. The only Korean department store was Hwasin and its owner, Pak Hŭng-sik, had a grand vision for his store. Pak Hŭng-sik considered it his duty and responsibility to make Hwasin into the best department store in Korea and establish Hwasin as a bastion that would protect Korean commercial rights in the Chongno district from the encroachment of Japanese commercial capital.

Normally, business people have various principles, such as selling good products at a cheap price or being polite and quick...However, [I believe] those ideas are duties rather than principles. For that reason, I don't use them as my principles. I have only

---

<sup>32</sup> Miwa Kunitarō, "Chōsen bunka to hyakkaten no shimei" [Korean culture and the mission of the department store], *Chōsen kōron* 25-5 (1937.5).

one principle and that is to never lose to any anyone else. Poor as it may be, [Hwasin] is the only department store for the Korean people, therefore I personally believe that the success or failure of this department store is tied to the honor of all of [the people of] Chosŏn. In Seoul alone, there are five department stores so I believe that this location requires the creation of an excellent department store. In the future, in terms of the facilities and the service and all other factors, we are absolutely convinced that we will very soon in the future establish the biggest and best department store in Chosŏn.<sup>33</sup>

For Pak Hŭng-sik, Hwasin was not simply a profitable organization but the only Korean-owned department store. As such, it represented all Koreans and had three vital missions.<sup>34</sup> Its first mission was to distribute goods and “disseminate modern convenience” [K. *munmyŏng igi*] as its contribution to Korean industrial development. Second, Hwasin was to set an example as a pillar of the business community and change the traditional contemptuous attitude toward merchants that had been passed down from the Chosŏn dynasty. Hwasin would have to take the lead in producing a “merchants for the new era” [K. *sinsidae ũi sangin*]. Lastly, Pak used the “Korean-ness” of Hwasin as a marketing tool but this ethno-centric categorization positioned Hwasin as a representative example of Korean business. Consequently, Hwasin, and its successes and failures, would become a publicly visible barometer of Korean management skills, which placed a large amount of pressure and responsibility on the company to perform in the marketplace.

Within this sense of duty, Pak Hŭng-sik devoted himself to managing the department store.<sup>35</sup> In the beginning, Pak knew nothing of managing a department store but he read the available literature on department stores in the West and in Japan and visited Japan to see their management techniques for himself. He took advice from experts and sought out

---

<sup>33</sup> Author Z, “Ch’ŏnyŏ wa Pak Hŭng-sik – Chosŏn ũi sangŏp wang Pak Hung-sik ssi wa ũi ‘ch’ŏnyŏ ch’ŏlhak’ ilmun ildapgi” [Single women and Pak Hŭng-sik: an interview with the Korean king of commerce Pak Hŭng-sik and ‘the philosophy of single women’], *Chungang* 4-3 (1936.3), 240-243.

<sup>34</sup> Pak Hŭng-sik, “Hwasin ũi samyŏng kwa oin ũi ch’aekim” [The duty of Hwasin and my responsibility], *Hwasin* 18-20.

<sup>35</sup> Pak Hŭng-sik believed there were three necessary elements to business, which were “trust, capital, and effort,” but that effort could make up for any shortfalls elsewhere. Pak Hŭng-sik, “Suji ga matnŭn saenghwal” [A lifestyle appropriate to income and expenditures], *Sindonga* 2-1 (1932.1), 40-41.

management knowledge.<sup>36</sup> He actively recruited capable individuals who had gone abroad and studied advanced department store management techniques. For example, he brought in specialists like Yi Kŭng-jong and Han Sŭng-in who had studied management at Columbia University.<sup>37</sup> If meeting someone was vital for managing the department store, then Pak was willing to meet with them anytime and anywhere, to the extent that he was known as “‘the elite machine knows no rest’ from 8 o’clock in the morning to 12 o’clock at night.”<sup>38</sup> Pak Hŭng-sik was driven by his entrepreneurial spirit to make Hwasin the best department in Korea. At the same time, he believed that this was the path to block the penetration of Japanese department stores into the Chongno commercial district.<sup>39</sup> His confidence was an example to other Korean businessmen and it was an expression of the pride and self-respect that came from recruiting the most capable managers for his department store.

The department store managers believed that the factor with the greatest direct influence on sales was the employees who stood at the front line of sales. Consequently, managers spent a great deal of attention on selecting department store personnel. The following quote provides an example of the selection standards for Hwasin employees.

We naturally consider character because the primary objective of the department store is to provide good service to the customers. A consideration of character takes into account various aspects that go beyond typical beauty, because we want someone who gives a good first impression to others...of course, employees must make a good impression if they are to attract many customers. Furthermore, there is no question of the extent to which employees must be courteous. Most people from various commercial backgrounds have learned to suppress their egos somewhat; but unlike other workplaces, people with excessive egos will be summarily rejected. If you do

---

<sup>36</sup> “Washin Tōa gappei mondai o megutte” [Examining the merger issue between Hwasin and Tōa], *Chōsen shitsugyō kurabu* 10-9 (1932.9), 17.

<sup>37</sup> For more on Han Sŭng-in, see Oh Jin-seok, “Ilcheha Migun chōnggi Han Sŭng-in ūi chōngch’i hwaldong kwa kyōngje insik” [The political activities and economic understanding of Han Sŭng-in in the colonial and American military occupation periods], *Yōnse kyōngje yōn’gu* 8-1 (2001).

<sup>38</sup> Ch’u Yōb-gaek, “Paekmanjangja ūi paekmanwōn’gwōn – saōp esō saōp ūro toyak hanŭn Pak Hŭng-sik ssi” [The million wōn perspective of a millionaire – Pak Hŭng-sik who is leaping from business to business], *Samch’ōlli* 7-10 (1935.11), 53; C, “Sirrōpgye ūi kōsōng ūl ch’ajōsō – yōlsōng innae ūi kwōnhwa Pak Hŭng-sik ssi pangmungi” [Finding a giant star of the business world – an interview with the incarnation of enthusiasm and patience, Pak Hŭng-sik], *Sindonga* 5-1 (1935.1), 193.

<sup>39</sup> Author Z, 242; Pak Hŭng-sik, *Chaegye hoego* 2 [Memoirs of the business world, vol. 2], (Seoul: Han’guk ilbosa, 1981), 200-209.

not kill off your own ego, how can you provide courteous service to people from a variety of classes?<sup>40</sup>

As seen above, the primary selection standard for employees was character. However, contemporary articles openly described how department stores evaluated the character of their employees based on their appearance.<sup>41</sup> Employee appearance undoubtedly influenced sales. Consequently, department stores tried to select employees who were particularly good-looking. In response to a reporter's question on employee selection policy, Pak Hŭng-sik pointed to the three standards of "impression, trust, and business talent" [K. *insang, sinyong, sangindaun sojil*] but in this case, impression meant appearance. In addition, Hwasin department store paid greater attention to personality rather than educational level in selecting its employees.<sup>42</sup> For example, the company wanted people who would obey orders from their superiors and who would be easygoing and cheerful in their personal relationships. The company evaluated whether or not workers could swallow their pride and courteously serve customers while also being sharp enough to recognize what customers wanted and assist them accordingly.

Employees who were ultimately selected by the department stores continued to be trained and assessed according to these standards. In their instructions at morning assemblies, managers exhorted their workers to have the self-respect of working at a cutting-edge

---

<sup>40</sup> "Yŏjikkjang ūi isanghyŏng t'ajin (4) – Hwasin paekhwajŏm insa kwajang Pak Chu-sŏp ssi tam" [Exploring the model female employee (4) – a conversation with Hwasin department store human resources manager Pak Chu-sŏp], *Chosŏn chungang ilbo* (1936.2.23).

<sup>41</sup> "Paekhwajŏm ūi miin sijang" [The beauty market of department stores], *Samch'ŏlli* 6-5 (1934.5); Yi Pak-un, "Sŏul sadae paekhwajŏm miin chŏmwŏn t'amsagi" [An exploration of the beautiful employees of the four major Seoul department stores], *Silhwa* 1-2 (1938.1.10), 76-79.

<sup>42</sup> "Yŏgisŏ nŭn irŏn yŏsŏng ūl ppopso – Hwasin paekhwajŏm" [Here we choose these kind of women – Hwasin department store], *Chosŏn ilbo* (1936.2.16); "Yŏsŏng ūi ilt'ŏ rŭl ch'ajŏ" [Finding women's workplaces], *Tonga ilbo* (1936.2.20); "Yŏjikkjang ūi isanghyŏng t'ajin (4) – Hwasin paekhwajŏm insa kwajang Pak Chu-sŏp ssi tam" [Exploring the model female employee (4) – a conversation with Hwasin department store human resources manager Pak Chu-sŏp], *Chosŏn chungang ilbo* (1936.2.23); "Sinyŏsŏng chikŏp annae (6) – yŏjŏmwŏn" [A guide to work for 'new women' – female clerks], *Maeil sinbo* (1937.1.9); "Paekhwajŏm e nat'anan sinyŏsŏng: Hwasin insagye chuim Pak Chu-sŏp ssi wa ūi ilmunildapgi" [The 'new women' appearing in department stores: an interview with Hwasin human resources manager Pak Chu-sŏp], *Yŏsŏng* 2-2 (1937.2), 23-24; "Chikŏp nyŏsŏng i toel pun ūn arŏdusŏya hapnida – Hwasin paekhwajŏm insakwajang Pak Chu-sŏp ssi tam" [Prospective working women should know this – a conversation with Hwasin department store human resources manager Pak Chu-sŏp], *Maeil sinbo* (1938.2.26).

commercial company and entreated them to be united and energetic in their work.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, managers distributed the rules and regulations, as well as the employee code of conduct, that the workers had to follow and demanded at company gatherings that workers follow company policies and instructions. In order to prevent employee negligence or improper actions, managers, supervisors, and section chiefs were frequently instructed to closely monitor the employees. In a work environment filled with young employees in their early twenties, romantic relationships between male and female workers could become a particularly troublesome problem. In fact, workers troubled about being in romantic relationships sometimes chose to commit suicide.<sup>44</sup> Consequently, Hwasin prohibited romantic relationships in the company and fired any employees discovered to be dating, as well as disciplining any employees who tarnished the reputation of the department store through questionable behavior.<sup>45</sup>

#### 4. The Flowering of Consumer Capitalism: Employees' Perspective of the Department Store

In general, female workers at department stores were generally 15-25 years old, were neat in appearance, and their educational backgrounds were limited to middle school, commercial schools, or girls' high schools. However, they labored under poor working conditions of twelve-hour workdays and low wages that were often insufficient to meet their living expenses. Their biggest complaint was the requirement for them to remain standing for long periods of time. It was often overwhelming for young women to have to constantly stand throughout their twelve-hour work shift. Consequently, they constantly complained that their

---

<sup>43</sup> “Kōri ūi yōhakkyo rūl ch’ajōsō, yōnae kūmje ūi Hwasin yōhakkyo, chebok ūi ch’ōnyō paeksasip myōng” [Visting a women’s school on the street, the dating prohibition system of the Hwasin women’s school; 140 young women in uniform], *Samch’ōlli* 7-10 (1935.11).

<sup>44</sup> *Chosŏn chungang ilbo* (1936.7.10); *Tonga ilbo* (1936.7.10, 7.24); *Maeil sinbo* (1938.8.2).

<sup>45</sup> *Chōsen shōkō shinbun* (1936.5.12).



legs hurt so much that it felt like their legs had been cut off.<sup>46</sup> The exterior of the department store might have been impressive but the working environment for the employees was quite unpleasant. The movement of goods and people coming and going created smells, dust, and noise that plagued workers. Consequently, many department store employees caught illnesses like lung disease, pleurisy, and beriberi. Also, working indoors throughout the day meant that employees suffered from a severe deficiency of sunshine and its attendant effects. One employee wrote in her diary that “I am envious of people who live under the sun.”<sup>47</sup> For these reasons, workers were dissatisfied enough to compare themselves to products, robots, and machines.

Although workers were brimming with dissatisfaction over the unfairness of their working conditions, they were not allowed to exhibit any discourteous behavior to customers. They were trained in their duty as employees to have a ready smile and an unflaggingly cheerful attitude. However, dealing with all types of customers was not an easy task. Employees had to courteously respond to customers who stubbornly tried to bargain down the prices or customers who deliberately demanded that clerks find items that were clearly not available. Store employees had to politely address customers who demanded service that went above and beyond common sense, as well as overlook sexual harassment from the occasional drunk customer. These were “problem customers” [K. *chinsang kogaek*].

There are all types of episodes. Instead of looking at the goods, [customers] keep looking at the clerk trying to start a conversation. Even though they aren't going to buy anything, they ask for different items until everything has been brought out. Then they say they're not going to buy anything because everything is too expensive or they simply turn around and leave without saying anything... It is pathetic when well-mannered gentlemen try to bargain down the price of cigarettes. It is the most awkward when dealing with drunk customers. In the case of a coworker from another department, there was a drunk student wearing a square hat who came and acted as if he was going to buy something. As requested, the worker brought out various items and talked about the items. The customer first arrived at noon but stayed until the evening and continued talking with the employee.

---

<sup>46</sup> “Chömwön saenghwal üi imyön – T paekhwajöm yöjömwön Yun—wön” [The hidden side of a clerk's life: Yun—wön, a female worker at T department store], *Sanggong Chosön* (1932.8); Yöjömwön Kim Pok-sil,

“Chamsirado anjō poassūmyön” [If I could sit for even a little while], *Sinkajōng* 3-8 (1935.8).

<sup>47</sup> Ch'oe Yōng-ae, “Yöjömwön üi ilgi” [The diary of a female clerk], *Sinkajōng* 3-2 (1935.2).

Finally, the worker had to call over a male coworker to help the customer and she escaped. When dealing with customers, workers have to be polite when trying to sell items, but when customers act this way, even elderly customers, then it is difficult to be polite. Of course, if we treat customers rudely, there are people who will write letters to the store manager.<sup>48</sup>

Even when dealing with “problem customers,” employees were required by their companies to deal with them politely. Regardless of whatever impossible demands were made, the department stores taught their employees that their duty was to give courteous service.<sup>49</sup> From the president to the section chiefs, managers, and supervisors of middle management, all administrators emphasized the need for unceasing courtesy to customers. A female clerk made the following honest confession.

The most unpleasant aspect is [the managers] turning clerks into prostitutes [K. *maesobuhwa*]. At assembly time, this is what they stress. To all the customers, they say to be charming, be polite, be warm, and always give them a smile. Once [the customers] hold an item, be charming so they won't turn around and leave! This is the basic instruction that [the managers] give at assembly times each day. We are not here to sell our labor but to sell our smile.<sup>50</sup>

Employees were not allowed to display frustration or unhappiness toward the customers. The company instructed its workers to always have a smile on their face and to be courteous. The clerks had to follow company-mandated rules on emotional expression, which them to regulate even their internal feelings. In one sense, the smiles and courtesy of the clerks were simply another type of “wrapping paper” used to sell the goods. In other words, this was a coercive example of the “commercialization of human feeling” through department store workers.<sup>51</sup> The demands for emotional labor were as high as those for physical labor,

---

<sup>48</sup> “Chiköp chanson e nasön yösöngdül (2) – yjömwön Oh Chöng-ja yang” [Women standing on the frontlines of business (2) – Female clerk Oh Chöng-ja], *Maeil sinbo* (1931.11.6).

<sup>49</sup> “Han siganssik üngdaehaja an samyön ulgo sip’ö – Hwasin paekhwajöm chömwön Hong Hye-yöm yang” [After serving them for an hour, I want to cry if they don't buy anything – Hwasin department store clerk Hong Hye-yöm], *Tonga ilbo* (1936.1.6); “Insaeng ch’onyönbyöng (1) – Hwasin paekhwajöm namjömwön Kim Sang-höm” [A novice in life (1) – Hwasin department store male clerk Kim Sang-höm], *Tonga ilbo* (1936.4.8).

<sup>50</sup> Chön XX paekhwajöm Kim Yöng-sön, “Yöin p’orodae sunangi salgi wihayö” [A record of the suffering of women in difficult circumstances], *Yöin* 1 (1932.6), 68-69.

<sup>51</sup> Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983); Pak Hong-chu, “Kamjöng nodong, yösöng üi nun üro tasi pogi” [Emotional labor: a

but emotions had no monetary value so workers were not compensated for this labor. The disconnect between the emotional control demanded by the company and the actual internal emotions of the female workers occasionally caused intense work-related stress. When dealing with difficult customers, workers could not express their actual emotions and had to engage in a performance of fake emotions. The toll of these performances was measured in the psychological stress of suppressing their personal dignity and self-respect while maintaining a deceptive and hypocritical front. As referenced above, workers felt that the company was turning them into prostitutes. When under the gaze of the customers, another worker compared herself negatively to a monkey in the zoo.<sup>52</sup>

However, workplace frustration was not simply limited to these issues. Workers also had to carefully watch the customers because there were people who try to steal items. If any goods were damaged, even if it was caused by customers, the responsibility still fell on the worker. At the same time, the workers had to labor under the “tiger-like” surveillance of their managers, supervisors, section chiefs, and other lower-middle management.<sup>53</sup> Consequently, it was impossible for them to conduct themselves freely. Although they were young women, their personal lives were strictly regulated. The workers unhappily characterized themselves as dolls that forced themselves to laugh politely, as well as working machines that were not permitted to malfunction, all the while fostering a deep-seated hatred towards the lower-middle management. In one worker’s journal, she clearly designated one supervisor as “someone to kill” [K. *chukil nom*], while another worker stated that the department store managers were “the enemy of the propertyless masses” [K. *musan taejung ūi chōk*].<sup>54</sup>

---

reexamination through female eyes], *Inmul kwa sasang* 103 (2006); Kim Sang-p’yo, “Kamjōng nodong: t’ongje sudan, chongōpwōn ūi simrijōk panūng, kūrigo pangbōpnonjōk munje” [Emotional labor: control measures, psychological responses of employees, and methodological issues], *Sanōp kyōngje yōn’gu* 13-4 (2000).

<sup>52</sup> Han Su-bong, “Hōmu rül nūtkinūn” [Feeling the futility], *Silhwa* 1-1 (1938.9), 72-73.

<sup>53</sup> Pak Pong-ae, “Chikōp yōsōng ūi saenghwal haebu” [A lifestyle autopsy of working women], *Sinkajōng* 3-2 (1935.2).

<sup>54</sup> XX paekhwajōm Kim Yōng-sōn, “Tep’atū sach’ūng esō” [On the fourth floor of the department store], *Pip’an* 13 (1932.5).

Regardless of the efforts of the department store management to instill the so-called pride and self-respect of working at the cutting-edge of commerce, the workers did not feel the same way. In actuality, the workers were ashamed of their occupations. When workers ran into former teachers or classmates, they often avoided talking to them or responded in mechanical fashion because of the shame they felt.<sup>55</sup>

The workers were quite young, generally between ten to twenty years of age, but they had to face the lower-middle managers every day at work and so the managers became the object of fear and envy. Among the managers, there were those who used the excuse of giving work instructions to strongly reprimand the workers, habitually browbeat them, and make abusive remarks. There were even managers who sexually harassed their workers. If workers dared protest, then the managers used their authority to give them additional punishments. The mostly young workers were continuously subjected to the verbal and physical abuse of these managers, which triggered extreme hostility toward the managers. One female worker at Hwasin department store who was tormented daily by one manager had enough after being berated in front of customers from the start of the workday. She went to the bathroom and attempted suicide through an overdose of the sleeping pill calmotin.<sup>56</sup> While this worker failed in her suicide attempt, the fact that she would go to these lengths demonstrates the level of the hostility that the workers felt toward middle management.

Manager Ch'oe does not normally have a generous personality and is usually bad-tempered. Occasionally, manager Ch'oe will say my name, "Paek In-bong," in front of the customers but if I do something wrong, then there are many times when [Ch'oe] will say "Hey! [J. *kora*]" or "Fool [J. *baka*]" and embarrass me. I have taken it up until now, but on the morning of the 23rd, I was simply adjusting my clothes. [Ch'oe] started scolding me for fidgeting and kept going until I could hardly breathe. I thought it would be better to die than to suffer like this. In order to show the agony felt by the employees, I decided to die.<sup>57</sup>

---

<sup>55</sup> Hwasin paekhwajöm Yi Su-kyöng, "Sselssükköl ūi piae" [The sadness of salesgirls], *Sinkajöng* 1 (1933.1); Kim Kyöng-ae, "Chömdu esö pon Chosön sonnim" [Korean customers as seen from the shop window], *Sinyösöng* 5-4 (1931.4); "Chiköp yösöng sunbang – paekhwajömwön Kong Kyöm-cha yang" [Visiting working women – department store worker Miss Kong Kyöm-cha], *Paekgwang* 2 (1937.2), 46-48.

<sup>56</sup> *Chösen shökö shinbun* (1938.3.27).

<sup>57</sup> *Maeil sinbo* (1938.3.25).

Due to employee working regulations and rules on emotional control, the company forced workers to offer false courtesy and suppress their egos, as well as labor under the surveillance and control of middle management. The unavoidable result was an increase in psychological stress and the development of neuroses, which pushed employees to the edge of self-control. In this state, it took only a little more damage to their self-esteem to create an extremely dangerous situation. In the mid-1930's, this is exactly what occurred between Hwasin department store employees.<sup>58</sup> After work, three employees went to their dormitory cafeteria to eat and they asked for a kimchi side dish to be replaced. The cafeteria worker ignored their request, which enraged the three workers to the point of carrying out a violent assault that killed one cafeteria worker. The main perpetrator was sentenced to three years in person and the two accomplices received two-year prison terms, which were reduced to three years of probation. While there may be no single explanation for why an ordinary episode turned into an extraordinary tragedy, the unexpected escalation was undoubtedly influenced by the neuroses and psychological stress of performing daily emotional labor in the department store.

As a result of their ordeals, the workers began to develop class consciousness commensurate to their suffering and repression. By reading books from the social sciences, some workers strengthened their understanding of social consciousness.<sup>59</sup> There was gradually increasing hatred towards company middle management and hostility to the upper-class customers in the store. Workers who were living at subsistence levels were particularly envious of the upper-class customers who conspicuously spending money without a second thought.

---

<sup>58</sup> *Maeil sinbo* (1935.8.18, 1935.10.26, 1935.11.1); *Chosŏn chungang ilbo* (1935.8.24, 1935.10.26); *Tonga ilbo* (1935.8.24); Chang Hŭk-yŏng, "Hwasin paekhwajŏmwŏn sarin sakŏn" [The murder of a Hwasin department store employee], *Pip'an* 3-5 (1935.10), 37.

<sup>59</sup> Yi Yŏng-ae, "Kyŏngjejŏk ũro Chosŏn ũl yŏn'guhae" [Researching Korea in economic terms], *Chosŏn ilbo* (1932.1.1); Pak Ũn-ae, "Yŏjŏmwŏn" [Female clerks], *Silsaenghwal* 3-2 (1932.2).

As employees worked at the richly appointed department stores, they were constantly surrounded by luxurious items and began to mistakenly identify themselves with their workplaces. While they may have stretched their budgets to purchase a luxury item during the occasional discount sale, they faced the unchanging reality that they could never afford to freely purchase any luxury goods on their salaries.<sup>60</sup> They were constantly reminded that they would never be more than just a salesperson, which caused a sense of shame. Although their workplace was a richly appointed department store, they returned home to their humble dwellings pointing to the dissonance between the two aspects of their lives. They compared their shabby lifestyles to the consumption behavior of their well-dressed customers and their families who purchased whatever they wanted, which inevitably led to some amount of envy.<sup>61</sup> However, the workers felt a “nauseating disgust” towards some customers, particularly the wealthy and bored customers who frequently ate at the department store restaurant throughout the day and shopped excessively. One worker said that she wanted to “throw up pickled fish guts” in reference to a rich customers who came to the department store with a *kisaeng* and promised to buy her whatever she wanted. Occasionally, college students came into the department store and assumed an air of superiority by speaking Japanese and English as they walked around the store. Workers thought to themselves that those students should grow up. As for the “new women” [K. *sinyōsōng*] and “new men” [K. *sinnamsōng*] who tactlessly preferred shopping at the Japanese department store, the Hwasin workers thought they should wake up to the reality of colonial Korea.<sup>62</sup> In this context, the

---

<sup>60</sup> The items sold in department stores were so expensive that workers could not afford them on their individual salaries. Among the items sold by Hwasin in the mid-1930's, watches ranged from a low of 11 yen 50 sen to 75 yen, with an average per watch price of 35 yen 94 sen. Fedoras cost between one yen 20 sen to 14 yen 50 sen, with an average price of five yen 65 sen. Neckties ranged between one yen to two yen 70 sen, with an average price of one yen 88 sen. Female shawls were between one yen 50 sen and five yen 80 sen, average price of three yen 13 sen. Men's dress shoes cost between six and thirteen yen. Women's shoes ranged between five yen 50 sen and 13 yen. *Kyōul kat'arogu – yōnmal yōnsi chūngdap yongp'um ho* [Winter catalog – Items for year-end or beginning-of-the-year gift exchanges] (Hwasin, year unknown).

<sup>61</sup> “Saenghwal chōnsōn t'ambanggi” [A tour of the front lines of life], *Silsaenghwal* 8-12 (1937.11).

<sup>62</sup> Kim Kyōng-ae, “Chōmdu esō pon Chosōn sonnīm” [Korean customers as seen from the shop window], *Sinyōsōng* 5-4 (1931.4).

workers were developing a hostile class consciousness towards the wealthy, which waited for the opportunity to burst forth.

## 5. A Kaleidoscope of Consumption: Consumers' Perspective of the Department Store

The department stores were focused on the socio-economic class that was giving life to a new culture of consumption. As modern transportation networks, high-rise buildings, and cultural institutions were continuously being established, a new urban culture was blossoming. The creation of window displays, neon signs, exotic advertisements, as well as social spaces like cafes and coffee shops [K. *tabang*], stimulated a new urban sensibility.<sup>63</sup> The contemporary conditions were well-depicted by the literary works of the modern novelists.<sup>64</sup> For example, the Pak T'ae-wŏn novel, *Sosŏlga Kubossi ūi ilil* [A day in the life of Kubo the novelist], describes how the title character Kubo enjoyed the urban culture of Seoul in a day-long walk around the city. With the transformation of the appearance and culture of the city, the new class was also rising to lead the changes. The so-called new men and new women were represented by the “modern boy” and the “modern girl,” that is to say, the new upper-class urbanite. They were transforming street fashion with sensuous clothes and hairstyles, shopping at department stores, viewing movies at theaters, and buying records in record shops. They also promoted a new social lifestyle centered on cafes and coffee shops, while also being sensitive to the latest fashions as well as a lifestyle of decadent sexuality. In other words, they lived lives of careless abandon, regardless of other people's opinions. At times, they were labeled “addicts of the urban lifestyle” and “wanderers of the streets.” While they were creating a heretofore unknown urban culture, they also possessed a strong appetite for

---

<sup>63</sup> Kim Yŏn-hŭi, “Ilcheha Kyŏngsŏng chiyŏk k'ap'e ūi tosi munhwajŏk t'ŭksŏng” [The urban cultural characteristics of cafes in colonial Seoul] M.A. thesis, Seoul sirip taehakkyo, 2002.

<sup>64</sup> Ch'oi Hye-sil, “Kyŏngsŏng ui tosihwa ga 1930 nyŏndae Han'guk modŏnijŭm sosŏl e mich'in yŏnghyang” [The influence of Seoul urbanization on the 1930's Korean modern novel], *Sŏulhak yŏn'gu* 9 (1998); Sŏ Chun-sŏp, *Han'guk modŏnijŭm munhak yŏn'gu* [A study of Korean modern literature] (Seoul: Ilchisa, 1988).

modern commodity consumption to deploy in their cultural activities.<sup>65</sup> Most of the items that they consumed were foreign in origin. The department store imported famous foreign brands or directly developed their own brand of products for customers to encourage the development of a modern consumption culture. For example, it was practically required for so-called modern consumers to purchase items like name-brand suits and Coty cosmetics in order to call themselves modern consumers.<sup>66</sup>

The new women [K. *sin yōsōng*] of the time were quite focused on beauty and a common phrase among women was “cosmetics are a women’s life” [K. *hwajang ūn yōja ūi saengmyōng*].<sup>67</sup> Ladies of leisure [K. *yuhan puin*] were sarcastically portrayed as being constantly concerned with their hairstyle, cosmetics, dresses, undergarments, and shoes.<sup>68</sup> However, the leaders in these fashions and trends were the Japanese department stores like Chōjiya and Mitsukoshi. These women did not differentiate between Japanese or Korean stores, as long as the department stores were accurately conveying the culture of modern consumption.

However, their reasons for patronizing these department stores were not simply limited to purchasing the latest fashionable items. From the perspective of department store customers, those items could be purchased anywhere. The reason for going to the department store was to enjoy a comfortable shopping environment and the courteous service offered by staffers, or in other words, a type of combinatorial consumerism. The bright lights and luxurious furnishings of the department store encouraged customers to forget they were not outside and to pretend that they were an amusement park on a warm spring day. Customers

---

<sup>65</sup> The new woman shared a common sentiment of “If I was a little prettier” [K. *chom dō arūmdawō chōssūmyōn*]. “Miin i toiryōmyōn – miyong pigyōl” [If you want to be a beauty – secrets to beauty treatment]

<sup>66</sup> Sō Kwang-jae, “Dep’at’ū hwajang” [Department store cosmetics, parts 1-2], *Chosōn ilbo* 1933.2.15-17.

<sup>67</sup> Yōwang mijangwōn O

<sup>68</sup> Tonga puin sanghoe Ch’oe Nam, “Sanghoe rosō pon yōhaksang,” [Female students as seen from the store], *Sin yōsōng* 4-4 (1926.4); Yi Sō-gu, “1932 nyōndo Sin yōsōng yuhaeng chōnmang” [Future fashion trends for new women in 1932], *Sin yōsōng* 6-1 (1932.1); Hō Yōng-sun, “Yuhan puin ege il’ōn – mōnjō saenghwal kaesōn e himssūra” [A word to ladies of leisure – focus first on improving your lives], *Sin kajōng* 3-9 (1935.9); Yi Yong-sōl, “Chosōn yōja wa sach’i” [Korean women and luxury], *Sin kajōng* 2-9 (1934.9).



were showered with the solicitous attention of staff for only a short time while they were in the fancy interiors of the department store, but they could feel like they were members of the upper-class for that short time.

Sunlight and people have a very important relationship. People gather where there is a lot of sunlight and there is a lot of sunlight where many people gather. For this reason, the bustling crowds of many different people where they are all jammed together becomes a bustling place. Amidst the bustling of the city, the place that most excites the emotions of the city folk and the emotion of young people is the department store. The department store at night is the pleasure palace and amusement park of city folk. Trends and fashions are the lifeblood of the department store, but the store also extravagantly displays the various daily necessities that accessorize young people, like clothes, shoes, and cosmetics. Well-mannered and embodying modern sentiments, the seductively beautiful salesgirls use subtle cuteness as they serve customers. While the service is offered underneath the radiance of hundreds of lights, the brightest object is watching the bustling stage [where this all occurs]. However, when watching the people giving and receiving the service, who are cheerfully giving and receiving sinful emotion, one can clearly see the self-conceit of the cityfolk. The exchange of emotions, in the absence of promises, is only possible with the cityfolk who come and go in the night. Furthermore, it is this emotion that grips the cityfolk [passing by], who do not want to buy anything and would like to rest their tired minds and bodies, and seduces them through the brilliant window displays and draws them into the bustling department store.<sup>69</sup>

In the department store, there was no distinction regarding status or position. As long as anyone has purchasing power, they were treated like kings. If someone became an elite customer that reliably raised sales figures, then they were the first to be informed of the arrival of new products, while receiving particularly attentive service from a dedicated staffer.<sup>70</sup> Some customers frequented the department stores specifically to enjoy this feeling. If these customers felt that some store personnel didn't give them this feeling of service, then the customer clearly expressed their dissatisfaction.<sup>71</sup> The customers criticized everything the workers did, harassing them, and even calling over their supervisors to protest. Some customers put complaints in the suggestion box and even reported their dissatisfaction to the media.

---

<sup>69</sup> *Tonga ilbo* (1932.11.22).

<sup>70</sup> *Chōsen shōkō shinbun* (1936.1.21).

<sup>71</sup> *Chōsen shōkō shinbun* (1935.4.16).

Hwasin department store should be a model for our Korean market so the discourteous behavior of its employees is quite regretful. I went to purchase one outfit of children's clothes in the Western products section of the third floor, but I didn't see anything to buy. I looked around and there were five or six male and female workers simply standing around in one place not doing anything. I called out "excuse me" [K. *igŏt poso*], but they only giggled and were pushing each other forward. After waiting a while, one employee finally approached with an unpleasant attitude. How can this kind of thing happen? I bought a two yen outfit and came home, but if this is the standard set by Hwasin employees, it should be corrected immediately. The enemy of stores is the dissatisfaction of the customer.

As seen above, the smile and courteous manner of employees was simply another type of "wrapping paper" utilized to sell more goods. Even if there was an unpleasant incident, the company expected workers to suppress their personal emotions and practice emotional control to present a "manufactured" smile and a polite attitude. However, some department store customers mistook this behavior as personal interest. They handed notes to female employees that they found attractive and waited for them after the store closed to ask them out on dates.<sup>72</sup> However, these men were coldly received by the female staffers outside the store, which showed that the smiles and courtesy inside the store were simply a façade.

On the one hand, some department store customers conflated the luxurious and high-class atmosphere of the department store with the items that were sold there. Their approval of the expensive products that they might have used once or twice expanded to encompass all the products sold in the department store. They believed that there was "something *different* about department store products [emphasis added]." The items sold at department stores were similar to items sold elsewhere but they might have the department store logo on it or they might be wrapped in logo-imprinted wrapping paper. While the items may have been similar, they were perceived differently. The same item could be purchased at the local market but consumers went all the way to the department store to purchase it. This was the sales strategy of department stores.

---

<sup>72</sup> Sŏ In-hŭi, "Saemsotnŭn mulyok ūi hŏyŏng ūl kŭkpok" [Overcoming permission [to indulge in] a flood of worldly desires], *Maeil sinbo* (1935.1.3).

Some customers used commodity consumption at department stores as a means of displaying of their wealth. Wearing fancy clothes, they entered the department store, purchased anything that caught their eye, and dined on expensive food in the department store restaurant.

If you look at the men who come into the department store, college professors and middle school teachers, the so-called ‘chattering class’ of society, it seems that they only shop at Mitsukoshi, Chōjiya, and Hirata. If you examine their behavior, they eat breakfast, lunch, and dinner at the [department store] restaurant! Although these people are certainly wealthy, isn’t this too much excessive behavior for Koreans? Also, it may be all right to do this in a walk through scenic mountains or in the countryside, but these men dress in Western-style suits, go to the department store, and walk arm-in-arm with *kisaeng* for an hour, strutting as if they won a victory. Seeing this makes me want to vomit. The linen and cotton department is full of *kisaeng* and men in Western suits! What a strange sight. They stick out their chests and show their faces, essentially saying that they are rich men, buying everything that the *kisaeng* want.<sup>73</sup>

When confronted with this type of leisure class customers at the department store, the reaction of other customers largely falls into two categories. As seen in the quotation above, the first reaction was hostility to this type of over-consumption. The other reaction was a desire to become part of the super-wealthy class and emulate their consumption. Some of the people in the latter category engaged in impulse shopping and extreme consumption that exceeded their income level.

It seems that there are many people who do not budget their money. Wives like this come out alone and make purchases totaling thirty or forty yen at one time. After a few days however, they bring back their items asking to return them. It was commonplace to hear people say that they were returning the items because they didn’t have the budget to make the purchases, they didn’t consult with their husbands, they bought too much when some money came in, their husbands told them to return the items, or their husbands scolded them.<sup>74</sup>

Department stores stood at the leading edge of fashion trends and they sold their merchandise through a luxurious atmosphere that stimulated the purchasing demand of

---

<sup>73</sup> Kim Kyōng-ae, “Chōmdu esō pon Chosōn sonnīm” [Korean customers as seen from the shop window], *Sinyōsōng* 5-4 (1931.4), 51-53.

<sup>74</sup> “Chikōp chanson e nasōn yōsōngdūl (8) – yōjōmwōn An yang” [Women standing on the frontlines of business (2) – Female clerk Oh Chōng-ja], *Maeil sinbo* (1931.11.6).

consumers. The department stores used numerous sales tactics to encourage consumers to spend more money, such as payment installment plans, liberal return policies, and free delivery. Although customers did not immediately need the items that they purchased, they were driven to buy it anyway to keep up with the latest trends. There were some people who were initially ignorant of fashion, style, and brands, but the department stores opened their eyes and naturally guided them onto the path of consumption. If they buy one thing, then they need an additional item. If they bought the additional item, then another item caught their eye.

Some customers became addicted to impulse shopping and quickly became ‘shopaholics.’ As soon as they saw something, they wanted to buy it, even if it was something that they did not immediately need. If they didn’t purchase it, then they became extremely anxious. Shopaholics spent a tremendous amount of time and money shopping at department stores. The following quotation shows how shopaholics pawned their possessions to get the money to buy new items.

It is quite a pathetic role for the family members of the petit bourgeoisie to pawn their belongings to buy things. The bitter heart of those who buy the pawned items is only known to those people who do the pawning. At home, the young wife and the children pester and badger in this bonus economy. There are families where the man is enraptured by a large item while he uses smaller items to satisfy his young wife and children.<sup>75</sup>

However, there was no end to the items that they wanted to buy. In the end, they fell into despair because they realized that they could not satisfy their desires through their pocketbooks. The department store managers boasted that their stores fabricated trends, provided a cultural lifestyle, but the flip side was the rise of these type of side effects.

## 6. A Breeding Ground for Crime: The Department Store through the Perspective of Crime

---

<sup>75</sup> “Semo ūi konoesang” [The agony of the end of the year], *Tonga ilbo* (1933.12.27).

The defining characteristic of department store operations was displaying a wide variety of items for anyone to freely examine. However, this feature led to various crimes, including pickpocketing, theft, embezzlement, muggings, and even murder. The movement and chaos of all the people moving through the department store created the ideal environment for pickpockets to operate.<sup>76</sup> When women were completely focused on their shopping, their handbags, wallets, and shopping bags were the primary criminal targets.<sup>77</sup> However, pickpockets also used sharp knives to slice through women's sleeves for the possessions carried within them.<sup>78</sup> One pickpocket even managed to surreptitiously remove a diamond ring from the hand of a customer standing in front of an elevator.<sup>79</sup> The wife of the Japanese army commander in Korea was shopping in Chōjiya when a thief stole 2,000 yen from her handbag while she was talking on the telephone.<sup>80</sup>

However, the most reported crime in the newspapers was shoplifting. It was mostly students, middle-aged gentlemen, and couples who came into the department stores posing as customers and waited for their opportunity. When the clerks were busy serving other customers, the shoplifters quickly stole items while the clerks were not watching. However, shoplifters employed a variety of formations and methods to carry out their crimes. There were solo criminals and people who worked in pairs or even larger groups. In the case of criminal groups, one person would turn the clerk's attention in one direction while another person stole the goods. Married couples would collude with each other, as would brothers, sisters, and sometimes entire families to undertake shoplifting. In the mid-1930's, a shoplifter caught by detectives confessed that in a space of three to four months, he committed about

---

<sup>76</sup> *Chosŏn ilbo* (1936.11.21); *Chosŏn chungang ilbo* (1935.4.26).

<sup>77</sup> *Chosŏn chungang ilbo* (1935.4.26, 8.11); *Tonga ilbo* (1938.5.7); *Chosŏn ilbo* (1939.10.22); *Maeil sinbo* (1939.12.6).

<sup>78</sup> *Maeil sinbo* (1936.4.14). The voluminous space within kimono sleeves allowed wearers to put small items away, leaving their hands free.

<sup>79</sup> *Tonga ilbo* (1935.11.17); *Chosŏn ilbo* (1935.11.17).

<sup>80</sup> *Maeil sinbo* (1933.9.3, 9.5).

140 crimes worth about 1,500 yen.<sup>81</sup> Statistics from that time indicate that each department store in Seoul had an average of ten or more shoplifting incidents every day.<sup>82</sup>

The primary cause of these types of shoplifting incidents was due to the hardships of life. At that time, the gap between the rich and poor was widening as the ranks of the urban poor were increasing with shanty town inhabitants, beggars, vagrants, and the working poor. One unemployed youth confessed to stealing from a department store to support his wife who was eight months pregnant.<sup>83</sup> One father turned to crime rather than watch his children starve.<sup>84</sup> Finally, a ten-year-old child became a thief when facing no alternatives.<sup>85</sup>

However, not all thieves became criminals because of unfortunate circumstances. There were many cases where people became thieves to pay for entertainment expenses, to give gifts to people they were dating, or to satisfy their own personal desires. These people specifically targeted department stores as their occupation. In other words, they were not pursuing crimes of opportunity as a means of survival, but rather as part of systematically organized and planned criminal endeavors. In fact, there were criminal gangs that operated only in department stores and committed their thefts as they circulated among the department stores.<sup>86</sup>

One of the particular characteristics of these planned group crimes was that they were undertaken primarily for the money and thus the thieves felt very little guilt for their crimes. Rather, there were organized criminal gangs that systematically stole items from the department store during the day and then sold the items in the evenings.<sup>87</sup> The money from

---

<sup>81</sup> *Maeil sinbo* (1934.10.27).

<sup>82</sup> *Chōsen shōkō shinbun* (1936.9.1).

<sup>83</sup> *Tonga ilbo* (1934.10.4), *Chosŏn ilbo* (1934.10.4).

<sup>84</sup> *Tonga ilbo* (1934.11.11).

<sup>85</sup> *Tonga ilbo* (1936.2.6); *Maeil sinbo* (1936.2.6).

<sup>86</sup> *Maeil sinbo* (1931.11.24); *Chosŏn ilbo* (1933.9.10, 1935.3.27, 6.7, 8.4, 1939.5.11).

<sup>87</sup> *Chosŏn ilbo* (1935.11.5).

these criminal activities was mostly squandered on entertainment or other non-essential expenses.<sup>88</sup>

In addition to the carefully planned and executed crimes mentioned above, there were also spur-of-the-moment, impulsive shoplifting as well. An eleven-year old young kisaeng stole perfume, Coty cosmetics, and silk cloth from the department store because she was envious of the luxurious lifestyle of an older kisaeng. In another case, a twenty-year-old woman who came to Seoul from Kongju, South Ch'ungch'ōng province, was jealous of the stylish clothes of the Seoul women and stole two dresses from a department store.<sup>89</sup>

Although these cases seem to have been committed because of a lack of money, money was not the ultimate cause if they are considered from the perspective of social status or wealth. These were ordinary people who had no criminal history but suddenly stole because of individual obsession, depression, or some type of social stress. They committed the theft because they couldn't control the impulse to steal. An examination of their psychological condition reveals that their level of tension was rising to a peak immediately before they committed the theft. When they succeeded in stealing, they felt self-fulfillment and relief along with the release of their stress. This type of extreme emotional fluctuation gave them a vague feeling of pleasure. This was the cause of their impulse to commit the crime. In regards to their inability to block their own impulse to commit a crime, they felt a strong sense of guilt but the pleasure from stealing that they also felt led them to repeatedly steal. As they repeatedly stole, they could no longer stop themselves and became addicted to the act. In these cases, these criminals developed the disorder of kleptomania.

In extreme cases, kleptomaniacs went to the various department stores several times a day to steal things. They did not usually use the items that they stole but accumulated them at home. They weren't stealing items because they needed them, they stole many items that they

---

<sup>88</sup> *Maeil sinbo* (1933.11.28); *Chosŏn ilbo* (1934.1.10).

<sup>89</sup> Coty Cosmetics was founded in Paris in 1904 by Francois Coty. <http://www.coty.com/company/coty-snapshot>.

did not need and their guilty conscience prevented them from using the items. When the police searched their homes, they thought that they were in a small department store because of the number of stolen items they found. However, these criminals did not steal for economic reasons, but because they could not control their impulses. Likewise, the people who could not control themselves collected items that they did not need and their shopping addiction meant that if they did not acquire those items, then they felt extremely anxious. The shopping addicts and the kleptomaniacs were simply two sides of the same coin, except the main difference was that the former acted legally while the latter acted illegally.

Kleptomania was not limited to any particular class, since there were thieves from the college or university-educated intelligentsia class<sup>90</sup> and the upper class as well.<sup>91</sup> There were socially respectable individuals like high-ranking government officials, mayors of townships [K. *myŏnjang*], and teachers.<sup>92</sup> Some thieves included middle-aged nurses, wives of company directors, and family members of high-ranking government officials.<sup>93</sup> Not only did most of these people enjoy economic security and wealth, they were also carrying large amounts of cash when they committed their theft. In one case, the wife of a prison warden was also caught for stealing.<sup>94</sup> After being arrested, she openly confessed that she “wasn’t thinking about anything” when she was undertaking the crime.

Although their thievery began as an impulse crime, it progressed to an everyday activity. Similarly, the execution of their crimes became increasingly intelligent, better planned, and more daring as time passed and their guilty conscience faded. For example, a Korean youth who studied abroad in Japan at Waseda University and graduated from its law school began stealing in Tokyo. After becoming more engrossed in his thieving during his time in Japan, he continued to steal after returning to Korea. He roamed among the Seoul

---

<sup>90</sup> *Maeil sinbo* (1936.1.16, 8.12); *Chosŏn ilbo* (1936.2.3, 8.15).

<sup>91</sup> *Tonga ilbo* (1936.7.7).

<sup>92</sup> *Maeil sinbo* (1935.10.26, 1936.4.17); *Chosŏn chungang ilbo* (1934.11.24, 1936.4.17).

<sup>93</sup> *Maeil sinbo* (1933.11.23, 1936.6.4); *Tonga ilbo* (1936.6.4); *Chosŏn chungang ilbo* (1935.1.8).

<sup>94</sup> *Chosŏn chungang ilbo* (1934.7.12).



department stores, stealing hundreds of items, accumulating them at home, and living a luxurious lifestyle.<sup>95</sup>

The department stores were also the setting for different types of fraud. For example, a former department store employee was caught after creating fake sales statements for the Chinese restaurant.<sup>96</sup> Also, fraudsters deceived newly arrived youths from the countryside by promising them employment in the department stores in exchange for a cash payment.<sup>97</sup> The fraudsters were so audacious as to use a lounge area in the department store and pass it off as the department store president's office. In another incident, swindlers targeted one department store in circulating fake gift certificates among the public.<sup>98</sup>

Some thieves also used the tactic of infiltrating the department stores themselves. One thief waited until the department store was closing and hid behind the elevator. After all the employees had gone home, the thief was able to leisurely steal whatever items he wanted. After the department store opened the next day, the thief casually strolled out, pretending to be a customer.<sup>99</sup> Less successful thieves tried the same tactic of hiding until the department store closed. One thief fell asleep and was discovered after he began snoring. Another thief hid himself but was unable to leave the following day because the store was closed.<sup>100</sup>

Due to the rash of thefts, the department stores asked for police assistance and several detectives were stationed at the department store to stop criminals.<sup>101</sup> Even these steps were insufficient to deter criminals. Department stores began employing former detectives as security personnel to stop crime before it occurred or to catch the perpetrators before they escaped.<sup>102</sup> However, the store workers were the ones most likely to discover and confront

---

<sup>95</sup> *Maeil sinbo* (1936.8.12); *Chosŏn ilbo* (1936.8.15).

<sup>96</sup> *Tonga ilbo* (1936.4.15).

<sup>97</sup> *Maeil sinbo* (1936.10.24).

<sup>98</sup> *Chosŏn ilbo* (1936.11.21).

<sup>99</sup> *Maeil sinbo* (1936.10.28); *Chosŏn ilbo* (1936.10.28).

<sup>100</sup> *Chosŏn ilbo* (1940.1.31, 7.13).

<sup>101</sup> "Paekhwajŏm pŏmjoe nŭn ōdŏkke irŏnana" [How does department store crime arise?], *Samchŏlli* 7-6 (1935.7), 227-231.

<sup>102</sup> *Tonga ilbo* (1931.8.16).

the thieves first so their response was critical. When employees suspected a customer of being a thief, they used code words to alert nearby coworkers, who began to observe the suspected criminal. When something was stolen, several employees would move in and catch the thief. However, workers could also suffer injuries as they chased after the thieves. In some cases, a case of theft could escalate into a case of violent robbery.<sup>103</sup>

Although workers were successful in catching some thieves, there were other instances where the store employees were working with the criminals. For example, Mitsukoshi employees were found to have stolen several thousand yen's worth of merchandise over hundreds of occasions.<sup>104</sup> At another department store, staffers working at the department store restaurant came to work earlier than their coworkers at least thirty times and stole more than 3,000 yen in items from the store floor.<sup>105</sup> Employees were caught after conspiring with friends to take merchandise from the stores.<sup>106</sup> Other employees used the excuse that they didn't receive a bonus to justify stealing or the cashiers in the store misappropriated store funds to buy items for themselves.<sup>107</sup>

In actuality, the department store employees were constantly surrounded by attractive merchandise as they worked, which whetted their appetite for the goods and made it easy to steal if they gave in to their desires. The department stores were aware of the temptation available to their employees and they stationed security personnel around the store to prevent crime from both internal and external threats. If there were any incidents of thievery however, suspicious workers were interrogated and bodily searched or the store sent security personnel to comb through their homes. When Minakai department store had 6,000 yen in jewelry stolen from its store, the managers suspected that it was an inside job and ordered pat-downs

---

<sup>103</sup> *Tonga ilbo* (1937.1.13).

<sup>104</sup> *Maeil sinbo* (1935.1.29).

<sup>105</sup> *Chosŏn chungang sinbo* (1936.7.20).

<sup>106</sup> *Chosŏn ilbo* (1937.7.7).

<sup>107</sup> *Maeil sinbo* (1937.12.19); *Chosŏn ilbo* (1939.3.30).

of all the workers.<sup>108</sup> However, excessive suspicion also led to tragedy in some cases. After the theft at Minakai, store security interrogated one of the female clerks and searched her home. Distraught at being targeted for undeserved suspicion, the female worker took poison and committed suicide as a demonstration of her innocence.<sup>109</sup>

## 7. Conclusion

Through this paper, we have explored the rise and development of department stores in colonial Korea during the 1920's and 1930's. In particular, we have focused on the everyday activities and consumer culture as it has been carried out and influenced by the managers, the employees, and the consumers. In the 1920's, the department stores in Korea were affected by the prevailing trends in the Japanese and Western retailing industries. In the 1930's, Mitsukoshi, Minakai, Chōjiya, Hirata, and Hwasin became the “Big Five” department stores that established branches throughout the country and created retailing networks that competed fiercely for customers. Department stores at that time were largely focused on three primary roles. First, department stores were large-scale retail institutions that impressed a consumer consciousness onto domestic consumers, while conveying and selling to them the latest fashions and trends. Secondly, department stores were cultural institutions that went beyond simple commercial transactions to tout the benefits of an enriching cultural lifestyle. Finally, department stores functioned as entertainment centers, amusement parks, and socializing spaces for the upper class. As a result of these roles and functions, customers from a newly arising urban consumer class flocked to the department stores.

On the one hand, the rise and development of the department stores imparted tremendous influence on the formation of the lifestyles and social consciousness of the managers, workers, and consumers who were connected in some fashion to the department

---

<sup>108</sup> *Maeil sinbo* (1936.11.30).

<sup>109</sup> *Maeil sinbo* (1938.3.24).

stores. From the perspective of the managers, overseeing a cutting-edge commercial facility like a department store was not an easy task. Managers had to numerous tasks to accomplish, while avoiding obstacles and mistakes. They had to sell a large variety and large quantities of merchandise, while managing the capital requirements inherent in the maintenance and expansion of an already vast retail floor space. They had to utilize new sales strategies and techniques without allowing unsold inventory to accumulate. They had to manage the human resources of a large work force that was constantly increasing, while constantly being aware of a host of other issues. While the work was difficult and challenging in many different respects, managers were also proud of their position running a state-of-the-art commercial facility like a department store. Hwasin was the only Korean-owned department store and as the owner, Pak Hŭng-sik was determined to make Hwasin into the best department store in Korea. He was adamant that Hwasin not be second to any Japanese store nor succumb to the penetration of Japanese commercial capital that was invading Korean commerce. Needless to say, Pak Hŭng-sik was filled with a deep sense of pride, responsibility, and duty towards managing his department store, to which he devoted a tremendous amount of effort.

Although the managers tried to impart pride in the department store to the workers through numerous opportunities, the cumulative effect of long work hours, low wages, poor working conditions, and difficult living conditions prevented the workers from feeling positive about their employer. Instead, department store employees were ashamed of their jobs. As the workers saw the consumption behavior of the upper-class customers who frequented the stores, they could not help compare their customers' behavior to their own low living standards and feel envious. Some workers looked at the extreme consumption and did not feel jealous but were rather disgusted by the excess. They resented the fact that they could not possess the goods that they wanted, but instead were expected to unquestioningly follow the orders of their bosses and work like machines. This type of thinking developed into a

antagonistic attitude towards the company and middle management and hostility towards the upper-class, particularly the wealthy leisure class.

Department stores were institutions that disseminated the latest fashions, culture, entertainment, and amusements, while providing socializing opportunities for the upper-class. In other words, department stores served as institutions that met the cultural and lifestyle needs of the modern bourgeois class. In this respect, department stores were targeting the harbingers of the new consumer culture, namely the “modern boy” and the “modern girl.” These upper-class urbanites wore sensational clothes and hairstyles, pursued diverse hobbies including movies and music, were sensitive to the latest fashion trends, and had sexual attitudes that were considered decadent for the time. In other words, they were the class that was creating a new urban culture. To meet their needs, the department stores imported famous foreign brands, developed their own store brands, and tried to meet the demands of the new consumer culture.

In order to drive foot traffic through the doors, the department stores used luxurious furnishings and decorations to create the proper setting, while instructing their workers to smile and be courteous. At the same time, department stores liberally used tactics such as discount sales, generous return policies, and free delivery to drive sales. Customers generally responded well to these enticements and their department store purchases showed a steady increase over time. Some customers used their buying behavior at the department stores to display their wealth through conspicuous consumption. They bought items that they did not need, leading some people to develop shopping addictions where they squandered their money on unnecessary purchases.

In contrast to the fancy appearance of the department stores, their interior conditions spawned various criminal activities, including pickpocketing, shoplifting, embezzlement, robbery, and even murder. Everybody was free to enter and browse the goods at a department

store, which was the perfect setting for these crimes. In the department stores, the most common crime of shoplifting was primarily motivated by poverty, but not all thieves were necessarily poor. Some thieves stole to pay for their entertainment expenses or simply out of greed. Some thieves were driven by individual obsessions, impulses, depression, or a need to relieve social stress. In these cases, the individuals did not need the items they stole, but were suffering from illnesses like kleptomania. These instances can be seen as a natural by-product of the modern consumer culture purveyed by the department stores.

In conclusion, department stores can be seen on the one hand as the epitome of retail institution development that was called forth by the acceleration of capitalism on the Korean peninsula. On the other hand, department stores were the sites that concentrated and exhibited the socio-pathological phenomenon that characterized all the dark and undesirable aspects of capitalism. While it may be difficult to clearly determine the preponderance of one over the other across the breadth of the modern capitalist development process, it is undeniable that they were clearly exhibited throughout and around the rise of the department stores in colonial Korea.

### Glossary

Ch'oe Nam 崔楠

Chōjiya 丁子屋

Han Sūng-in 韓昇寅

Hirata store *Hirata shōten* 平田商店

*Hwasin sanghoe* 和信商會 Hwasin store

*maesobu* 賣笑婦 prostitutes

Minakai Kimono Store *Minakai gohukuten*

三中井吳服店

Miwa Kunitarō 三輪邦太郎

*munmyōng igi* 文明利器 modern  
convenience

Nakae Katsujirō 中江勝治朗

Pak Chu-sōp 朴周燮

*shutchōjo* 出張所 office

*shiten* 支店 store

Sin T'ae Hwa 申泰和

*Tonga puin sanghoe* 東亞婦人商會 Tonga  
Women's Store

Yi Kūng-jong 李肯鍾

*yuhan puin* 有閑婦人 ladies of leisure