

Book Review

Fedorenko, O. (2022). *Flower of Capitalism: South Korean Advertising at a Crossroads*. University of Hawai'i Press.

Jiyeon Kang^{ORCID}

Department of
Communication Studies,
Korean Studies, University
of Iowa

Corresponding to

Jiyeon Kang
Department of
Communication Studies,
University of Iowa, 113 BCSB,
25 S. Madison St., Iowa City, IA
52242
Email: jiyeon-kang@uiowa.edu

Received

22 Sep 2023

Revised

14 Nov 2023

Accepted

8 Dec 2023

Oлга Fedorenko's *Flower of Capitalism: South Korean Advertising at a Crossroads* is an impressive interdisciplinary book that offers a historical and cultural analysis of the evolving landscape of South Korean advertising, *kwanggo* (광고). Situated at the intersection of Korean studies, communication studies, and anthropology, this book appeals to a broad array of readers of *Asian Communication Research*, not just advertising scholars but also those studying Korean media history and culture.

Advertisements, especially those that stay in the collective memory, indicate the shared desires, aspirations, and judgments of a period. South Koreans who were around in the 1980s would remember “*ttabong*,” a slogan promising that Korean consumers were now affluent enough to drink orange juice imported from Brazil. Those who experienced SK Telecom’s “Toward People (사람을 향합니다)” during the first decade of the twenty-first century would recall warm, sentimental images ironically promoted by the chaebol. SK Telecom was rapidly expanding as a leading market player in the cellular-phone network, but these ads still brought warmth during the post-financial crisis period. Fedorenko’s *Flower of Capitalism* focuses on this familiar subject of *kwanggo* and transforms it into a portal to cultural practices that “harbor collective dreams, critical insights into social reality, and opportunities to weaponize corporate discourses” (p. 32). The book provides insights into the shifting modalities of state regulation, the growing power of the market, neoliberal societal restructuring, and evolving public sensibilities.

Flower of Capitalism is more than just a book about Korean advertising—its intellectual contributions span multiple fields. As a work in Korean studies and cultural studies, the book offers a deep analysis of South Korea’s *kwanggo* since the 1970s, when it first became a significant social phenomenon, to the first decade of the

twenty-first century, when the media landscape transitioned from mass media to mobile digital media. Fedorenko notes with an anthropologist's insight that the English term "advertising" doesn't fully capture the essence of the South Korean variant and emphasizes the need to understand *kwanggo* on its own terms. By mapping both historical shifts and key players—such as the state, advertising professionals, mainstream media, and the public—Fedorenko highlights the specific "cultural logic" of South Korean *kwanggo* marked by the significance of "public interest" (*kongik*, p. 3). By labeling "unlikely advertising" that hides its commercial roots (p. 29) as a hallmark of *kwanggo*, she presents a compelling case that such advertising reflects the "local imaginaries of capitalism" in South Korea, specifically a "humanist capitalism" that correlates private pursuits with notions of partiality, selfishness, impropriety, and potential moral failings while upholding "communitarian values and nationalism" even in commerce (p. 30).

In this context, Fedorenko's deep dive into "sensibilities" via advertising is notable. Sensibilities can often be elusive, yet they are tangible—as demonstrated for example in the 1960s American sentiment characterized by anti-establishment values and counterculture, or in the sensibilities of South Korea's democratization generation marked by staunch opposition to authoritarianism and an embrace of resistance. The book highlights the distinct moral economy, ideals, and judgments intrinsic to South Korea's brand of capitalism. Within the overarching framework of humanist capitalism, Fedorenko notes its nuances, including a "cynical sensibility" urging consumers to be shrewd (p. 126) and a "melodramatic sensibility" affirming the triumph of good over evil (p. 162).

Another significant aspect of the book is its detailed narrative of South Korean media history. Fedorenko doesn't simply narrate but astutely complicates the topic, bringing forth the transitional period when the rigid structures of state power and censorship started to wane,

making way for the neoliberal market's emergence. This is most visible in Chapter 1 (as I detail later), but the entire book is chronologically organized to show historical shifts in the configuration of state, market, and public.

Methodologically, *Flower of Capitalism* proves that advertising is a useful heuristic for understanding the cultural logic of a society. Fedorenko adopts a multifaceted approach, intertwining historical analysis, textual analysis of advertisements, ethnographic studies of advertising production since 2007, and diary studies. With this array of methods, she establishes a new paradigm: "a critical anthropology of advertising." Fedorenko notes, "By 'advertising' I mean neither simply advertising texts nor the advertising industry but a historical institution whose social meanings and functions need to be grasped in their context" (p. 10). Such a perspective challenges the often-accepted universality tied to advertising, emphasizing its historical and contextual specificities.

Here, I would like to reflect on Fedorenko's call for an "anthropology of advertising" and its intellectual potential. Although this is not the focus of *Flower of Capitalism*, and thus is presented as a call rather than as a full-blown concept, it nonetheless warrants greater scrutiny, possibly as a distinct undertaking. Advertising was often a central piece in diagnosing and theorizing emerging cultural logics. Take, for instance, Fredric Jameson's (1992) *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, and Douglas Kellner's (1995) *Media Culture: Cultural Studies, Identity and Politics between the Modern and the Post-modern*. Each employed advertising as a marker or metonym for evolving public culture. Fedorenko's nuanced analysis has a potential to advance this discussion, demonstrating that advertising is a valuable heuristic tool for understanding the cultural logic of Korea (or another society) at a given juncture. In particular, echoing Raymond Williams's concepts of the dominant, residual, and emergent, Fedorenko

portrays the evolution of a South Korean media landscape underscored by themes of “ironies,” “contests,” and “ambivalence” that define the public sphere. These complexities permeate the levels of the advertising industry, government policy, and public culture. For instance, *Dong-A Ilbo* was once the champion of protests for press freedoms during the authoritarian era but became a target of protests for abusing its power in 2008 (p. 178), self-proclaimed liberal advertising censors in the 2010s paradoxically intervened to achieve public ideals (p. 112), and the ambivalent celebration of prosperity and thrift and of capitalist development and egalitarian public interests coexist in the public culture (p. 30, p. 42). These instances suggest that advertising can be developed into a heuristic for studying the shifting relationships among the market, the state, and public culture, and also Korea’s particularity in its rapid transition from an authoritarian and industrial to a neoliberal and hyper-mediated society.

The chapters are organized both thematically, examining the involved actors in advertising, and chronologically. Notably, chapters are dedicated to advertising publics (Chapter 4) and activists (Chapter 5), recognizing these integral components of advertising’s societal implications.

The introductory chapter, “The Politics and Aesthetics of South Korean Advertising,” establishes the distinct landscape of South Korean *kwanggo* in the first decade of the twenty-first century. This chapter underscores the importance of viewing advertising as both a media form and a social institution. It defines advertising as a window into Korea’s cultural logic, including “local sensibilities, values, and politics” (p. 2), and elaborates on the *kwanggo* cultural logics of “public interest,” “unlikely advertising,” and “humanist capitalism.”

Chapter 1 “Historical Struggles over Advertising Freedom” explores the unique evolution of advertising in South Korea. This material is especially relevant for scholars of media policy and

history, as it enriches the narrative surrounding the development of media censorship and regulation. The chapter underscores that South Korean advertising did not follow a linear trajectory of liberalization—instead, it evolved in constant tension with political and capitalist powers. In showing this, the chapter attends to transformative moments that redefined the relationship between the political and corporate powers that govern advertising freedom. For instance, the 1974–1975 *Dong-A Ilbo* White Pages Incident transformed the “freedom to advertise” from a commercial right to an obligation for advertisers to support critical mass media. In the 1980s, during Chun Doo-hwan’s reign, the institutionalization of the Korea Broadcast Advertising Corporation (KOBACO) underscored the public responsibilities of advertising. After democratization, advertising experienced a combination of freedom of capital, freedom of political expression, and freedom of exercising democratic citizenship. Finally, in 2008, landmark decisions by the Constitutional Court challenged longstanding regulations by KOBACO, reshaping the relationship between private freedoms and public obligations in postmillennial South Korea. With these, the chapter offers a cogent narrative that illuminates the cultural, political, and public configuration of *kwanggo* in Korea.

Chapter 2 “The Dreams and Realities of Advertising Practitioners” examines the evolution of the advertising profession’s subjectivity by weaving the reading of iconic figures with an ethnography of actual advertising professionals. The collage of iconic figures and advertising practitioners offers a multifaceted force that defines Korean advertising. The experiences of figures like Yi Jeseok, the renowned advertising “genius” whose life inspired a television series, and Park Woong-hyun, South Korea’s advertising guru and representative of the 386 Generation, reveal these practitioners’ role as cultural producers. Their vision aligned commercial advertising with public service, though they struggled to

fully achieve it. Through ethnographic studies with practitioners at an advertising agency, the chapter sheds light on the aspirations and realities of advertising work, highlighting the power imbalances and tensions between creatives and clients. In particular, while advertising workers aligned with global creative discourses, many Korean clients remained conservative.

Chapter 3 “The Quandaries of Advertising Censorship” illuminates the intricacies of advertising censorship in South Korea, delineating its complex linguistic, social, and public dynamics after market deregulation and political liberalization in the 2000s. This chapter suggests that advertising censorship should be perceived not as a mere hindrance but as a factor that shapes how advertising is conceived and how audiences respond to it. The nuanced analysis of transformations and tensions during this period is noteworthy. For instance, linguistically, ambiguities surrounding the concepts of “censorship” and “review” were evident, with the term “censorship” avoided to make control mechanisms more socially acceptable. Institutionally, while provocative campaigns proliferated after the 2008 disbandment of the Korea Advertising Review Board (KARB), the number of advertising-review organizations paradoxically increased. Furthermore, censors often protected capital’s freedoms, while advertisers advocated for the public interest. Interweaving these elements, this chapter captures the shifting configurations of the state, the public, and advertising.

Chapter 4 “Advertising Publics” looks into the contours of publics seen through their responses to, and even activism against, advertising. Although advertising professionals create content and censors manage its circulation, the audience’s reaction is what determines an advertisement’s impact. This chapter underscores the audience’s power to reinterpret advertising and to determine the message’s social meaning. The chapter includes two cases of contentious advertising

campaigns, illuminating how “misidentification” or how “advertising is responded to by those uncooperative with, or irrelevant to, its marketing goals” (p. 165) anchors the meaning of advertising texts. For instance, the aforementioned diary study of young consumers showed that they transformed an advertisement—one that featured the children’s cartoon character Dooly—into grounds for producing critical commentaries on South Korean life. Furthermore, misidentifications often occur on a national scale, mandating advertisers to address broader public concerns beyond their target audience. The chapter concludes by discussing the emotional landscape in advertising, highlighting melodramatic sensibilities as a mechanism whereby the public demands that corporations behave as responsible moral actors.

Chapter 5 “Advertising Suppression and Consumer Citizenship” studies the intricacies of advertising’s role within South Korean power politics and the concept of consumer sovereignty. On the side of corporations, the chapter explores Samsung’s advertising strategies, positioning them as acts of corporate citizenship and indicating how companies were morally obligated to prioritize the national interest and public good. Further, Samsung’s advertising controversies—and especially its withdrawal from progressive newspapers—spotlight how deeply the discourse of advertising with public obligations has been embedded in postmillennial South Korean society. On the side of activism, the chapter traces the emergence of the National Campaign for Media Consumer Sovereignty (or *Ōnsoju*) in 2008 and its activism, which actuated consumer rights as a pivotal form of activism. By juxtaposing historical moral-economic considerations with neoliberal tenets, the chapter underscores the potential to subordinate corporate dominance to the popular will.

The Epilogue “Digital Times: Wither Advertising?” addresses the ongoing transformation of South Korean advertising amid internet-enabled media

convergences and considers the lasting significance of its publicness ideals.

In summary, *Flower of Capitalism: South Korean Advertising at a Crossroads* is not just an examination of South Korean advertising but also a deep look into the societal implications. It offers insights into South Korea's values, challenges, and changes. In doing so, this book goes beyond simple advertising analysis and becomes a valuable read for scholars across multiple disciplines.

REFERENCES

- Jameson, F. (1992). *Postmodernism, or, the cultural logic of late capitalism*. Duke University Press.
- Kellner, D. (1995). *Media culture: Cultural studies, identity and politics between the modern and the post-modern*. Routledge.