

# “Spoon Theory” and the Fall of a Populist Princess in Seoul

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ON DECEMBER 9, 2016, South Korea’s National Assembly voted to impeach the country’s president, Park Geun-hye, over abuse of power among other charges. Three months later, the Constitutional Court upheld the impeachment and she was dismissed from office—the first South Korean president to be removed this way. New elections were called. Park was then made the subject of a criminal investigation and jailed for the trial. The allegations center on Park’s relationship with an old family friend, Ch’oe Sun-sil, who became involved in official decision-making and used her influence to extract funds from businesses, but the scandal widened to involve more individuals.

On the afternoon of the impeachment vote, thousands of citizens gathered outside the gates of the legislature. Despite the substantial presence of the military, the atmosphere was festive. A woman with a tray offered me a banana; another was distributing coffee. Between munches, citizens chanted “Step down, Park Geun-hye.” A former legislator had suggested that noise would put pressure on the representatives to vote in favor of impeachment. The crowd took up that idea; citizens took turns leading the chant. Two meters from the gate, I noticed three awkward boys, middle-school-aged, I guessed, standing on their own next to me. One was on his mobile, apparently speaking to his mother: “I’m at English cram class. I will be late. Don’t wait for me.” “Wow, you are lying to your mom,” I remarked casually. The boy smiled shyly, unconcerned about my comment. When I asked to take his picture, he and his friends beamed at my camera without hesitation.

This communal atmosphere had been built over six consecutive Saturdays of similarly peaceful gatherings demanding that Park step down. A gathering one November evening in Seoul attracted an estimated one million people, making it the largest mass political event in South Korea’s protest-rich history. At the weekly events, singers entertained crowds with folk songs. Families brought picnics and made a day of it. Protestors picked up after themselves, leaving the streets spotless by early the next morning. Anger drove citizens onto the streets, but once there, they acted nothing like a mob. Somehow, hundreds of thousands of strangers found ways to come together happily and exercise uncoordinated discipline. While this movement was political, it was also infused with personal meanings. Participants found the gatherings to be free entertainment, leisurely family activities, opportunities to be charitable—or a way of sneaking around behind one’s mother.

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The scandal that brought Park down led to a broadening investigation into criminal activity by the most powerful figures in government and business. The Samsung boss, the third generation in his family at the helm of the conglomerate, found himself in prison. The scandal has also cast a shadow over the legacy of her father, the dictator Park Chung Hee, who oversaw the country's rapid industrial development. While many South Koreans have been able to overlook the more repressive aspects of his rule while celebrating the economic advances, the linkages in the current scandal to private elite networks forged under the elder Park make public celebration of him more difficult. This scandal exposed a world of individuals born into privilege using public office and private networks illicitly to benefit themselves, their families, and their friends. Their alleged actions not only represent egregious violations of law; they also touch on fundamental questions about how family background figures into opportunities for social advancement. This theme, an especially sensitive subject today, is one that most South Koreans can relate to their own lives and struggles.

In this commentary, I place the reaction to the Park scandal in the context of popular discontent over the loss of opportunities for social mobility based on family ties. Relatively low income inequality had been a hallmark of South Korea's industrialization, helping to justify heavy-handed government measures and concentration of capital in a few conglomerates. But now, wealth inequality has soared—as it has around the world—and younger Koreans are struggling to comprehend life without chances for advancement. These problems have been framed recently in terms of “spoon theory” (*sujŏron*), a term derived from the English idiom about being born with a silver spoon and used to classify people according to their inherited privilege. This term, which is a local response to the global problem of rising wealth inequality, channels anger about inherited wealth and the failure of the political system to rectify it. Park's fall should be understood alongside the rise of this frame and the grievances that drive it. Not only is privilege through birth at the heart of both the scandal and discussions of social immobility, but Park in particular has lurked in the background of the “spoon theory” conversation from the beginning. This imagining may have stoked the frustration that brought so many ordinary Koreans onto the streets; it was also at the center of an episode that served as a catalyst for the impeachment movement.

## A SCANDAL ERUPTS

South Korea has had plenty of political scandals. Not only are scandals common, but Park Geun-hye has faced her share of them in the past. A year before this scandal, news broke of a “Sŏng Wan-jong List.” Sŏng, a construction tycoon, had managed a slush fund directed toward many people close to Park, including Kim Ki-ch'un. However, this episode had no impact on Park's approval rating, and when prosecutors dropped the case after Sŏng's sudden death, any popular anger was muted.<sup>1</sup> In 2014, Park was

<sup>1</sup>When the Sŏng Wan-jong List scandal occurred, the prosecution formed a special prosecution team and eight major politicians were investigated. Only two of the eight were charged, and then only without detention. See Kwak Hŭi-yang, “Sŏng Wan-jong risŭt' ŭ susa hŭjibuji” [Investigation of the Sŏng Wan-jong list fizzles out], *Kyŏnghyang sinmun*, June 16, 2015.

absent in the hours after the sinking of the MS *Sewol* tragically killed 294 high school students. Still, her approval rating remained at 48.8 percent. A full 36 percent of survey respondents confirmed that Park’s reaction to the MS *Sewol* then was appropriate.<sup>2</sup> Those scandals were not enough to bring Park down. Activists leading an impeachment movement mobilized their fellow citizens by citing the flagrancy of the injustices committed by Park. If there were so many actions that might be labeled injustices, and if the same issues—such as the president’s handling of the *Sewol*—could be seen as unproblematic at one time and then an impeachable crime at another—it is necessary to look beyond the formal symbols and appeals of the movement to examine what changed.

The impeachment scandal started with what appeared to be a relatively minor problem. Ewha Womans University, a private women’s college in Seoul, planned for a commercial expansion, establishing a special lifelong learning branch (the “Future Life University”) with financial backing from the government. This program would enroll working people who wished to obtain a university degree in hygiene and beauty care. Students expressed their opposition to the move on the grounds that the expansion was against the university’s mission, that it could increase fees, and that it would dilute the value of the Ewha name.<sup>3</sup> In response to a protest on campus, about 1,000 armed police cracked down on some 300 students who had carried out a sit-in for three days in front of the main administration office.<sup>4</sup> According to police records, university president Ch’oe Kyōng-hūi had requested their assistance. Student anger soared. Word then spread that Ch’oe had close connections to Park Geun-hye. At this stage, the issue was not especially large and the episode might have remained one of many student-university conflicts, which appear regularly. Then, in the context of speculation about contacts between the Ewha president and the Blue House, as the South Korean presidential compound is called, news emerged of a student suspected of receiving special benefits at the university. A single student launched a complaint that her classmate, Chōng Yu-ra, had passed courses with high marks despite rarely showing up for classes. Angered at university administration, fellow students revealed numerous ways that Chōng, daughter of Park’s long-time confidante Ch’oe Sun-sil, was subject to special treatment. She had barely attended lectures and had not submitted assignments, yet her instructors gave her good grades. Something was off.

The complaints about Chōng’s treatment at Ewha cracked the public secrecy surrounding the relationship between Park and Ch’oe Sun-sil. There had previously been suggestions of influence peddling at the highest level. Journalist Chu Chin-u and National

<sup>2</sup>The survey respondents included 800 people over the age of nineteen. See “Pak Kūn-hye taet’ongnyōng chjiyul, 4 myōng chung 1 myōng” [One in four people supports Park Geun-hye], *MediaPen*, May 13, 2014, <http://www.mediapen.com/news/view/31134> (accessed June 27, 2017).

<sup>3</sup>Ewha University has the third-highest fees among Korean universities. See Pak Tae-ho, “2016 iphak tūngnokkūm t’op 3 ... yōnsedae, koryōdae, yihwayōdae” [Top three in admission and tuition fees in 2016: Yonsei University, Korea University, Ewha Womans University], *Veritas*, April 30, 2016.

<sup>4</sup>Pak Su-jin, “‘Hakwi changsa pandae’ yihwa yeodae kyonaeng nongsōng, gyōngch’al tuildwae ch’ungdol” [“Opposition to diploma business”: Campus protest at Ewha University, collision with the police], *Hankyoreh*, July 30, 2016, [http://www.hani.co.kr/arti/society/society\\_general/754530.html](http://www.hani.co.kr/arti/society/society_general/754530.html) (accessed June 27, 2017).

Assemblyman An Min-sŏk, for example, had independently collected information on allegations of a real “power behind the throne,” but neither could conclusively identify who in Park’s inner circle was calling the shots. The complaints at Ewha tipped Chu and An off to Ch’oe as the key individual.<sup>5</sup>

Mass outrage at the Ewha scandal encouraged other media organizations and authorities to also set their sights on the Park-Ch’oe relationship. Evidence that had been collected over a few years could now be combined with new information to establish that Ch’oe was the crucial behind-the-scenes player in Park’s network and in the administration, and that serious wrongdoing had occurred, including Park allowing Ch’oe to make key state decisions.

As for Chŏng, further investigation revealed the extent of her special treatment. She obtained admission into the university on the basis of being a talented equestrian rather than through the normal procedure. The special prosecution team appointed to investigate the scandal found that several professors had helped Chŏng through methods that included supplying her with examination answers and ordering assistants to write assignments for her. More digging revealed that Chŏng had attended only seventeen days of her final year of high school and had supplied false documents in order to graduate. Even before Chŏng goes on trial, there have been a number of consequences. At Ewha, several professors, including a famous novelist who had been one of Chŏng’s instructors, were arrested for helping Chŏng inappropriately. Police also arrested and charged the dean of admissions. The university president resigned. The Seoul Education Bureau canceled Chŏng’s high school diploma.<sup>6</sup>

Chŏng represented illicit advancement through privilege. She even flaunted her privilege. On Facebook she had written: “Blame your own parents if you don’t have ability.... Money is also capability.”<sup>7</sup> This is an odd statement in a capitalist society. The implication is that success need not come from hard work, dedication, talent, or being useful to others. Rather, inherited privilege is as justified as any individual merit for helping someone advance. The statement sounds more like aristocratic arrogance, or a sarcastic critique of contemporary social organization. Even then, the birthright claim in this case is based not on any “natural” social order. Chŏng’s mother had helped her by directing state officials to violate their duties and by using her links to Park to extract funds from conglomerates. This could scarcely be portrayed as an ideal of motherhood. Chŏng’s bizarre logic, though, was not new.

<sup>5</sup>Sin Ki-ju, “An Min-sŏk-ŭn wae Yŏuido ūi Ton Kihot’e-ga toetna?” [Why did An Min-sŏk become the Don Quixote of Yŏuido?], *Esquire Korea*, January 2017.

<sup>6</sup>Kim Mi-hyang, “Sŏul-si kyoyukch’ŏng-i ‘kyoyuk nongdan’ Chŏng Yu-ra ūi kodŭng hakkyo chorŏp-ŭl ch’wisohaetta” [Seoul Education Bureau cancels high school diploma of “education trouble-maker” Chŏng Yu-ra], *Huffington Post Korea*, December 5, 2016, [http://www.huffingtonpost.kr/2016/12/05/story\\_n\\_13421466.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.kr/2016/12/05/story_n_13421466.html) (accessed June 27, 2017).

<sup>7</sup>Her Facebook message was posted earlier, on December 3, 2014. However, it was widely shared after this scandal broke, and media outlets also highlighted it. Kwŏn Kil-yŏ, “Ton-to sillyŏkiya nine p’umo wŏnmanghae’ Chŏng Yu-ra SNS geul nollan” [“Money is capability. Blame your parents.” Dispute over Chŏng Yu-ra’s SNS posting], *Insight*, October 19, 2016, <http://www.insight.co.kr/newsRead.php?ArtNo=79349> (accessed June 27, 2017).

GOLD SPOON, DIRT SPOON

In the preceding year, similar claims about privilege had circulated in the media. In late 2015, the phrase “gold spoon” lit up the Korean-language Internet. The term was a local twist on the English idiom. Opinion-makers first attached the term to an inexperienced actress whose famous father had presumably landed her a series of big roles. The entertainment field presented ample material for pondering the benefits of having influential parents. Those who had gained help from their parents defended their positions, claiming that it was more difficult to succeed when others knew their background. As the brother of the actress first labeled a gold spoon wrote, “We know we are gold spoons. But do we have to live quietly because we are gold spoons.... Can’t she [the sister] pursue her goals, even though she was born as a gold spoon?”<sup>8</sup>

Between June 2015, when the term “gold spoon” had not yet been invented, and the end of December 2015, the phrase “gold and dirt spoons” became the most-searched term on social media for the entire year.<sup>9</sup> These terms were the latest in a series of buzzwords used to capture inequality and difficult life conditions. Young people were already described as the “880,000 won generation” (*88-man won saedae*) to capture their ability to survive on less than US\$800 per month. What is new in the rhetoric of “gold spoons” is the focus on inequality as inherited.

Discussing the backgrounds of celebrities became a fad in the media. A television program since 2015 called *Revealing a List* featured several episodes on gold spoons. Each episode centered on a list around a certain theme. Examples of themes included “special gold spoon stars,” “elite siblings of stars,” “real gold spoon stars who overcame poverty,” “stars without family supports (although they have good family background),” and so on. On this program, the audience is introduced to the “successful” family members of celebrities.

Another trend was to emphasize the status of the parents of contestants on television programs, such as singing competitions. A newspaper article, presenting “exclusive news” on one such contestant, drew attention to the fact that “although the contestant has a ‘wealthy’ family background, he chose to follow his own dream from an early age.” The report included information on his parents’ work (both are doctors) and where they graduated (a prestigious university). Given this background, the report suggested that the contestant deserves praise for continuing to make his own life rather than relying on his “spoon.”<sup>10</sup> He was therefore bucking the trend in which being “a gold spoon means you can live with wealth that you inherited from your parents, so you do not actually need to have a job. Parents give an allowance, buy a car, buy a house, and

<sup>8</sup>Ko Sŭng-hŭi, “Kŭmsujŏ’ nollan Cho Hye-jŏng, ilnŭn’ge tŏ manŭn 3 yŏnsok k’aesŭt’ing” [“Gold spoon” Cho Hye-jŏng, losses greater in being cast three consecutive times], *Herald Economy*, October 21, 2015.

<sup>9</sup>Ch’oe Yŏn-jin, “Kŭmsujŏ namcha ka ...” [“Gold spoon” man ...], *Chosŏn ilbo*, December 30, 2015, [http://news.chosun.com/site/data/html\\_dir/2015/12/30/2015123000311.html](http://news.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2015/12/30/2015123000311.html) (accessed June 27, 2017).

<sup>10</sup>Hong Sŭng-han, “K-p’ap sŭt’a Chŏng Chin-u pumo modu yumyŏng taehak ch’ulsin ūisa ijiman” [K-pop star Chŏng Chin-u, both parents are doctors from famous universities], *Sports Seoul*, January 25, 2016.

find a job for you. Your parents' wealth becomes a bonus for you."<sup>11</sup> The logic here is that gold spoons are not expected to work or try to achieve anything through their effort.

The discussion of "gold spoons" soon evolved from being about celebrities to being applied to all social fields. Of course, not everyone was a gold spoon, so terminology was required for talking about the rest of us. Gold spoons were contrasted with "dirt spoons." Intervening categories were also invented so spoons could be assigned to people from every sort of background. And it is clear the terms conferred identity rather than possession: you are the spoon you are born with. One does not say "she holds a gold spoon" or "she was handed a gold spoon" but rather "she is a gold spoon." The system of classifying people by spoons became known as "spoon theory" (*sujõron*).

Spoon theory, formed through contemporary digital culture, spawned numerous memes—and even a mobile phone application called the "gold spoon test." One posting that went viral formalized the qualifications for each type of spoon. As [table 1](#) shows, each level of spoon was associated with one's income and wealth. The wealth component is essential to spoon theory because much accumulated wealth is inherited. Such tables invited people to find their own spoon. Bingo games based on spoon theory also made the rounds. In gold spoon bingo, each box has a statement about property, other assets, education, social connections, or lifestyle. If a player can tick ten of the twenty-five squares, then he or she qualifies as a gold spoon. Those with more humble origins may find they are more successful at dirt spoon bingo, modeled on the same concept.<sup>12</sup>

#### SPOON THEORY AS SOCIAL COMMENTARY

Spoon theory could be engaged in a light and fun way, while gossiping about celebrities, but conversations about spoon theory hit serious social issues. The term gave expression to observable concerns about an unfair society in which wealth and social status determine one's life chances. The richest 10 percent in South Korea now holds 66 percent of national wealth, while the poorer half of the population holds only 2 percent.<sup>13</sup> A greater portion of wealth has been tied up as inherited wealth. Economist Kim U-ch'an calculates that South Korea has the highest proportion of inherited wealth in the world. Part of the reason, he finds, is that inheritance and gift-giving laws make it easy for wealth to be transmitted from one generation to the next. In fact, Kim maintains that the wealth of one's grandparents may now be a key indicator for one's status: "When we talk about spoons, we have to question whose spoon it is. It is not from dad anymore. How hard your parents worked is not important anymore. What spoon your grandfather conveyed to his grandchildren is more important nowadays."<sup>14</sup> Many young people now struggle to get a start in life. Youth unemployment

<sup>11</sup>Pu Ae-ri, "Tangsin ün kũmsujõ? Ũnsujõ? Animyõn hũksujõ?" [Are you a gold spoon, silver spoon, or dirt spoon?], *Asia Economy*, August 8, 2016.

<sup>12</sup>"Hũksujõ binggo kaeimũl asinayo?" [Do you know the dirt spoon bingo game?], *Han'guk ilbo*, July 31, 2015.

<sup>13</sup>Yi Kwang-bin and Pak Ch'o-rong, "Uri nara sangwi 10% ka pok 66% poyu ... hawi 50% chasanũn 2% pulkwa" [Our country's top 10% occupies 66% of the wealth ... the lower 50% has only 2% of the wealth], *Yonhap News*, October 28, 2015.



**Table 1.** Spoon categorization

Diamond Spoon	Assets: above 3 billion won Annual Income: 300 million won	Upper Class 0.1%
Gold Spoon	Assets: above 2 billion won Annual Income: 200 million won	Upper Class 1%
Silver Spoon	Assets: above 1 billion won Annual Income: 80 million won	Upper Class 3%
Bronze Spoon	Assets: above 500 million won Annual Income: 55 million won	Upper Class 7.5%
Dirt Spoon	Assets: below 50 million won Annual Income: below 20 million won	The rest

Note: One million won is US\$870.

Source: Ch’oe Ūn-gyōng, “‘Sujōron’ sasillo ... sahoejōk chiji sesūp simhwa” [“Spoon theory” becomes real ... succession of social status deepens], *Chosōn ilbo*, January 31, 2016.

reached 12.5 percent in February 2016.<sup>15</sup> Other evidence suggests the issue may be more severe: a 2016 news report indicates that one out of three young people fail to find work.<sup>16</sup>

The rise of inherited wealth inequality has been in the making for at least two decades. In the mid-1990s, dissident-turned-president Kim Young Sam began to build a social welfare system. However, even during Kim’s administration, the emphasis on welfare declined as a strategy of global economic competition gained ground. The IMF-led restructuring that followed the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis gave many Koreans a deep sense of economic vulnerability. Some 1.8 million people lost work; in 1998, 170,000 people in their forties and fifties experienced “dignified retirement” (*myōngnye t’oejik*), meaning, of course, forced retirement.<sup>17</sup> Large portions of the workforce subsequently became informalized, as employers preferred fixed-contract workers without union representation or benefits. Even as parents have poured resources into educating their children, returns on schooling have been disappointing for many as youth unemployment has grown. These trends have been said to forge a “kangaroo class” (*k’aenggōrujok*) of twenty-five- to forty-four-year-olds who live with their parents and have no means to live independently.<sup>18</sup> A strong sense has grown that the economy and the education system are now entrenching inequalities.

<sup>14</sup>“Kūmsujō’ chikyōjunūn Pak Kūn-hye chōngbu” [Park Geun-hye government protects “gold spoons”], *Nyusūt’ap’a*, November 19, 2015, <http://newstapa.org/30253> (accessed June 27, 2017).

<sup>15</sup>Kim T’ong-ho, Pak Ch’o-rong, and Kim Su-hyōn, “Ch’ōngnyōn sirōpyul 12.5% ‘yōkdae ch’orego’ ... chōnch’e sirōpyul to 4.9% ro ch’isosa” [Youth employment “the highest ever” at 12.5% ... total unemployment reaches 4.9%], *Yonhap News*, March 16, 2016.

<sup>16</sup>“Ch’ōngnyōn set chung han myōng paeksuranūnde ... t’onggyech’ōng sirōmnyul yōjōnhi 9% tae” [One of three young people are unemployed ... statistics still say 9%], *Financial News*, January 30, 2017, <http://www.fnnews.com/news/201701301034270283> (accessed June 27, 2017).

<sup>17</sup>Pak Chae-min and Chōn Chae-sik, “Sangt’ae konggan mohyōng-ūl iyonghan kyunhyōng sirōp ryul ch’uchōnggwa koyong chōngch’aek-e taehan sisajōm” [Using a state-space model to calculate equilibrium unemployment and implications for employment policy], *KRIVET* 10, no. 3 (December 2007): 67–87. This figure is for the period up to February 1999. The number translates to an unemployment rate of 8.8 percent.

The problems of inequality and barriers to advancement are core themes in public discussion today. Jobseekers are regularly asked to provide information on the background of their parents, a practice that has been criticized for allowing employers to favor those with a more privileged background.<sup>19</sup> Competition for jobs has created greater pressure in education. A degree from a university in Seoul is often perceived as essential for career success. But those who are admitted into one of those schools tend to have invested a good deal of resources in extra courses. Referral letters from high-status individuals also allow students whose parents have the right social connections to gain advantages in the admissions process.<sup>20</sup>

In other areas, too, questions of privilege have come to dominate debate around policy reforms. This pattern has occurred with a reform to the legal education system. In 2009, a law school and bar examination system was introduced to replace the judicial examination as the only means of becoming a lawyer. The old system, under which only 3 percent of exam-sitters passed annually, was criticized for its inefficiency. In 2015, allegations surfaced that under the new system, a legislator was able to use his influence to get his son a place at a law school.<sup>21</sup> In order to practice law, studying hard was no longer enough; one had also to invest in the necessary courses for gaining admission to a law school. This scandal led many to compare this new system to previously identified unfair university admissions. The language of spoon theory appeared in this debate as well, with gold spoon students said to be advantaged in law school admissions.<sup>22</sup>

Spoon theory has been used to criticize practices that benefit the privileged in a wide range of areas. A television program on “gold spoon teachers” reported on an investigation into nepotistic hiring practices at private schools. The teaching profession is attractive to many for the stability, vacations, and strong pensions.<sup>23</sup> The program revealed that most people’s opportunities to serve as a teacher were limited by schools that tend to hire their own family members to fill posts. Advertised positions were given to internal candidates, while other applicants had little chance of success.<sup>24</sup> In civil society, spoon theory has been used to rally against the illicit benefits of the privileged. A lawyer operates a website, [www.goldspoons.org](http://www.goldspoons.org), and calls it the “Dirt Spoons Hope Center.” The

<sup>18</sup>Pak Sŏng-jun, “Nobumo pongyang-e ta k’ün chasik kkaji ... 50-dae tŭnggol huinda” [Taking care of elderly parents and adult children: Bending the backs of fifty-somethings], *Segye Daily News*, May 2, 2013, <http://media.daum.net/economic/newsview?newsid=20130502194210057> (accessed June 27, 2017).

<sup>19</sup>An Sŏ-hyŏn, “Ch’wiŏp to sŭngjin to ‘kŭmsujŏ’ e millinŭn sŏrŏun sesang” [An unfair world in which people are pushed away by “gold spoons” in employment and promotion], *SBS News*, August 20, 2015.

<sup>20</sup>“Kŭmsujŏ’ chikyŏjunŭn Pak Kŭn-hye chŏngbu,” *op. cit.* note 14.

<sup>21</sup>Kim Chi-hun and Sŏ Yŏng-ji, “Sin Ki-nam ūiwŏn, adŭl-i rosŭk’ul chorŏp sihŏm ttŏrŏjija ... ‘kuje haedalla’ amnyŏk nollan” [National Assemblyman Sh’in Ki-nam, his son failed law school graduation exam ... pressure to “save him”], *Hankyoreh*, November 26, 2015.

<sup>22</sup>Yi Sŭng-yun, “Kowi kongjikja chanyŏ taegiŏp, taehyŏng rop’ŏm ch’wiŏp hyŏnhwang konggae-haeya” [Information on employment of children of high-ranking government officers and conglomerates should be publicized], *Legal Insight*, August 20, 2015.

<sup>23</sup>Pak Ūn-yŏng, “Ch’ŏngsŏnyŏn changnae hŭimang ‘kyosa, yŏnyein, kongmuwŏn’ sun” [Teenagers’ favorite jobs “teacher-entertainer-civil servant”], *TNT News*, July 19, 2012, <http://tntnews.co.kr/news/view.html?section=1&category=7&no=3330> (accessed June 27, 2017).

<sup>24</sup>“Kŭmsujŏ sŏnsaengnim” [Gold spoon teachers], *PD Notes MBC*, October 20, 2015.



goals of this organization are to “get tip-offs regarding stories of gold spoons who are in public organizations and big companies, to demand changes, and to establish a fair employment culture.”<sup>25</sup>

The critique embedded in spoon theory can have a profound impact on individuals and how they view their futures. This impact can be seen in the suicide in December 2015 of a student at the elite Seoul National University. The student, whose family background was not elite (but also not low status) and who had a remarkable academic record, grew gloomy about his prospects given that he lacked family connections and wealth. In a note, he wrote, “It is this society that makes me suffer. I make myself feel ashamed. . . . In this society, which talks about the color of spoons, I thought that I have ‘a golden frontal lobe.’ But I realized that what decides survival is not the color of one’s frontal lobe, but the color of one’s spoon.”<sup>26</sup> To some, inherited status appears as the required condition for pursuing a good life.

Wealth inequality also became a main theme in politics. In the 2012 presidential election, won by Park Geun-hye, inequality was a major issue and was directly addressed by the leading candidates. Park’s campaign featured frequent reference to “democratization of the economy,” though the meaning of this promise remained vague. One of her ten pledges was to “restore 70 percent to the middle class” (*chungsancheung 70% chaegon*). She made “solving the polarization of society” the essential task in pursuing this goal.<sup>27</sup> Departing from previous conservative candidates, she spoke about the need for better welfare protection. Her opponent in the election, Moon Jae-in, had a more comprehensive welfare plan. Park may have been helped by a perception that state assistance was not the real need. The real problem, many felt, was that working hard was not leading to advancement. Such an ethos had been crucial to South Korea’s rise to a global economic powerhouse, and to the material improvements felt by nearly all families from the 1970s to the 1990s. Tapping on this desire was the core of the identity Park built for the presidential election.<sup>28</sup> As the daughter of the president who oversaw growth with social mobility, she drew on those credentials. She ceaselessly made references to her father’s presidency. While she also played up old-style fear of communism, one of her main appeals was to fighting barriers to social mobility. In her New Year’s address shortly after the election, she stated that “in the spirit of symbiosis and co-existence, I will make a society in which everyone lives well.”<sup>29</sup>

<sup>25</sup>Sin Chong-ch’öl, “Pae Süng-hüi p’yönhosa kümsujö ch’wiöpp ggajil kop’alsent’ö ‘koldüsüp’un’ op’ün” [Lawyer Pae Süng-hüi opened “Gold Spoon” reporting to illicit gold spoon employment cases], *Law Issue*, December 11, 2015.

<sup>26</sup>Yi Tae-ho and Ch’ae Sae-rom, “Söuldaesaeng, hangnae onrain kesip’an-e yusö namgigo t’usin samang” [Seoul National University student leaves suicide note on campus bulletin board and dies], *Yonhap News*, December 18, 2015.

<sup>27</sup>Chön Min-jöng, “Chungsanch’üing 70%-ro nülligo, söngjang kwasil kolgoru nanunda” [Increasing the middle class to 70% and sharing growth], *E-today*, December 28, 2012, <http://www.etoday.co.kr/news/section/newsview.php?idxno=671042> (accessed June 27, 2017).

<sup>28</sup>Hyejin Kim, “A Link to the Authoritarian Past? Older Voters as a Force in the 2012 South Korean Presidential Election,” *Taiwan Journal of Democracy* 10, no. 2 (2014): 49–71.

<sup>29</sup>“Pak Kün-hye taet’ongnyöng tangsöncha sinn’yönsa ‘kongsaeung kwa sangsaeng” [New Year address from president-elect Park Geun-hye ... Symbiosis and co-existence], *Ch’önji ilbo*, January 1, 2013.

## FROM SPOONS TO PROTEST

Park gained power by tapping into people's anger over social immobility. Four years into her presidency, not only did frustration persist, but Park was herself both a beneficiary of illicit privilege and a perpetuator of it. "The Park Government Protects 'Gold Spoons,'" declared the headline of a report on business and education policy.<sup>30</sup> Having failed to make any serious headway into the problem of inequality, citizens were left with a princess. She had no career prior to politics, no qualifications of her own. All she had was her inherited privilege. It was not only her name but her connections in and around official circles that helped her. Foundations seized by her father made money for her. Worse, public officials secretly assisted her election. In the presidential election campaign period, an estimated one-third of social media postings about the election came from the intelligence agency and were aimed at supporting Park by smearing her opponent. After this program was exposed, the intelligence chief was sacked and found guilty of criminal charges, only to have his sentence overturned on the grounds that his actions served the national interest. Then, in October 2016, the dealings involving Ch'oe were uncovered. Park was allowing her adviser to enrich herself, enhance her family members' social status, and make public decisions. Park was by then the embodiment of the very problem she had promised to address.

Violation of public duty was, of course, what got Park into trouble. And in the months of peaceful protests leading up to and beyond the impeachment vote, Koreans demonstrated that they could be exemplary citizens with no tolerance for such profound breaches of trust. But Park's violations also struck a chord that may have resounded more deeply than simple civic-mindedness. Problems of social mobility relate directly to the everyday experiences of ordinary people. South Koreans have a range of symbolic resources for imagining and articulating the importance of access to opportunity: Confucian traditions of examinations for public office; the experiences of a recent history of growth with relatively little inequality; and "spoon theory," which captures the particular concerns of today and makes them easily accessible through humor and apparently light-hearted gossip about celebrities. Once the Ewha scandal broke and the president was linked to it, this cultural repository offered a clear way of making sense of Park's background, promises, policy failures, and misdeeds.

It was Chŏng Yu-ra who had first given a face to the gold spoon concept as a serious political issue. Her claim that her mother was only acting as any parent should prompted indignation. Many had to ask themselves: "Do I have to feel guilty as a parent because I am not Ch'oe Sun-sil?" The Chŏng scandal touched a nerve because access to education is a near-sacred value in Korea. The education system is the foundation of a stratification system that allows for social mobility. It gives opportunities to families from any background. This view has remained steadfast despite two decades of educational advancement becoming increasingly tied to a family's economic status. Public power being used to cheat the system and deny places to others is unacceptable.

As the scandal unfolded, Koreans found themselves confronted with several gold spoons. At the center were Chŏng and her mother Ch'oe, both of whom gained from

<sup>30</sup>*Nyusūt'ap'a*, November 19, 2015.

the ability of Ch’oe’s father to insinuate himself into the then-president’s trust in the 1970s. Then other figures were also seen in light of their privileged backgrounds. J. Y. Lee, the third-generation boss of Samsung, which for its size is viewed like a public institution, had given funds to Ch’oe, presumably in exchange for government benefits. At the thirteenth installment of the candlelight vigils, the slogan was “to arrest J. Y. Lee,” as the special prosecution team had failed to detain him.<sup>31</sup> Then there was Park herself. From the beginning, perhaps, spoon theory had been directed at Park. Using games and talking about celebrities offered a safe way to mock the president. At times, this link was made explicit. In December 2015, Park Geun-hye received the highest number of votes in a “gold spoon” competition at a youth street performance.<sup>32</sup> On the surface, though, it appeared to be in jest.

In reflecting on the Park scandal, attention should be given not only to political corruption in principle, but also to an interpretation in which the actions of these gold spoons have contributed to making life increasingly frustrating for most Koreans. Spoon theory reflects the failure of the economy and social system to generate opportunities for advancement. This is a twenty-first-century problem, and countries around the globe are grappling with its political repercussions. In South Korea, given the history of growth with social mobility, and the cultural expectations such a history has entailed, rising wealth inequality is imagined in a particular way. Koreans are struggling to come to terms with a world in which inherited status means so much more than it did a generation ago. Easy to understand and humorous on the surface, spoon theory offers a powerful frame for mobilizing discontent around inequality and corruption. Park opportunistically inserted herself into the narrative of growth with mobility, but her association with that history was inherited and not earned in any sense. The breaking of the Chŏng scandal clarified for many that Park, who appears to have used the state as little more than a vehicle for enriching and privileging her inner circle, was actually a symptom of the problem rather than a source of the solution.

<sup>31</sup>O T’ae-yang, “Yi Chae-yong ŭl kusokhara ... 32 man inp’a sŏlmat-i ch’oppul chiphoe” [Arrest Yi Chae-yong. 320,000-person strong candlelight vigil in the New Year], *Nyusūt’ap’a*, January 21, 2017, <http://newstapa.org/37643> (accessed June 27, 2017).

<sup>32</sup>On December 8, 2015, in the Sinch’ŏn district of Seoul, the organization Youth Strategy Space (Ch’ŏngnyŏn Chŏllyak Sŭp’aesŭ) held a performance and conducted a street survey of 300 people in their twenties. Kim Chi-hyŏn, “20-dae 300 yŏ myŏng-i ppopŭn ‘ch’oego ūi kŭmsujŏ’ Pak Kŭn-hye taet’ongnyŏng parŏn” [Park Geun-hye’s statement on the top gold spoons chosen by 300 people in their twenties], *Nyusūt’ap’a*, July 9, 2015, [http://www.ohmynews.com/NWS\\_Web/View/at\\_pg.aspx?CNTN\\_CD=A0002125693](http://www.ohmynews.com/NWS_Web/View/at_pg.aspx?CNTN_CD=A0002125693) (accessed June 27, 2017).