ASSUMING MANHOOD:
PROSTITUTION AND PATRIOTIC PASSIONS IN KOREA
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“Korean Men! Rise! Korean Men! Rise!”

The Korean beverage market is saturated with male tonics. A 1999 TV commercial of one such tonic featured a gigantic bottle of the drink making a thunderous landing onto the city, upon which toppled buildings become erected, together with throngs of Korean office men’s arms raised to the sky, cheering in unison to the male voice-over, “Korean Men! Rise! Korean Men! Rise!” The theme of rise from ruins in national and commercial propaganda has been prominent following the “IMF crisis,” a local interpretation of the Asian economic crisis and its effects on Korea. Together with the slogan “Glory and Might” (wip’ungdangdang) in its print-ads and a poster featuring a naked athletic male body, the advertising campaign offers the promise not only of male virility but also reinvigoration of national honour through the revitalization of the male body.

1. “Korea” refers to South Korea or the Republic of Korea throughout this paper unless otherwise specified.
2. The drink, “Tongchunghacho,” is named after the ingredient—a species of fungus that grows on the remnants of silkworm pupa. The advertisement campaign is
In spite of this popular concern with male prowess, dominant discourses are highly repressive and moralizing towards sex. In the public arena, forms of sex deviating from the moral ideal of marital sex is readily controlled and suppressed. Public discussion of sex in the late 1990s continues to focus largely on the sanctioning of sex within marriage. However, statistics have shown that Korean men’s use of prostitution is a prevalent phenomenon. A series of reports assert that there are around one million women engaged in the Korean sex industry, amounting to as much as 20 percent of all women between the ages of 15-29. My findings suggest that these contradictions have to be understood in terms of three powerful but conflicting discourses.

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3. Stanley Kubrick’s film “Eyes Wide Shut” as well as a local film “Lies” were both banned because of the possible bad effects to public morals—the former with its exposure of pubic hair and the latter with the sexually active heroine dressed in a school uniform, according to the censorship committee. Yet double standards for men and women on censorship can be observed in another controversy: two recent autobiographical publications on personal sexual experiences by a male cultural critic and a female actress received very different public and official evaluation. The former was received with relative public calm and could be purchased freely while the latter stirred up a heated public controversy and could only be purchased by adult readers over the counter following a government ban.

4. Ku Song- ae, a nurse-turned-sex educator, has been immensely popular with her lively and bold discussions of sex in the mass media since 1998. Her talks are targeted at teenagers and deal with issues such as sexual desires, relationship between masturbation, love and sex etc., but she also has a large adult following. She has coined the term “Our Beautiful Sex,” which gives a positive meaning to a previously tabooed subject. However, discouraging the “irresponsible” pursuit of passions, “she reinforces the legitimacy of marital sex as legitimate and “beautiful.”