



Tübingen Korean Studies Lecture Series

Frontlines of Social Science Research on Korea

Supercorporate South Korea: Rethinking Hierarchy through Distinction.

Michael Prentice (University of Sheffield)
Wednesday November 16, 2022, 18:00 c.t.,
Wilhelmstraße 133, Room 30



Abstract

Accounts of (and critiques) of negative hierarchy in South Korean society seem particularly prevalent today, reflecting various conflicts between generations, classes, or those with different mindsets. While hierarchy is often conceptualized as a negative residue from the past, this presentation argues that such thinking is unhelpful for social analysis. Rather, it might be better to think about tensions surrounding the attainment of distinction. The quest for distinction motivates educational trajectories, corporate job-searching, real estate aspirations, and consumer tastes in South Korea's thoroughly capitalist modernity. Based on ethnographic research from within a South Korean conglomerate, this presentation describes how corporations are as much modern organizers and arbiters of fair distinction as they are sites of old hierarchy. A thorough account of the modes of distinction, and their tensions in practice, can move beyond the trope of hierarchy that has long stuck to South Korea.

Bio

Mike Prentice is a lecturer (assistant professor) in Korean Studies in the School of East Asian Studies at the University of Sheffield. He has a PhD in linguistic anthropology from the University of Michigan. His research focuses broadly on genres and technologies of communication in work and organizational life in contemporary South Korea. He is the author of *Supercorporate: Distinction and Participation in Post-hierarchy South Korea*.



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