Reading Korean Popular Culture: The Webtoon as Form, Translation, and Critique of Everyday Life

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts
Department of East Asian Studies
University of Toronto

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Abstract

This thesis conducts a form analysis of the webtoon *Annarasumanara*, created by Ha Il Kwon and originally released in 2010. The thesis examines this webtoon from multiple directions: as a new form of graphic narrative emerging from developments in digital technology and its powerful use of digital image production, synthesizing digital photography with cartoon art; as a historical narrative of post-IMF Korean everydayness; and as a digital pop culture commodity within the flourishing Korean media industry. This form analysis will highlight *Annarasumanara* as a piece of art performing a powerful critique of capitalism that particularly speaks to the contemporary South Korean context. However, it must be read as emerging from, and embedded within, an industry that is organized through the relationships of capital. This contradiction culminates in the translation of *Annarasumanara*, in which its critique of capitalism is filtered through a process of commodification aimed at export to foreign audiences.
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Introduction

In the year 2010, I came to experience a piece of media that shook me to my core and left an impression upon me so profound that it would affect me for the foreseeable future thereafter. This narrative work was a South Korean (hereafter just referred to as Korea/n) webtoon, a type of online digital comic, titled *Annarasumanara*, made by the webtoon artist/writer Ha Il Kwon [Ha Ilgwŏn] and released in the same year I happened to read it. The premise of this webtoon is a fictional story written for a predominantly Korea-based youth audience about a young girl and boy in their second year of high school navigating their paths to adulthood. This thesis is the culmination of several years ruminating over this cartoon, in an effort to understand the ongoing interactions between myself and this graphic narrative, its tight grip upon my psyche and my efforts to understand its power.

This power of the webtoon I am referring to is in its presentation of reality or rather its ability to disrupt the reader’s, in this case my, concept of reality, in their casual plodding through the mundane and endless progression of everyday life under capitalism. Lefebvre described in volume 1 of *The Critique of Everyday Life* that “in a nutshell” the philosophy of everyday life is as follows: “In the realm of necessity, human needs became degraded. They represented ‘the sad necessities of everyday life’. People had to eat, drink, find clothes… and so they had to work. But people whose only reason for working is to keep body and soul together have neither the time nor the inclination for anything else. So they just keep on working, and their lives are spent just staying alive” (173). It is possible liberation from this mode of being that is the power of *Annarasumanara*, its ability to disturb and speak to my vision of reality and thus awaken my own subjectivity. As Lefebvre writes, “to reach reality we must indeed tear away the veil, that veil which is forever being born and reborn of everyday life, and which masks everyday life
along with its deepest or loftiest implications” (57). It is this process of revealing reality that I believe is the key to the power of *Annarasumanara*.

If this is the power of the webtoon I am fascinated with, the task is then to locate it within the material, meaning within both its content and material circumstances. The plot of *Annarasumanara* revolves predominantly around the story’s two Korean youth protagonists in their second year of high school: a girl named Yun Ai and a boy named Na Ildŭng. The temporal setting of this webtoon, though never explicitly stated, is implicitly represented as being contemporaneous with the time of its publication in the year 2010 and takes place within some generic and unspecified urban setting in Korea. The two protagonists of the story, Yun Ai and Na Ildŭng, are both top performing students attending the same school, with the story beginning at Ildŭng’s transfer into Ai’s classroom when the two first meet in person after having spent the previous year facelessly interacting with each other in competition for the position of the top scorer within their year. Both characters are shown in the early part of the narrative as already possessing strong convictions regarding the nature of society and their current and future roles within it. For Ai and Ildŭng, educational performance for the goal of later financial success constitutes the entirety of their lives: while both are highly pragmatic and realistic they are also unresolved characters who are suffering as they deny themselves any consideration towards meaning in life outside of development along the terms of what they believe will enable them to become proper adults. The characters’ motivations are informed by their identities. Ai belongs to a broken household suffering from severe financial debt. Her mother abandoned the family shortly after their financial troubles began and her father is on the run from debt collectors, so Ai is in charge of looking after herself and her younger sister, struggling to make ends meet and believing in successful education as her path of escape from poverty. Ildŭng however belongs to the upper level of the spectrum of socioeconomic status. Coming from an exorbitantly wealthy
family, he is motivated and determined on a path set by his parents to succeed in life and maintain his position in society.

The characters thus represent two tropes: the trope of the pitiful burdened by debt and the exorbitantly wealthy and callous. Both of these subjective positions are figures that have emerged following the IMF financial crisis of 1997, and are found in many examples of Korean soap opera dramas and films with this exact pairing of a rich male lead and an impoverished female lead: Secret Garden (2010), Coffee Prince (2007), A Millionaire’s First Love (2006), The Heirs (2013), among others. Whereas most pairings of these two tropes are for the sake of a romantic motivation, a sort of contemporary version of Cinderella, the story of Annarasumanara focuses on the two protagonists and their separate paths’ character progression as they struggle to navigate their youth identities and negotiate the internal dilemma of what it means to be a functioning and fully realized subject. Annarasumanara’s storytelling is heavily focused on the interiorities of its protagonists, their inner thoughts and reflections on their world, and developments in the plot progress in terms of transitions and developments in the characters’ interiors. Annarasumanara thus falls nicely within the bildungsroman genre and draws heavily upon essential themes of the bildungsroman, such as youth and emergence, national subjectivity, and education. The characters both experience a disruption in how they perceive themselves as well as their surrounding society upon meeting a mysterious stage magician who exists as an anomaly functioning outside of normal social guidelines and expectations as he lives without a proper job or even residence and is surrounded by haunting rumours. While both characters initially view the magician disparagingly they both become drawn to him and rekindle a fascination with magic they had originally held when they were younger. The mysterious magician acts as Annarasumanara’s key plot device as his very existence produces an internal conflict within the protagonists who must navigate and negotiate their irresistible fascination
with the magician and his magic, a fascination that has no place or function within the realms of either educational or financial success. In typical bildungsroman form, the characters face an identity crisis through the contradiction expressed between their internal fascination and desire to engage with something so inherently childlike as magic and their motivations towards emerging as what they and their surrounding society deems as successful adults. In the end, the protagonists reconcile this internal conflict by compromising, maintaining themselves as fully functioning subjects attending university, managing their capital, and continuing their standard career paths while finding ways to maintain their love of magic in pragmatic ways, i.e. as a minor hobby or in a part time job as a performing magician.

As far as plot synopses go, *Annarasumanara* is an interesting presentation of the everyday, as written by Lefebvre, “everyday life is defined by contradictions” such as “illusion and truth” and the narrative of *Annarasumanara* does a good job of presenting contradictions within the characters’ subjectivities and surrounding society (21). While it is a good narration of many of the problems facing Korean youth and other various socially relevant tropes of neoliberal life within Korea today, however, the narrative plot alone does not hold the power to affect me, and such topics and themes are quite plentiful within a range of Korean media. Were *Annarasumanara* a novel, while I would appreciate its story it surely would not have impacted and gripped me as it has, for if I imagine the webtoon reduced to its plot and story alone, it is no longer liberating the way “all power” is as according to Lefebvre:

“All power is liberating; thus, to take a very simple example, someone who can swim or run is attaining a higher level of freedom: he is free in relation to a material environment which he controls instead of being controlled by it. ‘Spiritually’ and materially, the free individual is a totality of powers, i.e. of concrete possibilities” (172).
I argue that the potential of liberating “power” exists somewhere within the material artifact of the webtoon itself, but only becomes manifest through the interaction between myself and the material of the webtoon. The narrative content of the webtoon itself is only a part of that something which interacts with my own subjectivity. The total of that something is the form of the medium and so what becomes crucial to the goals of this thesis is the particular form of the webtoon Annarasumanara. To specify the goal of this project, the goal is to present the webtoon Annarasumanara and to understand the full make up of its artifact form in order to explain its power. It is also through the exploration of the full make up of the form of Annarasumanara that the power it holds as a critique of the everyday, as a disruption and intervention into capitalist reality, as an example of art that moves and liberates, will be revealed.

To begin, the webtoon is a form of media that has emerged quite recently from Korea, with the first usage of the term “webtoon” being in the year 2000. This places the emergence of this form within the ongoing context of the ubiquitous internet and the rise of the digital age. The term webtoon itself, a portmanteau of “web” as in World Wide Web and “toon” as in cartoon, originates from Korea and refers to a specific type of digital comics that are published through the internet. While comics released in digital format through the internet are by no means restricted to the region of Korea, webtoons should not be understood as being a Korean language equivalent term for webcomics, a more general term commonly used outside of South Korea denoting comics published and/or available online. Instead, the webtoon is a distinct subtype of webcomics originating within Korea. Whereas the webcomic is a general term denoting any comic that is published online, the Korean webtoon has arisen through a particular process of industrialization and has come to possess specific qualities and characteristics that require it be denoted as a subcategory of webcomics. Dal Yong Jin differentiates webcomics in other regions such as Japan and the United States from the Korean webtoon. In Japan, for example, webcomics
function as online publications of the standard print manga, an extension of the dominant print manga industry. In the US, webcomics consist predominantly of short three to four panel comic strips published online, taking a format more akin to newspaper comics, i.e. short individually contained narratives often humorous in nature a la “Peanuts,” “Calvin and Hobbes,” “Garfield,” and etc, or comic pages that contain a single narrative joke within one screen (197). Some well known webcomics existing within this category are “Penny Arcade” and “XKCD,” for example. These trends in the US and Japan have thus capitalized on the internet as a new mode of distribution for traditional print-style comics in the production of webcomics, a utilization of the power of the internet and its revolutionization of mass reproduction by negating the constraints of physical mass reproduction through their conversion into digital commodities. The webtoon as a subtype of webcomics is certainly also embedded within this context of the expansion of mass reproduction by transitions into the digital, but is also distinct as a new digital form of graphic narrative/comics that is structured specifically for and through digital technology. The most important and defining feature of the webtoon is its digital form, and this is especially important in the case of Annarasumanara.

To define this digital form of the webtoon, I separate it into two key components: the digital image and the frame. The digital image can be understood as constituting the sum total of the individual pixels that construct the image content of the webtoon, while the frame is the border of the image which can be either the physical edge of the screen the image is viewed through, i.e. the edge of the computer monitor or smartphone screen, or the internally contained borders within the digital image of the webtoon, i.e. the borders of the comic panels. The truth of these two aspects of the digital form is, of course, that they are not so easily separable but are at times overlapping or even the same thing. This separation is thus a tool implemented to enable thinking through the larger form overall. The digital natures of these two qualities of the webtoon
are important as they work together to empower it with the potential to interact with the reality of the reader. This potential power of the digital form of the webtoon moves in tandem with the digital photograph and its impacts upon the visual construction of reality. The first chapter of this thesis will explore and discuss this digital form of the webtoon, specifically the digital image and frames, and the ways in which Ha Il Kwon’s weaving of digital photography and digital cartoon art has enabled a powerful critique of reality.

From there, the second chapter extends the idea of the digital form presented within the first chapter to a close reading of the webtoon Annarasumanara. This second chapter will thus utilize a close reading approach drawn from an understanding of the webtoon’s form and the ways in which the webtoon creator is manipulating it, in order to extend beyond the realm of fictional reality. It will be argued here that Annarasumanara speaks to a particular reality that belongs to post-IMF Financial Crisis South Korea and in doing so, functions as a powerful historical narrative. The webtoon’s power as a critique of capitalism and its revealing of the everyday life in neoliberal South Korea will be presented here.

The third chapter then situates Annarasumanara within its position as a cultural commodity and its relationship to a webtoon industry that is rising within the context of South Korea’s burgeoning culture industry. The discursive significance of the categorization of the webtoon as occupying a space that is distinct within the broader category of webcomics will be presented here, as the distinct form allows its origins to be traced and located within the region of South Korea, but more significantly within its culture industry. The regional origin of this form is directly related to its national and transnational industrial practices. This aspect of the artifact form of the webtoon Annarasumanara; as a commodity, and the political economy surrounding the culture industry from which it emerged, reveals important conditions of the reality of the current moment under transnational capitalism. The political economy surrounding and
embedded within the webtoon industry and Annarasumanara will be discussed in relation to the contradictory emergence of this powerful digital form as a critique of capitalism from within the distribution/production strategies of a national culture industry increasingly motivated by the goal to extend outwards in search of capital.

The fourth chapter will then present the official English translation of Annarasumanara, arguing that the mode and logic of Annarasumanara’s translation and distribution abroad exemplifies the contradiction of this material artifact emerging from a capitalist context. Annarasumanara as an artifact occupies the position of capitalist critique and liberator, but at the same time commodity that is negotiated in terms of capitalist logic. While all chapters are meant to argue a specific point in their own rights, it is also my intention that this thesis be read with the understanding that all previous chapters speak to each other while eventually leading to this final chapter. Each component of the webtoon argued in the chapters before is intended to lend power to the complex and dynamic interactions that are occurring in the manifestation of this one material, but all of which are still organized in relation to capital.
Chapter 1
The Digital Frame and the Digital Image

The key distinction of the webtoon is its quality as an inherently digital form of media. This digital quality of the webtoon is crucial for understanding the webtoon as being representative of a distinct form of comics separated from print comics in both style and distribution practices. Thus, the webtoon is a form of media that is born out of the rise of the current era of global society that has come to be shaped by the ubiquitous success of the technology of the computer. The webtoon as a digital medium is reliant on its consumers to have access to the internet and a computer in one of its various forms, i.e. personal computer, smartphone, iPad, etc. As stated by Dal Yong Jin, “South Korea is widely known as being the most wired nation in the world. The majority of Koreans have near-constant access to high-speed internet, which is one of the highest in penetration in the world” (193). The ubiquity of the computer and smartphone is so great that webtoons are lauded for their accessibility as “[a]nybody with either Internet or smartphone access and a minute to spare can read webtoons anywhere” (ibid., 199). Though the large majority of webtoons are free to read, unlike printed literature they require an expensive piece of hardware in order to be accessed and given realized form before the reader. Of course, individuals are not purchasing these machines for the sole purpose of being able to read webtoons. These machines have already become ingrained within the everyday life of contemporary society, and webtoons represent only one of many forms of media that have been developed out of this new digital context.

The emergence of the webtoon is thus embedded within the historical and social context of the rise of this digital technology. Indeed, it is a requirement that these digital technologies exist in order for the webtoon to even be possible, but the social impact of the technology itself is more complex than a change in material from paper to computer screen may suggest. In this
chapter I emphasize the significance of the digital form of the webtoon through elements, which in reality are enmeshed and not so easily separated, the digital image and the digital frame. The understanding of this form must however begin with an understanding of the relationship of the technology to the human.

The story of modernity is often told through the development of the great technologies that arose such as the engine, the railroad, the various weapons of war, and manufacturing technologies that comprised the Industrial Revolution. Another crucial and oft emphasized development within the myriad technologies of the early modern era was the invention of the camera. The importance of the camera and the photograph within modern subjectivity, like all technologies, are manifest within the physical capabilities of the technology itself, in this case the process of interacting light within a chemical process to produce a 2-dimensional visual record of a moment. Unlike other technologies which amplify the physical power of humanity, for example the engine, the emergence of the camera was profound because it transformed the way in which humanity imagined itself and the world. By producing an image derived through a process of “capturing” light, the camera informed a new way of seeing and provided a discursive framework for objectivity and reality through its mechanical production of visuality. As described by Antonia Bardis, “the photographic image has always possessed a particular bond with reality. Despite its limitations as a medium: its two-dimensionality, its possible lack of colour, or even blurriness, it still has veracity not inherent to other forms of illustrations such as a drawing or a painting” (210). Then, citing Roland Barthes’ description of the photograph’s invisibility in Camera Lucida, Bardis continues to explain that “we see only the referent and rarely are we obstructed by the characteristic properties of the medium on which it is embedded” (ibid.). The photograph is given power through the process of its construction through the
collision of light upon chemicals. Unlike a painting, the photograph cannot portray that which
does not exist and is bound to the state of the light used to produce it. Thus, Bardis states,

“photography was seen to be a force of nature, with no human intervention coming
between the image and reality… Photography became the means for which to observe the
world, to describe its properties, and most importantly, to prove things existed within the
relationship of space and time. Photographic images seemed to warrant objectivity and
produce records, or indexes of past reality.” (ibid.)

The webtoon as a cartoon produced by an artist, as a digital painting, is thus far removed from
this description of the invisible photograph that presents an image of reality separate from human
intervention in its presentation. However, this conception of the photograph is changing through
the capabilities of the computer and the digital form of the photograph, and it will be shown
within this chapter that this changing relation of the photograph to reality is crucial to the
expression of the imagery of the webtoon. Furthermore, with the actual nature of objectivity
within modernity and mechanical technology still a subject of academic debate today, I wish to
clarify myself now to explain that by presenting the modern response to the photograph as a
representation of objective reality I am not aiming to advocate a discursive position towards
modern realism and objectivity within photographic visuality but instead acknowledge it as the
paragon of the modern imagination. Indeed, the frame of the image is a crucial aspect of the
image content itself just as the photograph was never separate from the human in its visual
production even when it was a process of capturing light.

The vision of objective reality expressed by the photograph arose within the modern
condition. The current contemporary period of society has since transitioned with the invention
and subsequent proliferation of a newer technology, the computer. While the modern era was an
age of the mechanical, the current age of society belongs within the realm of the digital. Despite
the risk of generalization, the modern imagination may be understood as having arisen from the vast expansion of human physical ability and power in an age where humanity was inspired by the wonder of mechanical capabilities. With the rise of the digital age, humanity has not discarded the mechanical but instead; now qualified it with digital coding, programming, and language. Digital technology has thus worked to alter the interaction between humans and machines by adding a new layer of communication between the two. The interaction between humans and digital machinery is not just a physical interaction, but instead a process of communication between user and technology through the language of computer code.

The invention of the digital camera/photograph thus fundamentally altered the symbolic meaning existing within the physical process of the original technology. All of the characteristics of the photograph that separated it from human intervention change with the introduction of its digital form. Describing this process of the construction of the digital photograph as a fundamental transformation in the meaning of the photographic image, Bardis writes,

“This transformation entails the translation of each part of the continuous tone analogous image by way of computer, into a map of distinct blocks of electronic data. A picture element, or pixel… is nothing more than a series of mathematical algorithms. With proper computer software, portions of the photograph… may be modified, duplicated or deleted with relative ease, making the digital image incredibly mutable” (ibid., 211).

Transitioning photography from the analog to the digital means that the way a photograph is formed is no longer just a chemical reaction bound by physical reality, but instead a process of translating the captured light into the language of computer code. This change in the form of the photograph from the physical to the digital has transformed the content of the photograph from a finished product actualized by the interaction of light upon a negative, to instead a model or component of a production to be worked upon and manipulated to suit the artist’s intent. This
crucial difference arising from the building blocks of photographs being computer code, rather than a crystallized physical artifact of a single moment made permanent, means that photographic images are *mutable* and no longer reliant upon a visual moment occurring. Thus, the making of a photographic image is entirely capable of skipping the process of “photographing” anything at all and can instead be manufactured purely from written computer code. This is precisely the process of computer generated imagery or CGI production, and so as Bardis sums up, “just like paintings, digital photographs have come to be seen as constructions” (ibid.). Digital technology has thus transformed the act of photography from an effort to capture reality to instead an act of “painting” it. This holds true regardless of whether the photographer decides to alter the content of a “real” world-based digital photograph or not, or if a digital image was made through CGI or not, because the significance of this realization is not in the actual makeup of the image itself but instead within the changed relationship the image now holds to reality. It does not matter whether the image is a “real” photograph or not, because it could also not be. As a result of this, the photograph that was once hailed as the paragon of truth and objectivity is now viewed with intense skepticism, distrust, or even immediately assumed to be not “real.” The digital quality of photographs today has rendered the once invisible photograph now visible. Viewers scrutinize the actual construction and form of the photo itself, its pixels, either prior to or while simultaneously considering its referent.

This new mode of interaction with the visual image is of course is not only within the context of static imagery, but also cinema and film where visual manipulation techniques have proliferated. The film, as a medium incorporating photography, has transitioned into the digital age and has incorporated new technologies in the construction of its visuality. That endlessly referenced tool of contemporary films, CGI or computer-generated-imagery, is now a part of virtually all films and has brought new debates to the nature of film in relation to realism. CGI is
now utilized in various modes with some more obvious than others; CGI may be used to produce an obviously not-real creature such as a dragon or filling out an empty stadium with a generated audience. While the incorporation of such techniques has produced a variety of debates and interests in regard to the nature of film and realism outside the scope of this thesis, the significance of the digital quality of film imagery within the context of the graphic narrative of the webtoon is summed within a statement by Gabriel Giralt:

“The present fascination with visual manipulation not only has brought realism into question but also has brought into focus a new breed of film director whose creative sensibility is manifested in the way he or she perceives reality. Namely, reality is seen not as something to be captured in the purest way possible by the camera lens but rather as something to be constructed.” (3)

The digital construction of visuality has reconfigured the human imagination once again from a belief in some quintessential all-encompassing reality from which the image is extracted, to an understanding of constructed and subjective plural realities. Digital imagery has altered the relationship of the image to reality by reinserting the presence of the human within its content and in doing so has disrupted a belief in the image as a capturing of objective reality. The digital image is not simply dismissed as a false image, but instead understood as a construction of subjective reality presented by the artist/photographer/film director. This relationship of the image to reality is under debate however, and Giralt explores this difference in approach to realism in film by referring to André Bazin’s dichotomy of two distinct film trends, “those directors who put their faith in the image and those who put their faith in reality” (Bazin, 24). For Giralt, Bazin’s two trends within film is distinguished as follows:

“[T]his great divide regarding the normative place of reality in cinema, as seen by Bazin, resides fundamentally between one side claiming that reality precedes artistic knowledge
and is fully independent of it and the other side claiming the exact reverse, that artistic knowledge defines reality (i.e. reality is what one makes of it)” (Giralt, 5).

Discussing these two approaches, Giralt states however that both are still subjective presentations of reality and ultimately concludes that “[n]either indexical or non-indexical images are true representation[sic] of reality itself” but instead are an “intermediary media between the reality they represent and the viewer.” As “intermediary media,” the image is not presenting knowledge of reality to the viewer but instead “elicit feelings—concerns, admiration, revulsion, and so on” which in turn “bring the viewer to a closer or more distant relation with the reality represented.” (ibid., 15). Thus, what is important within the imagery of the film is not whether the images are digital constructions or derived from physical reality, but instead how effective they are at eliciting feelings within the viewer and drawing them into the director’s depiction of reality.

It is this context of the change in the photograph from the analog to the digital that underlies what I am describing as the digital image aspect of the webtoon’s digital form. The webtoon as a digital painting is contextualized within this ongoing dialectical relationship the photographic image has with reality. The webtoon thus becomes an interesting form of visual media in contrast to film and its relationship to reality with the introduction of digital image technology. Whereas the image within film is predominantly captured by the camera and then augmented through computers to suit the vision of the director, webtoons are primarily imagery that is drawn by an artist utilizing digital painting tools. The digital image production technology of webtoons have for the most part functioned as a new tool for producing images in the style of print comics, or cartoon art, that have benefits over traditional drawing techniques such as easy augmentation and easier colouring. However, some webtoons have also incorporated the digital photograph within their cartoon style artwork in a process that may be considered the inverse of
CGI in film. By incorporating digital photographs of the physical world within the imagery of the webtoon, the physical reality of the viewer becomes enmeshed within the fictional world presented by the author and thus connects the reality presented within the webtoon through the referent image of the photograph to the viewer’s reality. This technique is powerful and provocative for its newness, but also performs the function of empowering the webtoon artist’s depiction of social reality. The webtoon Annarasumanara is especially powerful in its use of digital photography, but I will first present another webtoon, Oemoji Sangjuŭi or “Lookism,” as another example in which the artist/author Park Taejoon [Pak T’aejun] incorporates this technique.

The premise of Oemoji Sangjuŭi’s plot is one that may be considered outside the genre of realism. The protagonist is an ugly and fat high school student constantly bullied until he finally transfers schools only to become dejected as he realizes his move has not produced any actual differences in his circumstances as he begins to be bullied immediately upon arrival to his new location. Then with no explanation, as the protagonist goes to sleep the night before his first day at his new school he awakens to find himself within a new beautiful body standing next to his still sleeping former fat and ugly self. From this point on, the protagonist continues his life living in two separate physical bodies and switching between them whenever one body goes to sleep. The author utilizes this plot point to make a social critique of Korean society by depicting a stark contrast in the everyday experiences of the protagonist as he lives between the two bodies, eliciting distinctly different interactions with others on the basis of his outward appearance. While the main plot point itself may exist more within the realm of fantasy or the impossible, the strong point of Park’s work is within his ability to project its setting as being within the real and existing South Korea that his readers exist within. One of the key techniques Park utilizes to produce this analogous relationship between the surreal/fantastic reality of his narrative and the
reality of his viewers is through a technique known as *t'ūreising*, or “tracing,” in which photographic images are digitally augmented and overlaid through digital painting and then integrated within the art of the webtoon as shown in figure 1. Not all instances of tracing are immediately obvious within the webtoon but it is clear that Park prevalently integrates real world visuality within his artwork through this technique.

In some cases, such as in the case of figure 1, the specific referent of incorporated photographs is of negligible importance to the narrative of the story. For this image, it’s not important that the reader recognize the individual real-life models that were incorporated within the artwork, but instead only that they be recognized as fashionable and beautiful people. By digitally painting over the photographic images of these real-life models, Park utilizes the photograph to incorporate real world aesthetics into his cartoon world. This skillful use of digital art techniques makes the imagery of Park’s webtoon more appealing to the tastes of his readers, with the comment sections underneath episodes of *Oemoji Sangjuūi* often being full of comments and praise on the attractiveness of its various characters, many of whom are speculated as being derived from real life Korean celebrities. Park’s utilization of tracing techniques is not restricted to just character models however. The locations and environment within *Oemoji Sangjuūi* are often derived from digital photographs of real world settings as well, such as the high school presented in figure 2. This is another example of a digital photograph utilized for its invocation of a generalized real-world referent. Which real world school within South Korea the original photograph is of does not matter, only that it is immediately recognizable as being a school.
Figure 1. "Tracings" of real-life models; cut out from episode 4; Oemoji Sangju-ui; http://comic.naver.com/webtoon/detail.nhn?titleId=641253&no=4&weekday=fri
In other cases of Park’s usage of tracing techniques, the incorporation of a digital photograph is done so specifically to connect the reader back to the specific referent within the original. In these instances, the viewer’s lived experience and familiarity with the referent photographic image is critical to proper understanding of the narrative. For example, at one point in the story the protagonist, prior to obtaining his secondary and far more attractive body, attempts to improve his outward appearance and decides to get a haircut. The protagonist is shown to have failed in his efforts when the final result of his haircut is revealed to have transformed his appearance into that of the supreme leader of the DPRK, Kim Jong Un. As shown in figure 4, this joke utilized a real photograph of Kim Jong Un and unlike the other examples of tracing, the punchline of the joke requires that a connection be made by the viewer.
from the tracing produced by Park to the referent he is attempting to direct them to, in this instance being Kim Jong Un.

Figure 3 A side by side comparison of the protagonist of *Oemoji Sangjuŭi* after receiving an unfortunate haircut, and a photograph of Kim Jong Un; (Left) cutout from ep. 2 *Oemoji Sangjuŭi*, http://comic.naver.com/webtoon/detail.nhn?titleId=641253&no=2; (Right) Yonhap via United Press International, 2015, https://www.upi.com/Top_News/World-News/2015/12/10/Kim-Jong-Un-North-Korea-has-hydrogen-bomb/4061449758722/

Commodities are another example in which the specific real-world referent of Park’s tracing artwork is significant. In one episode, a classmate provides the protagonist with a substantial amount of expensive clothing and accessories after overhearing other students commenting on the protagonist’s poor clothing and lack of fashion sense. These students become stunned when the protagonist appears the following day wearing a full outfit consisting of highly desirable and expensive fashion items. In the webtoon, the various items are presented before the reader and listed out as the characters observe and recognize each piece while exclaiming the various brand names of each item, such as a “Rottweiler backpack” by Givenchy (see figure 4). Each brand
name presented is altered slightly compared to its real-world equivalent, i.e. swapping letters within the names. After impressing his classmates with the various items he wore to school that day, the protagonist then reveals that he is still carrying a generic and worn-out wallet which he nonchalantly states was given to him by his mother the year prior, the easy confidence with which the protagonist confesses this fact stuns and shames another character who was portrayed as obsessing over the brand quality of his own possessions. This final statement acts as Park’s punchline as a critique upon Korean society’s obsession with the fashion commodity, but is presented in a contradictory way as the protagonist shows a disregard for fashion brands while simultaneously wearing the most expensive clothing amongst his peers and benefiting from the social capital such a commodity provides as he is showered in the attention and envy and praise of his peers. Furthermore, within the context of the webtoon industry’s monetization structure, it is unclear but possible that the presentation of these commodities within the webtoon may be a form of “brand webtoon” marketing, a method of monetization used in webtoons in which webtoon producers are paid by corporations to include their products within the webtoon.

Outside of the possible but suspicious monetization of this episode in which highly expensive designer brand fashion items are explicitly shown and inventoried, a clear case of monetization within Oemoji Sangjuŭi is found in advertisements featuring the characters acting as models for real life equivalents of various cartoon clothing articles worn throughout the series and presented at the bottom of each episode with links to an online store for purchase. These advertisements are an example of the “Page Profit Share” model of webtoon monetization in which characters from a webtoon are used in external advertisements to market real world commodities. While both of these models of monetization and the context of the webtoon
Figure 4. “Rottweiler backpack” by Givenchy shown being worn by the protagonist; ep. 20; Oemoji Sangjuŭi; http://comic.naver.com/webtoon/detail.nhn?titleId=641253&no=20&weekday=fri
industry will be further discussed in chapter 3 of this thesis, these examples are being presented now to highlight the ways in which the webtoon transcends a separated fictional world setting into the real world of the reader. This connection between the two settings, the webtoon and the reader’s reality, is functioning through a shared form of visuality where the commodities of the real world are incorporated into the webtoon world and the fashion of the fictional cartoon characters becomes commodified and realized in the reader’s world.

In another example of this layering of the fictional and reader’s lived worlds, Park Taejoon presents a Korean bank note within his webtoon as seen in figure 5. At this point in the story it has been recently revealed to the protagonist that his mother has been collecting cardboard to deliver to recycling facilities to procure finances in addition to her regular job. At this moment, the protagonist has met his mother in his new and beautiful body without revealing his true identity to her, instead introducing himself as a classmate. After taking his mother to a café, the protagonist notices his mother’s reaction to the price of coffee as she tells him she will buy him an iced Americano and drink water herself. The protagonist reacts to this with the realization that his mother only ever drinks cheap instant coffee though she has treated him to iced Americano many times in the past. After spending time together in the coffee shop, during which the protagonist treats his mother to her first iced Americano coffee, on their way out of the shop the protagonist’s mother asks for permission from the café worker to take the stack of cardboard lying in the shop before presenting the protagonist with a 5000 won bank note, thanking him for being a friend to her son and to treat him well in the future. In this depiction, the reader is presented with the realistic style of the South Korean bank note, a tracing, held within the cartoon styled hand of the protagonist’s mother extending from a tattered old sleeve. The reader is positioned from the viewpoint of the protagonist receiving the bank note, implanted within the narrative as representing not just monetary currency but instead as a representation of
his mother’s labour. The value of this meager sum of capital procured through such tedious means is held in juxtaposition with the monetary value of a single cup of coffee.

Figure 5. The protagonist’s mother presenting 5000 Won; ep. 17; Oemoji Sangjuŭi; http://comic.naver.com/webtoon/detail.nhn?titleId=641253&no=17&weekday=fri

The importance of these images, at least in relation to the argument of this chapter, lies not only within their narrative significance, but instead in the way that the supplanting of realistic
visuality within a surreal narrative works to empower the subjective construction of reality so projected by the artist. Whereas the early modern realists argued that the key to producing a powerful critique and projection of the problems within capitalism and modern society was an objective and realistic production of humanity, the artists utilizing these digital techniques have produced powerful critiques and analogues of society through this mode of subjective expression. The current form of visuality is however still connected to the form of modern realism, the most obvious way being the symptom that visuality is still so key to our imagination of a given world. Unlike the modern form of realism however, validity within this contemporary subjective construction of a reality is not the medium’s objective presentation of its referent, but instead the effective ontological indexicality of its visual presentation within the subjective narrative to elicit reactions within the reader and disturb their subjectivity. With the transformation of the photograph from mechanical to digital, the artist has lost the claim to authority based on an imagination of existing objective reality and thus, the artist/author no longer performs a presentation speaking to objective reality to the viewer/reader but instead clashes their subjective constructions of reality with the subjective reality held by the reader.

Park Taejoon is certainly not the only artist to utilize this method of incorporating photography within illustration. The technique has become well established within many webtoons, and while not all utilize the technique, a significant number do. Furthermore, these digital art techniques that fuse real world photography within cartoons are also not unique to Korea or webtoons. One well known example of incorporating digitally overlaid photographic imagery within the Japanese animation context for example, is the critically acclaimed animated feature 5 Centimeters Per Second (2007), directed by Makoto Shinkai, that utilizes highly realistic backdrops of actual physical locations in Japan within its artwork. Again, it is not my intention to position webtoons as representing a unique media form. Webtoons may be
understood as constituting one example among many forms of media experiencing dramatic new modes of representation and interaction through the rise of digital technology. The importance of these digital art techniques are the ways in which they affect and interact with the viewer through the bridging of the fictional/subjective presentation of reality posed by the “painter” and the viewer’s own vision of reality.

What is being argued is that humanity is conjoined to technology in a relationship whereby humanity constitutes itself in reaction to and through technology. The invention of the photograph was crucial to transforming the human imagination within modernity. The photograph was significant for its symptomatic construction of human reality as being imagined and envisioned in terms of visuality, however, as the photograph itself has transformed from an image of the physical world produced outside the hands of human subjectivity into a digital form understood inherently connected to the subjective vision of humanity, so has there been a transition in the imagined understandings of what constitutes reality. The digitalization of the photograph has thus resulted in the transformation of the photograph from a crystallized artifact of objective visual reality to a subjective art form and thus integrated into a subjective form of expression, such as the webtoon, that works to validate itself in terms of subjective constructions of reality. Furthermore, these subjective realities by the very nature of them being subjective are particularistic and are speaking to and from within particular contexts and localized identities. In the case of Korean webtoons these particularities are central to the context of Korea.

As stated in the introduction, the themes and tropes within the plot of *Annarasumanara* are of the sort that are widely present within many modern Korean works of fiction: overwork, the existential crisis of a life within neoliberalism, the suffering of youth under the suffocating structure of Korean education, and the heavy social pressures of contemporary Korean values. What is exceptional within Ha Il Kwon’s take on these themes through the webtoon
Annarasumanara is the masterful way he utilizes the form of the webtoon to present the crisis of contemporary Korean life by weaving and patching together digital photography, text, and cartoon art. His ability to manipulate the form of the webtoon speaks to his skill as a digital painter, and exemplifies the difference in the form of the webtoon being a significant transition from standard print comic art. From the opening of its first chapter, Annarasumanara departs from the standard presentation of most webtoons in its stark utilization of colour. Whereas most webtoons are full colour, the majority of Annarasumanara’s artwork is presented in monochrome greys. When Ha Il Kwon does incorporate colour within the artwork, it becomes held in sharp contrast to the surrounding greys of the webtoon’s landscape, for example: a splash of pink on the lips of the young girl protagonist; the imposition of a digitally composed rose cut out from a photograph; a photorealistic banknote. The contrast of these striking implementations of colour within the bleak imagery of the world of this webtoon functions as just one of the ways in which Ha Il Kwon’s Annarasumanara manages to disturb the reader’s tendency to passively view the image. In a large proportion of cases, the instances of colour within the webtoon do not belong to the construction of its contained and fictional world but are instead artifacts from the reality lived in by the webtoon’s creator and its readers, injected into the fictional reality of the webtoon through their transformation into two dimensional images as photographs as shown in figure 6. The rare use of colour and digital photography within Annarasumanara imparts a disruption, a pause however brief, in the ceaseless scroll of the reader and invokes active attention. This method of implementing digital photography is markedly different from the form of “tracing” presented in Oemoji Sangjuûi.
Like many forms of interaction, the reading of comics is a skill that can be improved and honed over time so that the process becomes faster as the individual becomes more familiar with the material. A first-time reader of comics may in the beginning, being completely unfamiliar with the form, hesitate and linger over the individual panels of the comic, attempting to decipher the imagery and paneling and coding that goes into the layout of this form of storytelling. There is an effort to decipher and make sense of what specific shapes of text bubbles represent and which direction to proceed across and through panels, and at this moment the form of the comic is opaque before the reader’s eyes. The reader clearly sees and must confront the form of the comic itself to interpret the narrative contained within its imagery/text. As the reader develops
greater familiarity with the material this process will become more seamless, fluid, and rapid. On the other side of the material, the skill of the comic artist is also often measured by their ability to produce the comic in such a way that makes reading fluid and effective in its conveyance of information. Such is the case of world renowned manga artist Akira Toriyama, lauded for his effective layouts in the popular manga series Dragon Ball. An effect of this interaction between the effective artist and the familiar reader thus becomes that the actual form of the comic itself is rendered invisible.

Where typically a “good” comic may thus be one that facilitates a seamless interaction between storyteller and reader in the delivery of narrative, *Annarasumanara* is clearly distinguishable from this norm as the incohesive imagery disrupts and breaks the natural flow of reading, but manages to do so in a way that is separate from the pauses of frustration typically caused by poor artwork, incoherent paneling, or a messy layout or generally poor storytelling. Instead, it is these instances of disruption I experienced while reading the webtoon, and which I linger over after having finished reading, that have instilled within me a love for this webtoon. The success of *Annarasumanara* is not that it has maintained a cohesive graphic narrative within its fractured, incoherent, and multi-leveled format of storytelling, but instead that the form of *Annarasumanara*’s imagery empowers its graphic narrative to the point that it is able to disrupt the reader.

This leads me to the second aspect of the digital form of the webtoon, the frame, because while the digital painting techniques of the webtoons I have presented may mark a significant difference compared to inked print comics, webtoons are further differentiated from print comics in their layouts or “frame.” Indeed, the most significant and obvious departure from traditional print style comics in webtoons are their vertical layout, as stated by both Heekyoung Cho (2016) and Dal Yong Jin (2015) in their recently published articles discussing webtoons as a new form
of digital media. This vertical layout is geared specifically towards the digital apparatus in terms of both production and consumption. Unlike print comics which consist of individual pages folded together in the form of a book, each publication of a webtoon is constructed as a single continuous strip which the reader scrolls through on their internet browser or smart phone (see figure 7). This striking difference in the spatial arrangement of panels within webtoons functions to provide a more convenient reading experience through digital technology, i.e. a smartphone or internet web browser, compared to print style individually paged comics (Jin 2015, 199-200). Webtoons make the process of reading comics even more effective through its vertically progressive paneling which simplifies the zigzagging path of progression the eyes must move through comic panels presented in two page spreads at a time, with webtoon panels for the most part simply stacked on top of each other and progressing through a continuous scroll downwards from the top of the webtoon. Reading webtoons can thus be done very quickly and indeed this may very well be one of the appeals of the webtoon within Korea where readers may enjoy the ability to finish an episode of a webtoon between the margins of hectic schedules. Each episode of a webtoon may be loaded at once and then read via scrolling as opposed to having to load each separate page of a traditional print page style comic. Besides being more convenient for the consumer utilizing the digital media apparatus however, the vertical layout of the webtoon also significantly alters the mode by which the artist is able to manipulate and present the artwork of the comic. Whereas in print comics, e.g. Japanese manga, individual panels are presented in sets
Figure 7. Normally the entire webtoon would consist of one single to be scrolled image spanning the entirety of the episode, a section has been separated here for the purposes of displaying the vertical layout of the imagery of webtoons; ep. 10; Annarasumanara; http://comic.naver.com/webtoon/detail.nhn?titleId=179704&no=10
of chunks all at once to the reader each time the page is turned, webtoons are embedded within the monitor in such a way that its borders extend far beyond the actual boundaries of the monitor itself. This structural difference provides a new level of control for the author/artist in the temporal progression of the act of “reading” this form of comics. As the artwork is revealed bit by bit through the act of scrolling through the vertical layout of the webtoon, the artist is able to manipulate the tempo of reading by presenting information (imagery or text) tightly together or spaced farther apart for the purposes of affective timing. Furthermore, as described by Heekyoung Cho, the “vertical layout also limits the reader’s freedom to wander among the panels on the page” (Cho, 2016). When reading webtoons, readers begin at the top and proceed in a linear direction towards the bottom, the next piece of information to be read is only what is presented directly below what is on the screen currently. With print style comics however, an entire two pages’ worth of panels is presented with each sequential page turn allowing the reader the agency to navigate the simultaneously presented chunks of narrative. While of course in order for the narrative to make sense, there is an intended direction within the sequence of panels presented on the page (top left to bottom right, top right to bottom left in Japanese manga), but even so the readers’ eyes are free to first wander about the pages as they see fit before following the intended narrative progression. This freedom to wander across the imagery of the narrative is restricted within the webtoon’s more regulated directionality and is seen to be advantageous for certain genres, i.e. suspense and horror, as the artist is able to exercise significantly greater control over the order in which information is revealed to the reader (ibid.).

The webtoon is thus more analogous to a strip of conventional film than a print comic in its structural layout, with the computer screen taking the place of the projector. The sequencing of images within the webtoon however are akin to a comic, as is the tempo of viewing and image sequencing, where each panel represents a separate image to be viewed and read for its own
narrative as opposed to a series of images that blend together to produce one scene. The layout of
the webtoon that places it within the frame of the computer screen also holds a further
implication in the ways in which the webtoon contrasts with the printed comic: the webtoon
extends beyond the borders of its frame. This distinction locates it within some form of space
that is separate from a comic that is printed on paper, for the paper comic is interacted with and
exists as a realized material within our world. The reader interacting with the webtoon however
is using the computer screen as a moveable window to peer into the digital space that the
webtoon occupies. The insertion of digital photography within the webtoon is thus not just a
collage of painted and photographic imagery but instead the insertion of the real within the space
of the webtoon.

An interesting take on this was utilized in a horror series of webtoons titled “Unknown
Caller” released in 2016 on the Line Webtoon platform that required the platform’s smartphone
app. In “Room 201,” the first of the three separate webtoons in the series, the story of a group of
friends in a haunted room utilizes the smartphones camera technology so that at the end of the
story, when it is revealed that the ghost haunting the webtoon had disappeared from the room it
was in, the app switches to turning on the smartphone’s camera to display the reader’s
surroundings on the screen. Whatever the camera is pointing at in that moment will be shown on
the smartphone’s screen and by manipulating the smartphone to look around their surroundings
the reader will be able to find the ghost of the webtoon now revealed as existing somewhere in
the vicinity of the reader. This technology is referred to as augmented reality and has been most
famously utilized in the app “Pokémon Go” in which the phone’s camera function in conjunction
with GPS technology is used by the app to place cartoon Pokémon characters as locatable in the
real world. Of course, the technology works by imposing a rendering of the cartoon character on
top of the photographic image produced by the smartphone’s camera, but the narrative and
symbolic intent of the technology actually places the fictional beings in some dimension between
the fictional world and the reader’s world only viewable through the window of the smartphone.

As Stanley Cavell so astutely wrote, “A painting is a world; a photograph is of the world” (24). Here, Cavell is explaining the key distinction between the photograph and the painting, for
the painting exists only within the edges of its frame and in what is painted within that frame. It
would be nonsensical to wonder what might exist to the left of the painting’s edge for example.
In contrast, a photograph is a “crop” of the larger field that is the world it photographs (ibid.).
The digital frame of the webtoon however complicates this distinction because of its structure
and content, and this is especially so in the hands of Ha Il Kwon. Figure 8, shows an instance in
the webtoon Annarasumanara where the panels switch from being digitally painted images to
instead a series of photographs of a panel that was hand drawn and inked by the artist. In this
series of photographs, the character Na Ildŭng tilts his head to glance at Yun Ai, but what is so
peculiar is that Ha Il Kwon did not simply produce these panels the way the majority of the
panels and imagery in Annarasumanara or webtoon in general are made. Instead, he has hand
drawn a scene of the two characters and then cut out and pasted another drawing of the head and
neck of Na Ildŭng on top of his character and then proceeds to make a sequence of photographs
of this same image, with each sequence slightly lifting and tilting the cut-out head and neck of
Na Ildŭng with lighting positioned so that the shadow of this movement in the real world is
revealed. In this sequence, Ha Il Kwon traditionally “painted” his narrative, but then
photographed the sequence of its events with the character acting and moving within the real
world, and then framed this scene within the digital frame of the webtoon. Another instance of
Figure 8. Photographed drawings embedded within the webtoon; ep. 1; Annarasumanara; http://comic.naver.com/webtoon/detail.nhn?titleId=179704&no=2&weekday=fri
this is shown in figure 9, where after being beaten up and laid out on the street by the debt collectors harassing Yun Ai, the magician of *Annarasumanara* is presented as a crumbled ball of paper that unfurls itself in a series of photographs of a real paper cut-out of the character. The first two section cut-outs in figure 9 depict this occurring, while the last section cut-out on the right of the figure shows a sequence of photographs of standing up paper cut-outs of Yun Ai and the magician interacting with each other on top of a real-world asphalt floor, the camera rotating around them to show their paper material on top of the asphalt.

![Figure 9. Paper characters; ep. 6; Annarasumanara; http://comic.naver.com/webtoon/detail.nhn?titleId=179704&no=7&weekday=fri](image)

Ha Il Kwon has thus managed to photograph the events of his webtoon, placing them in the real-world. The violence that happened to the magician was made manifest as a real-world occurrence through the crumpled and uncrumpling of the magician, as was the character Yun Ai comforting the beaten magician, these images are not paintings but instead are cropped images of
an event taking place within the real world, and then further framed as belonging within the
greater context of the webtoon. Ha Il Kwon has effectively managed to frame both the real-world
and the cartoon world within the digital frame of the webtoon. These frames of reality are
overlapping and function to complicate the relationship between Ha Il Kwon’s webtoon and the
reader’s own world and frame of reference.

This visual bridging of the realities of the fictional and lived worlds of the webtoon and
the reader is powerful and works to not only connect the webtoon artist’s expression of
subjective reality to the reader’s subjectivity but also works further to complicate, meaning here
to disrupt or confuse, a passive consciousness towards reality. The depiction of money is a
powerful example of imagery that has been utilized within webtoons to present this idea of
complicating reality as was presented earlier when discussing the figure of the protagonist’s
mother and her 5000 won banknote in *Oemoji Sangjúi*. Figure 10 presents a cut out from
*Annarasumanara* in which the protagonist Yun Ai is holding a single 10,000 won bank note in
her hand. Where a photograph may enable the viewer to skip past the form of the photograph to
reach its referent instantaneously and subconsciously, the presentation of the bright green
photorealistic bank note is held in friction against the monochrome grey backdrop of this cartoon
world and grasped within the hand of the fictional cartoon protagonist and thus forces a
conscious viewing. Ha Il Kwon has utilized the power of the photograph to represent the referent
here to place the real-life symbol of capital the banknote represents in the hand of his fictional
protagonist. The single green realistic banknote is presented to the viewer from the perspective
of Ai so that the viewer must confront the artifact itself and perceive it in such a way that it exists
as both real world referent but also in terms of its subjective construction by the author. When
viewing the image of the bank note, it is representative of a financial value, of a commodified
worth, but also it is inherently national in its character. Within the image presented in
Annarasumanara, it is not just “money,” but more specifically, Korean money. As written by Nancy Armstrong in her book, *Fiction in the Age of Photography*, “the ‘nation’ had never been imagined more materialistically” than within the proliferation and production of the bank note (50). Here, framed within the digital space of the webtoon *Annarasumanara*, the cartoon character holds onto that symbol of the Korean nation enmeshed within global capitalism, authorized and validated by the text in the top centre of the bank note that reads “bank of Korea.” This image is inseparable from its position in the narrative itself and at this moment the protagonist, an impoverished high school student struggling to survive in the face of massive financial debt, has stopped to stare at this single bank note that is the key to her survival until the next week and contemplate whether she will first buy rice or a new pair of stockings to replace her currently worn and tattered pair. The protagonist is gazing at and holding within her hand the supreme material manifestation of the nation imagined, so vital to her own survival and yet also representing the source of all of her suffering. The framed perspective of the protagonist in first-person pushes the reader into the position of staring at this symbol of capital to contemplate their own relation to this material artifact.
Figure 10. Photorealistic money; ep. 1; Annarasumanara; 
http://comic.naver.com/webtoon/detail.nhn?titleId=179704&no=2&weekday=fri
Chapter 2
*Annarasumanara* as History

The disruptive nature of these overlapping realities becomes central to the theme of *Annarasumanara* as presented from the beginning of its story. In the opening sequence of the webtoon, a few high school students are shown sitting around a desk whispering about the rumours of a strange magician heard to be found wandering an old abandoned amusement park. This mysterious magician is said to perform not tricks but real magic and is rumoured to present everyone he meets in the amusement park with the same haunting question. When this inquisition is finally presented to the reader, Ha Il Kwon switches from a visual arrangement in the panel from framing the three girls in a circle speaking among themselves, positioning the viewer from the outside, to a close-up of the face of the girl speaking so that the reader is no longer listening in on a conversation but instead directly presented with the question themselves: “Do you believe in magic?” This question becomes the crux of the entire premise of *Annarasumanara*, to disrupt the reader’s belief in what is valid or real.

Considering that the webtoon wants to argue for some reconsideration of the reader’s sense of reality, this chapter contemplates the realities that *Annarasumanara* is speaking to, the reality of its readers in relation to the reality it presents within its narrative. It is at this point in the discussion of this webtoon then, that the regional context of *Annarasumanara* becomes significant as a Korean webtoon speaking to a particular Korean context existing post-IMF financial crisis. In the previously discussed figure depicting the Korean banknote held in the hand of the character Yun Ai at the end of the previous chapter, the photographed referent is the Korean banknote as the symbol of the modern nation in capital but is contextualized within the temporal and social context of the narrative as representing Yun Ai’s greatest hardship, her
family’s poverty and debt. I argue in this chapter that the webtoon *Annarasumanara* functions as a history of everyday life in post-IMF crisis South Korea.

The character Yun Ai is marked by the conditions of poverty. In the first episode of the series, Ai is shown being unable to pay for school lunches, instead filling her stomach on tap water, and struggling to decide between whether she will use her remaining ten-thousand-won bank note to buy a bag of rice or a pair of new stockings to replace her single tattered pair. The circumstances of Ai’s life have pushed her into the position of wanting to be a proper adult as soon as possible, and her ideas about what it means to be a functioning adult are fashioned in terms of the neoliberal subject: a subject that is financially responsible and capable of supporting herself. In many ways, Ai is successfully managing herself from the beginning of the story as a capable “adult.” Though impoverished, she is managing to survive and also provide basic necessities for her sister by taking on part time employment while still performing as a top-level student. At the same time however, Ai is depicted as a pitiful and sad youth embarrassed of the holes in her stockings and loud rumblings of her empty stomach in class, forlorn and desperately wishing to escape her poverty. In reaction to the realities of her life she has constructed a harsh and pragmatic view of the world, she wants to become a successful adult and does not have time for things that will not help her move in that direction. This beginning point of Ai’s character development is embodied in the final scene of the first episode of *Annarasumanara* when Ai finally meets the magician in the abandoned amusement park who then gives her the same question that was presented to the reader in the opening sequence of the webtoon, “do you believe in magic?” Though as a child Ai had loved magic and had even held a dream of becoming a magician when she grew up, she has abandoned her love of magic and so in responding to the magician her reply is a short and resounding “no.”
Yun Ai is a self-managing neoliberal youth subject in this moment of the narrative. As David Harvey wrote of the ethos of neoliberal self-governance:

While personal and individual freedom in the marketplace is guaranteed, each individual is held responsible and accountable for his or her own actions and well-being. This principle extends into the realms of welfare, education, health care, and even pensions… Individual success or failure are interpreted in terms of entrepreneurial virtues or personal failings (such as not investing significantly enough in one’s own human capital through education) rather than being attributed to any systemic property. (Harvey, 65-66)

Ai’s life outlook is drawn along these lines: she cares for herself, works hard to manage her own poverty, and most significantly she manages her education. This position towards her responsibility in relation to her socioeconomic conditions and path out of them are directly produced by the rampant neoliberal economic policy reforms in the wake of the IMF Financial Crisis of 1997. As argued by Dongjin Seo:

“[T]he economy needs to come into being through a wide range of discourses, including economic theories, which demarcate it as an area with a certain set of laws, characteristics, and rules… In turn, economic ideals and norms… can be transmitted to other domains, producing the ‘truth’ of domains, such as administration, education, welfare, health… in new ways. In short, the debt crisis, which forced the Korean people to problematize entire aspects of their society, became a critical moment during which a full-fledged neoliberalism could take shape.” (87).

Dongjin Seo proceeds to write in this same article that the “creation of the ‘self-managing subject’ as part of everyday existence” came to be produced out of the neoliberal programming that evolved out of South Korea’s neoliberal reforms during the past two decades (ibid., 88). The self-managing subject has been further emphasized specifically in the case of South Korea’s
youth within the context of education, which has come to play a primary role in upward social mobility. As described by Abelmann, Park, and Kim, “students inhabit new discourses of human development in the context of South Korea’s neoliberal turn” (101). The shape of these “discourses” hinges on the ways in which contemporary South Korean students envision “human development, particularly their own maturation,” in terms of their “newly emerging subjectivities” which are reflective of “neoliberal trends in South Korea” (ibid.). This envisioning “highlight[s] personal ability, style, and responsibility and work” so that contemporary South Korean students envision themselves as “self-managers” in control of their own success. Abelmann, Park, and Kim, argue that these “emergent subjectivities” must be understood within the temporal context of South Korea in its IMF-era neoliberalization and, furthermore, “viewed through the lens of South Korea’s highly stratified higher education system in which college ranking is significantly correlated with real returns on educational capital (ibid.).

Annarasumanara’s depiction of Ai is thus a representation of this real and existing post-IMF Korean youth subject and the narrative follows her progression from this starting point as a suffering but fully realized self-manager. Her struggle to manage her educational development while suffering the conditions of poverty is a central theme of her narrative arc. The first episode of the webtoon is titled “tchoch’aganda,” meaning “chasing” in English, and is a reference to a sequence in the episode where Ai’s last ten-thousand-won banknote gets caught in the wind. She chases this banknote until finally ending up in the abandoned amusement park where she first meets the magician. In the beginning of this scene, the webtoon presents Ai within her surrounding fictional cartoon reality, the only exception to the monotone grey and visual style of the fictional setting being the photorealistic image of the bank note in Ai’s hand as shown in figure 6 presented in the previous chapter. As the bank note is swept in the wind and Ai gives
chase however, the imagery shifts to abstract representations of Ai in her chase. A silhouette of Ai filled in with a collage of bank notes leads into an image of a path composed of bank notes being walked upon by paper cut-out depictions of Ai as she chases the bank note still aloft in the wind. These two image arrangements are shown below in figures 11 and 12. The visuality in figure 8 depicts Ai descriptively within her fictional reality but as the webtoon transitions to the sequence in figure 9 the imagery switches to representations of this painted character whose interiority is filled with the real-world symbol of Korean capital, and then a paper cut-out representation of a young Korean girl running along a path constructed of money while chasing an amount of capital, the bare minimum for her survival, caught in the wind. She is not in control of the movement of the money, only able to run in chase of it down the path capital has set out for her.

Ha Il Kwon also plays with the interaction of the fictional and realistic world in his presentation of Ai’s internal narrations. Hand-written letters from Ai to her mother become a recurring theme in the webtoon and are used to present Ai’s interiority as she writes to her mother on her daily events and reflections. Ha Il Kwon’s use of a photographed letter with wrinkles in the page and hand-written text confuscates the reality of Annarasumanara in a way that is similar to the previously discussed photographed depictions of the characters. The characters and story of the webtoon are fictional and yet the letters written by the cartoon protagonist Ai are shown to exist in the readers’ reality by being photographed images. The visuality of the photograph is a signifier of the world that we as non-fictional beings reside in,
Figure 11. Ai chasing money; ep. 1; Annarasumanara; http://comic.naver.com/webtoon/detail.nhn?titleId=179704&no=2&weekday=fri

Figure 12. Money in the wind; ep. 1; Annarasumanara; http://comic.naver.com/webtoon/detail.nhn?titleId=179704&no=2&weekday=fri
and thus, by photographing the internal narrations, the thoughts and reflections of Ai, Ha Il Kwon elevates this interiority of his fictional character to the non-fictional world. Figure 13 shows one example of Ai’s letters from episode 1 of the webtoon. The text is translated into English as follows: “Mom. Today was the first day of second year. The new homeroom teacher and classmates all seem nice. Also my new seatmate is the number 1 ranked student from first year. I feel as though I should work harder too. Even so, don’t worry mom! I can do everything well! Because I’m an adult now…” Ai reflects on her first day of the new school year and tells her mother not to worry, she is an adult now and is capable of handling herself well. The contents of the letter are simple, endearing, and mundane. These letters are not the only instances in which Ai’s internal speech are shown, there are many instances where Ai’s internal thoughts are displayed as text hovering in the webtoon and not directed to anyone in particular but are rather the narrations of her immediate thoughts within the context of the story. The important distinction between these letters and other sections of text presenting Ai’s internal speech is that the letters are the character’s reflections written out at the end of the day of the episode. We are thus able to see Ai’s character from two temporalities simultaneously while reading the narrative, her actions and emotions during the moment and her later reflections on the events. These later reflections manage to present Ai’s understanding of the Annarasumanara narrative.

One example in the narrative demonstrating this occurs in episode 2 of the webtoon when the magician, shortly after meeting Ai for the second time, performs a magic trick in which he takes Ai’s 10,000 won banknote and duplicates it for her and then offers both. Ai’s immediate reaction is simply concerned with whether it is okay for her to take the money and her excitement over the prospect of being able to afford both rice and new stockings to replace the single tattered pair she is currently wearing. After a moment of internal conflict, she decides to
snatch the money and leave hastily, but as she is leaving, the magician compliments her on her tattered stockings full of holes and tells her their polka dot design is pretty. This moment startles Ai as she is confronted with the possibility that her life under poverty be considered in any way other than shameful, and that the holes in her stockings may be anything other than a representation of her poverty. After a brief pause to consider her situation from a different perspective outside the relations of capital, a brief moment of alleviation from her burden of shame associated with poverty, she returns home. The subsequent letters Ai writes reflecting on the scene reveal that she acknowledges the moment as a magical performance enacted by the magician in which he transformed her tattered stockings into polka-dot-patterned stockings, but then states that actually, this was not amazing but instead pathetic. Ai remains of a completely neoliberal mindset driven only by her developmental goals and discarding and dismissive of
anything that exists outside of those motivations of capital, unwilling to acknowledge life outside of the relations of capital.

Later in the webtoon it is revealed that Ai is not in contact with her mother or even aware of her whereabouts and so these letters written by Ai are never actually sent anywhere. Ai’s choice in writing to her mother is interesting as she reaches out to an unreachable parent who abandoned her during a difficult moment. Even further in the narrative, when Ai is writing to her mother again, she reveals that she understands her mother’s choice to abandon them as being a rational grown up decision to leave behind her past and that she believes her own failure to abandon the magician proves that she is still unsuccessful in becoming an adult. In contrast to this considerably generous view towards her mother’s actions, Ai’s views of her father are shown to be quite disparaging from much earlier in the webtoon. Much of episode 3 is devoted to how Ai views her father and his failings as an adult. The image of a toy is presented in the beginning of the episode and mused upon by Ai as an object carrying a strange “soksŏng,” or “property,” as a thing “made for children but made by adults, something that is a child while being an adult.” For Ai, this duality of the toy is problematic and comes to be the point of fault she views within her father. At the end of the episode the same toy is used as a representation for Ai’s father. As shown in figure 14, the cartoon face of Ai’s father is placed atop the body of the toy presented in the beginning of the episode. The accompanying text in the cut out narrates Ai’s thoughts and can be translated as follows: “Dad is like a toy. An adult carrying the properties of a child. Even though he ages he cannot become an adult. He has that kind of existence.” These feelings regarding her father as a being that has aged but remained a child stem from her views on development and proper adulthood. Ai sees her father’s unemployment and massive debt accrual as a consequence of her father’s failure to become a proper adult. She places no blame upon any systemic failing in her family’s financial struggles. After Ai’s reflections upon
her father she remarks that she felt the same way upon seeing the magician and another handwritten letter of Ai’s is presented in which she writes that her current dream is to “become an adult quickly, a proper normal adult.” Here, the idea of a “proper normal adult” is held in contrast with the “childlike” adults of her father and the magician, fully grown men who play with toys or perform magic, accrue debt or live without a recognized job. Returning to figure 14, the toy representing Ai’s father is presented surrounded by a crowd of other like toys and one can’t help but see the crowd of toys as representing the generation of workers during the IMF Financial Crisis that experienced massive layoffs, a significant increase of unemployment from 3% to 7%, increased job insecurity and the inability to find permanent work, and worsening poverty (Kang-Kook Lee, 2011; Kwang-Yeong Shin, 2011). While Ai is reflecting only upon her own father, the image of the webtoon presents her father as just one toy among many. There is an irony in the character of Ai however, found in the meaning of her name which in Korean means “child.” This leads the magician to remark upon learning Ai’s name that even after she grows up she will be “Ai.” In this way, Ai herself is destined to one day represent the contradiction she sees in her father, as being an adult yet also a child.

Despite Ai’s early disposition towards the magician, she is drawn more and more to the magician and magic. This internal crisis within Ai is expressed in the second confrontation between Ai and the magician in episode 4 of the webtoon during which Ai declares that she does not believe in magic. The magician in response tell her that she is lying and that she likes magic and she truly believed in it when she was little. Ai, while accepting that she believed in magic as a child says that she does not believe in it now, that she is no longer an immature child, that she
Figure 14 Ai’s father and toys; ep. 3; Annarasumanara; http://comic.naver.com/webtoon/detail.nhn?titleId=179704&no=4&weekday=fri
cannot afford to believe in magic when just surviving day by day is so difficult. When the magician responds again asking “Why? What’s so difficult? If you enjoy magic, you can just do it!” Ai finally explodes and shouts at the magician that the people she hates most are people like him, who regardless of how much they age have no fears, worries, or responsibilities, that people like the magician who live while escaping reality are pathetic people. In response, the magician asks a very frustrated and distraught Ai again if she believes in magic. Upon receiving an emotional shout from Ai that she does not believe in things like magic, the magician strikes a pose and speaks the incantation from which the webtoon takes its title, “annarasumanara” and suddenly the dreary grey landscape of the abandoned amusement park lights up in bright pink colours and fills with floating butterflies of light. Faced with this transformed landscape Ai reaches out to her mother again confessing that although she declared that she does not believe in magic, the sight before her was so beautiful that she could not say anything. The stunning beauty presented before Ai leaves her questioning at the end of the episode whether it is possible that the person standing before her is a real magician.

Ai continues to question whether the magician is capable of “real” magic for much of the webtoon. She soon faces the limitations of the magician’s abilities shortly after the sequence described above, however. In episode 6 when Ai is being harassed by debt collectors pursuing her father and seeking payment for his debt, the magician appears again and she finds herself calling out to him begging for him to use his magic to make the men disappear, to free her from her poverty, saying that if he can fulfill her request she will believe in magic. The magician in answer, confronts the debt collectors and proceeds to expunge torrents of money from his hands, showering Ai and the debt collectors in a rain of colourful bank notes (see figure 15). At first both Ai and the loan sharks are mesmerized by the show of bright explosions of money raining down upon them. This brief moment of magical euphoria ends abruptly however, as the money
falls to the ground and one of the banknotes lands in Ai’s hands, this banknote presented to the reader on top of Ai’s hands reveals upon closer inspection that the section of the note that would normally read “bank of Korea” has been replaced with “bank of children” (see figure 13). The banknote resting upon Ai’s hands at this point in the story is virtually identical to the one that she had grasped between her thumb and her index finger, that she was chasing in the wind in the first episode, sparing this one crucial detail of the authorization of the nation-state. Regardless of their near identical properties, a banknote is only valuable through its connection to the sovereignty of the state and is only valuable as a representation of state capital. The value of this ten-thousand-won note issued by the “bank of children” is thus worthless in terms of finance capital. Once this quality of the money produced by the magician is revealed, the debt collectors beat the magician and leave him quite literally crumpled in the street. Having dealt with the magician, the debt collectors proceed to leave Ai after warning her that they will return again.

This sequence is a powerful moment in the webtoon for its recalling of the image of the banknote from the first episode with a twist. By adding this small detail to the image of the banknote Ha Il Kwon makes the point that what is valid or real is mediated by the conditions of capitalism.

Whether the magician is capable of producing real magic or not, what becomes clear to Ai is that magic will not solve her financial problems. Facing this reality, Ai once again attempts to separate herself from her interest in the magician and proceed with her daily life. Then in episode 8, when Na Ildŭng asks if she would be interested in starting a romantic relationship she finds herself unable to reciprocate his feelings. Though she is caught off guard by the proposition, she immediately proceeds to rationalize that this would be a good opportunity for her as she evaluates that Na Ildŭng is attractive, wealthy, seems to be caring, and being the
Figure 15. A rain of money; ep. 6; Annarasumanara; 
http://comic.naver.com/webtoon/detail.nhn?titleId=179704&no=2&weekday=fri
top ranked student in school he could help her in her studies. She takes this line of thinking even further proceeding to consider that should the relationship carry into the long term and they were to be married she could begin a new life finally free from poverty. A relationship with Na Ildŭng would bring Ai all that she’s been aspiring towards, her internal thoughts placed as text around a Korean 10,000 won bank note: “the thing I wish for most, money and the abundance money brings, the thing I wish for most, the typical life of a typical adult…” (see figure 17 below). As she continues to rationalize this proposition presented before her as being an obvious rational decision to make, she becomes fixated upon the statement of “the thing I wish for most” and the
text becomes enlarged and repeated three times before the reader. Her internal narration becomes interrupted by the image of the magician telling her “Magic… Didn’t you really like it when you were little?” Upon recalling this image, Ai meekly rejects Na Ildŭng’s proposition and the two agree to continue a platonic relationship. The beginnings of a change in the way Ai navigates meaning in life is beginning to show at this moment. Under the logic of capital the choice of accepting Na Ildŭng’s offer is made to be the only logical decision, but she becomes hesitant as she remembers a love of magic that ultimately leads her to rejecting Ildŭng. She begins to take lessons in stage magic from the magician while still managing her part time job and studies, and comes to find herself feeling happy during these moments that bring to her the same feelings she held as a child.

The question of what magic in Annarasumanara represents comes more and more to the forefront the longer its narrative is explored, and it becomes clear that the central problem facing Ai is how to integrate her need to survive in her neoliberal capitalist society and her love of magic. I argue that the internalized conflict of the character Ai, between the self-managing neoliberal subject determined by and led by capital in juxtaposition with the youth subject fascinated with magic, is the interplay between a history of capital and that which cannot be completely subsumed into the history of capital, as described by Dipesh Chakrabarty in his book *Provincializing Europe*.

In Chakrabarty’s reading of Marx and the history of capital, he develops a distinction between two kinds of histories: “histories ‘posited by capital’” referred to as History 1, and “histories that do not belong to capital’s ‘life process’” referred to as History 2 (50). He further presents History 1 as the “past posited by capital itself as its precondition” and in contrast, “elements of History 2” as “antecedents” of capital (ibid., 63). History 1 is the past subjugated
Figure 17. An image of money surrounded by Ai’s thoughts; ep. 8; Annarasumanara; http://comic.naver.com/webtoon/detail.nhn?titleId=179704&no=9&weekday=fri
under the logic of Capital, the “usual narratives of transition to the capitalist mode of production,” while History 2 is the past that “did not necessarily look forward to capital” (ibid., 64). To best understand the way in which Annarasumanara is a direct representation of Chakrabarty’s History 1 and 2 may be best seen within an example Chakrabarty gives to illustrate the two Histories. Chakrabarty describes an imagined laborer who works at a factory for regular hours, each day devoting 8 hours of service to the capitalist. Chakrabarty thus explains within this context:

“History 1 is the past that is internal to the structure of being of capital. The fact is, that worker at the factory represents a historical separation between his/her capacity to labor and the necessary tools of production (which now belong to the capitalist) thereby showing that he or she embodies a history that has realized this logical precondition of capital… While walking through the factory gate, however, my fictional person also embodies other kinds of pasts. These pasts, grouped together in my analysis as History 2, may be under the institutional domination of the logic of capital and exist in proximate relationship to it, but they also do not belong to the ‘life process’ of capital. They enable the human bearer of labor power to enact other ways of being in the world—other than, that is, being the bearer of labor power” (Chakrabarty, 66).

I position that the concepts of History 1 and History 2 may be applied to the form of neoliberal capitalism expressed within the character of Yun Ai. Her neoliberal mindset of self-management, her relationship to her studies, her path to development and literal and figurative efforts to chase money, her evaluation of her father and mother, are all History 1. As a character, Yun Ai is defined by her past in relation to capital, i.e. her father’s debt, her poverty, etc. Her being is marked by the path of money and her silhouette filled with it. History 1 would move to subsume the past and frame her entire being under capital, but as described by Chakrabarty, “History 2 is
better thought of as a category charged with the function of constantly interrupting the totalizing thrusts of History 1” (ibid., 66). For Yun Ai, History 2 is magic. Magic in *Annarasumanara* bewilders, inspires, excites and brings happiness, but it makes no sense under the logic of capital and this is why most significantly the magician is incapable of producing a rain of real money that would solve all of Ai’s financial worries. Magic, in the webtoon, is thus anything that functions outside of the relations of capital.

Switching to the character of Na Ildŭng now, unlike Ai whose desire to develop into a financially successful adult is a determination designed out of her hardship under poverty, Ildŭng cannot be seen as desiring to develop for the purposes of escaping poverty or achieving wealth as he has been wealthy throughout his life. Instead, his views on life come from the social expectation and position he has been placed into by his parents reflected in his name, Na Ildŭng, which may be translated into English as “I am number one.” For Ildŭng, the entirety of his motivations and morality is taken from this position of embodying first place within society and he is shown to be fixated on being the top-ranked student in the school based on test performance. This motivation is entirely stemming from a neoliberal capitalist value in education with Na Ildŭng’s strive for educational performance being tied to the path of financial success later in life. Thus, while Yun Ai has worked hard and taken upon the position of being a self-manager struggling to climb to a position that will allow her to survive independently, Na Ildŭng’s subjectivity is predominantly concerned with competition and maintaining a position within the top percentile of society. Furthermore, Ildŭng does not only belong within the socioeconomic upper class, he full heartedly believes in the system of values and measurements that place him there.

Ildŭng’s character position is also a representation of a class symptom that was born out of the IMF Financial Crisis. As described by Kwang-Yeong Shin, though the financial crisis led
to the collapse of almost half of the thirty largest chaebol companies, the chaebol that managed to survive the financial crisis became empowered by the neoliberal reforms that followed (17). The period following the IMF crisis not only saw a significant increase in unemployment, job precarity, and household debt, but furthermore led to an increase in social polarization and greater income inequality (ibid., 19-22). Ildŭng and his family thus occupy the opposite spectrum of the lived outcomes of the IMF crisis in contrast with Yun Ai’s family. Furthermore, while he is represented as occupying the “top 0.01%” of society in terms of socioeconomic status, his general disposition towards competition and education is found to be a standard representation within the generation he represents. Abelmann, Park, and Kim interviewing South Korean university students in the year 2004, presented their interviewees as having accepted competition as a necessary value in South Korea (108, 112). Cho Han Haejoang goes even further in her description of the generation of students emerged as neoliberal subjects post-IMF, dubbed the “Spec generation” with the word spec here meaning specifications as pertaining to résumé building. She describes this Spec generation as accepting that “life is a continuous process of competition from birth until death” (Cho, 447). A generation that had read neoliberal self-development manuals from beginning in middle school, that had “grown accustomed to a highly calculated micromanagement of self, with guidance and support from mothers and private tutors” (ibid.). While Ildŭng’s attitude towards his peers may be condescending and arrogant, his belief in the importance of competitiveness and managing his viability in the later job market is representative of an attitude effecting an entire generation.

When Na Ildŭng is first introduced in the webtoon, what is immediately apparent to the reader in his visual representation is the stunningly bizarre shape of his head (see figure 18). Throughout the entirety of the webtoon, the only characters portrayed in this style of an elongated sausage like head are Na Ildŭng and his parents, as shown in figure 19. What becomes
more troubling to the reader is that the rest of the characters within the webtoon appear oblivious to the odd and unsettling appearance of Ildŭng’s body and instead seem to unilaterally agree on his appearance as being highly attractive. This evaluation of Ildŭng’s appearance within the world of the webtoon appears incomprehensible and indeed, comment sections which appear at the bottom of Annarasumanara’s webtoon episodes are filled with readers commenting on the shape of Ildŭng’s neck and head and expressing confusion towards the rest of the characters’ mutual approval of Ildŭng’s appearance. These reactions and the unsettling feelings produced by Ildŭng’s visual representation are undoubtedly a deliberate intention on the part of his creator. Ha Il Kwon’s representation of the wealthy is held in stark contrast to the common trope of young wealthy male protagonists being usually portrayed as exceedingly handsome in much of Korean mainstream dramas, such as “Secret Garden” (2010), “Boys Over Flowers” (2009), “Coffee Prince” (2007), to name just a few examples. In designing the wealthiest characters within the world of Annarasumanara, Ha Il Kwon has differentiated them from the rest of humanity by extending the metaphor of a rich snob looking down on others by shaping their bodies with hideous elongated necks that put their enlarged heads high above any normal person.

The success of this grotesque representation of the exceedingly wealthy thus becomes fully realized in its ability to prompt an emotional reaction within the reader who decries the failed judgement of Ildŭng’s surrounding fictional characters who somehow manage to laud his good looks despite his giant inflated head and neck. Ha Il Kwon further positions the wealth of Na Ildŭng’s family within the realm of the bizarre through the ridiculous architecture of their lopsided residence shown in figure 20. Na Ildŭng’s house is formed of a nonsensical collage of cutouts from photographs of buildings stacked atop each other with the image of an enormous diamond on top. The architecture of Na Ildŭng’s home is nonsensical and beyond the realms of excessive. Such a building as presented could not exist in reality but the components from which
it is comprised do exist, and so it is through the amalgamation and manipulation of the photographic images that Ha Il Kwon succeeds in subverting the power of these photographs as signifiers of things that are real into a symbol of excessive wealth as absurdity. The dwelling of the rich family in *Annarasumanara* thus comes to be ridiculed as opposed to envied.

![Figure 18 Na Ildŭng's sausage head; ep. 1; *Annarasumanara*; http://comic.naver.com/webtoon/detail.nhn?titleId=179704&no=2&weekday=fri](http://comic.naver.com/webtoon/detail.nhn?titleId=179704&no=2&weekday=fri)
Figure 19. Na Ildūng's parents; ep. 8; Annarasumanara; 
http://comic.naver.com/webtoon/detail.nhn?titleId=179704&no=9&weekday=fri

Figure 20. Ildūng’s house; ep. 8; Annarasumanara; 
http://comic.naver.com/webtoon/detail.nhn?titleId=179704&no=2&weekday=fri
The development of Ildŭng’s character in the story progresses into the eventual revaluation of this initial formation of Ildŭng’s internal sense of social superiority and representation of grotesque and excessive wealth through his interactions with Ai and the magician. When Ildŭng first meets Ai in episode 1 of the webtoon, his initial reaction is to view her as a rival upon recognizing her name as the one person to outperform him in math in the test score rankings. Shortly after introducing himself, he begins to taunt her, acknowledging her besting his math score but that he will not be losing to her for long as he has applied to two additional high class math academies. When Ai, who has not heard him speak, turns to face him however, he becomes shy and chooses to reintroduce himself by simply giving his name. Very quickly, it becomes apparent that Ildŭng has become romantically interested in Ai with this motivation eventually leading to the scene of Ai’s rejection of Ildŭng’s initial proposition to enter a romantic relationship in episode 8 of the webtoon, previously discussed earlier in this chapter. This becomes a critical moment in the development of not only Ai but also Ildŭng’s character progression as Ildŭng later reflects to himself in the same episode: “Until this moment of my life, I have been able to obtain anything that I have wanted because I am in the top 0.01%... My father, mother, house, car, all belong in the top 0.01%, but then why can’t I have you?” This is also the critical moment that History 2 interrupts Ildŭng’s narrative, in the form of romantic love being something that he is incapable of purchasing through money. His socioeconomic class status is incapable of providing him with what he wants or what he is entitled to by nature of his capital.

Unable to let go of his feelings for Ai and his inability to have her, Ildŭng eventually follows Ai without her knowing on one of her excursions to meet the magician to learn magic in episode 12. Seeing the happy expression upon Ai’s face as she interacts with the magician,
Ildŭng’s internal narration becomes emotional as he internally disavows Ai’s happy interaction with the magician through the following text from the webtoon translated here into English:

“What is this… Is it because he is good looking? Is that why you’ve fallen for this other man? Outward appearance is only temporary… It’s only valuable during middle and high school, only for that moment… Can you be fed off of good looks???. Men are evaluated on their capability!!! Good looks are worth nothing!!! Do you think that kind of man will be able to make you happy?! That good looking face will only bring you suffering later…!!! Just look! Just look! What kind of behavior is that at that age???. So pathetic to be performing magic!!! With that kind of thing would he be able to make a proper income??!! That kind of thing has no use value or use in real life!!! That’s why you should come to me!!! Ai!!! I can make you happy!!!”

It is clear that at this point in the story Ildŭng still maintains his original disposition defined by neoliberal ideologies of development and success. He then proceeds to enter the magician’s tent after Ai has left in order to confront the magician. When Ildŭng meets the magician, the magician is depicted as standing slightly taller than Ildŭng as they glare at each other. This is the first time in the webtoon another character is depicted as being taller than Ildŭng even despite his long neck. Unperturbed however, Ildŭng proceeds to admonish the magician and warns him to stop meeting Ai or he will call the police and notify them that the magician is residing in the abandoned amusement park illegally. In response, the magician presents Ildŭng with a seemingly arbitrary question asking: “Is it not cold? The asphalt floor you’re walking on right now… It seems you’ve been caught by the curse of asphalt…” The words of the magician appear to affect Ildŭng who runs home after hearing them.

In episode 13, the words of the magician continue to haunt Ildŭng’s thoughts leading him to return to the magician’s tent to ask what he meant by the asphalt floor, and Ildŭng reveals that
the asphalt floor was something that he himself had also thought of. Instead of answering however, the magician presents Ildŭng with another question and asks: “After running the full length of that path of asphalt, what is at its end?” to which Ildŭng responds “What else… a bright future…” The magician denies Ildŭng’s answer and proceeds to tell Ildŭng, “That path has no end. Asphalt is cold and no fun. That’s why I stepped down from it. You must step off there in order to finally see the blue sky.” Then as the magician performs a magic trick in which he sets fire to a handkerchief to make a rose appear, he proceeds to say: “If you step down from there, you’ll see that this place is a garden of flowers.” After running home again, Ildŭng continues to think over his interaction with the magician and while at first he tries to dismiss the magician’s words he eventually admits to himself that in the moment the magician performed his magic trick, it really did appear to him as though the magician was in a garden of flowers.

This metaphor of the asphalt path becomes the foundation of difference between Ai and Ildŭng’s character formation. While Ai has struggled to manage her own life and development, both of Ildŭng’s parents have been there to push and support him in his life and education by not only supplying him with his basic needs but also paying for a regiment of expensive private academy programs and rewarding him with expensive gifts for his academic performance. In addition to this, Ildŭng’s parents have also provided him with the rhetoric for his social values as they cheer him on for his position as the top student of his grade and assert his social position as being within the “top 0.01%” of the country. It becomes clear that Ildŭng’s parents do not unconditionally support him in his motivations but instead only encourage his educational performance as a means to ensure a future where he maintains the same social status as his family. When Ildŭng, inspired by the performance of the magician, comes up with the idea to learn a magic trick to entice Ai with and is caught searching for magic techniques on the internet by his father, he is immediately reprimanded and told not to waste his time with useless things
and instead to continue to focus on his studies in order to maintain his position within the 0.01%. This path of development provided for Ildŭng by his parents is what is represented by the metaphor of the asphalt path, a straight paved road of development laid out for him by his parents that he has been running upon since birth.

Despite his father’s earlier reprimand, Ildŭng pursues his newfound interest in magic and proceeds to practice on his own while being excited at the thought of being able to perform for Ai later. When his mother catches him practicing his magic trick the night before a school test she becomes furious with him for wasting his time and demands that he stops being pathetic and immediately return to his test preparation. From here, Ildŭng’s internal perceptions are shown to be dramatically shifting: when left alone in his room following his mother’s outrage he wonders to himself if being a magician is really so pathetic. This internal crisis within Ildŭng eventually leads to a substantial drop in his academic performance and his score drops from first to sixteenth place within his grade. In episode 16 when confronted by his parents on his test score, to the dismay and frustration of his parents Ildŭng declares that he no longer wants to go to law school and instead wants to become a magician, that he is unable to stop thinking about magic and is fascinated by it. He has come to find an intrinsic value within the practice of magic and questions the importance of the things his parents tell him he should aspire towards: money, a house like theirs, and social status. After this emotional confrontation with his parents, Ildŭng returns to the magician’s tent again but upon seeing that the magician is absent, sits alone and reflects upon his life upon the asphalt path.

As Ildŭng thinks to himself that the asphalt path laid before him by his parents is in reality not a gift but a curse, the following panel shown in figure 21 of the webtoon is presented to the reader. The panel outlines the natural progression Ildŭng is expected to take in his life. The words on this panel can be translated into English as follows: “A good home, born within a good
environment. A good elementary school. A good middle school. A good high school. If I just continue to go down this asphalt path it is certain that I will graduate from a good university and reach a good job all in one go without rest.” Continuing to narrate his own thoughts on the path laid down before him, Ildŭng proceeds to think to himself: “It is certain that this path is a good path that everyone would be envious of. This path was the path that I thought I had to go down. I believed that if I ran down this road quickly I would naturally become a good adult. A typical adult that everyone would envy, respect, and acknowledge.” The visual representation of this typical adult that Ildŭng refers to is shown in figure 22. The image presented here is a collage of photographs of designer fashion goods that appear to have been cut out of a magazine and arranged into the rough shape of a faceless man comprised of a fashion hairstyle, designer sunglasses, a mash of suits and ties, and fully accessorized with diamonds on his wrist, several watch faces, golf clubs and a leather handbag. Ildŭng reconsiders the goal at the end of his asphalt path, an entity composed of the luxury commodity, and wonders if he has been moving down this path of his own volition or if he has been dragged along it and even if it is the correct path. Ildŭng continues to narrate his inner thoughts saying that because he was moving so quickly along this path he was unable to see anything around him until, in the moment he finally slowed down and stopped, he saw that during the time he had been mindlessly running, the magician had been singing in a garden of flowers. This revelation of Ildŭng’s is visually represented in the panel shown in figure 23, in which the lonely character of Ildŭng stands atop the cold asphalt road forlornly gazing upon Ai and the magician laughing with each other in a beautiful field of brightly coloured flowers.

Ildŭng’s “History 1” is his strong neoliberal development arranged from birth through the capital investments and educational and neoliberal development programs designed by his parents. His life has been so restricted to this vision of life along a progression mediated
exclusively under neoliberal values, that he has never had a moment to experience life outside of the relations of capital. This is in contrast to Yun Ai who had lived a life beyond goals in capital relations during her youth, and as such is traversing a path of reintegrating those lost aspects of
life outside of capital. History 2 interrupts Ildŭng's life process beginning with his romantic interest in Yun Ai, but only specifically when he is rejected by her, thus disrupting his understanding of the relationship of capital to his goals and needs in life. While originally all of his life was organized in relation to capital, he begins to question the arranged History 1 narrative of his life when he takes a moment to pause and consider life outside of capital relations. The representation of the realized adult that he is destined to become appears as a hollow amalgamation of commodity fetish, he is faced with the dilemma of not wanting what he

모두가 부러워하고 존경하고 인정하는

Figure 22 Ildŭng’s typical adult; ep. 21; Annarasumanara; http://comic.naver.com/webtoon/detail.nhn?titleId=179704&no=22&weekday=fri
had been endlessly running towards on the path set out for him by his social conditions. History 2 is the life outside of capital for Ildŭng of which he has yet to experience.

![Figure 23. Ildŭng gazing upon the garden of flowers; ep. 21; Annarasumanara; http://comic.naver.com/webtoon/detail.nhn?titleId=179704&no=22&weekday=fri](http://comic.naver.com/webtoon/detail.nhn?titleId=179704&no=22&weekday=fri)

The climax of Ildŭng’s internal crisis appears near the end of the story when the magician goes into hiding after police seek to arrest him under allegations of assault and robbery in episode 22. These allegations are instigated after a few students in the same class as the protagonists orchestrate an attempt to frame the magician by having one of them attack a lady on the street while dressed in the magician’s typical attire in retaliation for him having treated one of them poorly. The police and victim arrive at Ai’s school and interrogate Ai on the magician and his possible whereabouts due to her known relationship with him. When Ildŭng interrupts to argue the magician’s innocence having met the magician the night before during the time of the
crime, his claims are dismissed by the homeroom teacher who says that Ildŭng as a top performing student would never associate with a person like the magician and must be simply acting out after performing poorly on the most recent exam. Ildŭng’s parents are subsequently called to the school and berate Ildŭng for lying to the police. When Ildŭng argues that he was telling the truth his father responds, instructing him to not tell the police he saw the magician even if he did. Ildŭng’s father continues to explain to Ildŭng that the magician by the nature of his status in society, as “homeless and unemployed,” is placed under suspicion and is thus guilty regardless of whether he actually perpetrated the crime. Ildŭng’s father thus uses the guilty status of the magician as a lesson for Ildŭng on the requirements of society:

“"You asked before right? Whether everything has to be done for the sake of something? If it’s so important that people acknowledge you? Look! That magician known to no one, who can’t match the normal criteria of an adult is placed under suspicion by everyone. Would the police believe the words of your father or that magician? Do you understand now? Na Ildŭng. That’s why everyone must strive to be an adult recognized by adults… The people unable to do so are culled.”

Ildŭng’s father’s lesson on the guilty status of the magician presents the position of capitalism in fully realized form. Those who do not fulfill their role as sources of labour are to be “culled” from society.

Ildŭng’s reaction to the words of his father shows the progression of his character as he asserts his realization: “Now I know. The magician was not crazy. He was being made into a crazy person because he was unable to conform to the damned [pirŏmŏgŭl] frame made by adults. I feel like I’m going to explode.” As Ildŭng walks back into his classroom Ha Il Kwon depicts the interrogations from Ildŭng’s peers on the rumours surrounding Ildŭng’s declaration of the magician’s innocence as a blur of floating text that transitions to a panel showing the blurred
outlines of Ildŭng’s parents shouting at him “Just go down the asphalt path we laid out for you!!!! Why do you keep going astray!!!” The next sequence in the webtoon then presents Ildŭng’s classroom in a sequential progression where each of the walls and ceiling become replaced with a side of asphalt leading into a panel where Ildŭng is presented alone standing behind his desk surrounded by a room made of asphalt, this sequence is presented in figure 20. The webtoon then proceeds to show Ildŭng pick up his chair and throw it, smashing his asphalt containment, while internally calling out to the magician “Mr. Magician, if you’re a real magician, this asphalt curse that I am caught in, can you free me from it?” The webtoon then switches back from this abstract representation of the room of asphalt to show a smashed window and Ildŭng’s classmates asking why all of a sudden he acted that way. The final panel of the episode presented in figure 21 shows a panting Ildŭng with tears streaming down his face, expressing a final plea, “If I can escape, can I too run in the garden of flowers?” In this final frame, gone is Ildŭng’s signature elongated sausage neck-head as now finally in this last panel and for the remainder of the series Ha Il Kwon chooses to depict Na Ildŭng in normal body proportions. The scene is incredibly dramatic and emotionally provoking. Na Ildŭng with tears streaming down his eyes is presented as a human to the reader from here on in his depiction in the webtoon, but only after he rejects and lashes out against the dehumanizing form of society expressed by his father and of which he had previously been a representative as a member of the top 0.01%.
Figure 24. The asphalt classroom; ep. 22; Annarasumanara;
http://comic.naver.com/webtoon/detail.nhn?titleId=179704&no=23&weekday=fri
The magician goes into hiding from the police and Ai and Ildŭng, searching for him, meet a friend from the magician’s past who reveals the truth of the magician’s past. It is revealed to the two protagonists that the magician had actually been a top-performing student during his time in high school as well but ended up having a mental breakdown while preparing for his exams. Figure 26 shows the image of what the magician saw in the window of the classroom while writing his university entrance exam under extreme pressure to succeed. The grotesque
figure within the image is a representation of social pressure upon students to perform within school, the figure before the eyes of the magician led him to insanity and for a short time he was institutionalized within a mental hospital after jumping off the roof of his school in a state of delirium. Upon hearing the story of the magician’s past, both of the characters reach the decision that the magician himself is not crazy, but instead was driven mad by an insane society. The two protagonists then rush to find the magician and save him from being arrested by the police. Ai interrupts the police who are in the middle of arresting the magician and saves him by using a magic trick to make him disappear before everyone’s eyes. Ildŭng meanwhile manages to prove the magician’s innocence in the face of his allegations. This marks the end of the main narrative, with Ai succeeding in performing a magic trick that saves the magician.

Following the disappearance of the magician through the efforts of Ai, the epilogue returns to the characters two years later. It is shown that both Ai and Ildŭng have continued on

Figure 26. Pressure to perform and the eyes of society; ep. 25; Annarasumanara; http://comic.navercos.com/webtoon/detail.nhn?titleId=179704&no=26&weekday=fri
into top tier universities within South Korea and that both continue to practice magic in their spare time. The two are shown to hold positive feelings towards children, Ildŭng performing a magic trick for a young child on his way to meet Ai, and Ai is further shown to have begun working as a performing magician part time as a means of funding her studies. In the end of the story, the characters have reached a compromise within their newly realized subjectivities that integrate neoliberal/capital demands with their non-capital desires. Yun Ai even manages to negotiate her non-capital desire in such a way that it functions to support her finances, turning it into a form of commodifiable labour. In a sense, the epilogue of the webtoon shows that the characters ultimately are subsumed within the structure of capitalist society. The interplay of History 1 and 2 works so that History 2 interrupts and complicates the totalogy of capital, and indeed the form of subsumed non-capital desire into commodifiable labour by Yun Ai is a function of Chakrabarty’s History 2 in that it enables her to find joy and happiness in her labour.

The end of the webtoon however reiterates the question it presented in its beginning to the reader: Do you believe in magic? This time asked by Yun Ai and framed so that she is now taking the place of the girl in the first episode who asks the reader the question. The webtoon, as a whole, functions as a history that is meant to speak to the reader and disrupt their everyday life under neoliberal South Korea. For this reason, the connection to the particular reality of South Korea is relevant when it is geared towards a Korean reader. If history may be understood as a narrative through which the conditions of a moment are to be defined, the webtoon works to disrupt the reality of the reader’s moment by presenting a history that speaks directly to and complicates their lived reality in relation to the social conditions of capitalism.
Chapter 3
The Digital Commodity

Where the previous chapters discussed the webtoon Annarasumanara in terms of its content, its form as a graphic medium, and the interaction between the medium and the reader, and its criticism as a history of Korean neoliberal capitalism, it is important to address now in this chapter that the webtoon itself is also a commodity that has emerged within this context of South Korean neoliberal capitalism. The webtoon, as previously said, has a specific origin in South Korea and it is important to implicate the form of the webtoon Annarasumanara as a digital commodity within its own historical context.

Webtoons unlike webcomics in other regions have come to be aligned within the Korean digital industry such that they are all organized within several internet portals. The means of distribution may be considered significantly different in context from webcomics in America for example, which are usually held and distributed independently by artists through self-owned websites, e.g. the popular American webcomic The Oatmeal. Thus, while outside of Korea webcomics may be considered in a large proportion as occupying an entrepreneurial and small business endeavour, within Korea, webtoons have become a corporate structured market industry with a handful of internet based companies in competition that employ and manage thousands of webtoon artists. This oligopoly structure of Korea’s internet industry is born from the context of South Korea’s neoliberal reforms after the IMF financial crisis. As Kwang-Yeong Shin describes, the “Kim Dae Jung government supported the IT venture companies by providing financial subsidies” and the knowledge economy is further argued to have contributed to the polarization of the job market by increasing jobs at both the higher and lower ends of the income spectrum and reducing jobs in the middle-income (20). This development in the information technology industries was a crucial context necessary for the eventual rise of webtoons. In
addition to investing in the information industry however, the Korean government was also making efforts to invigorate their culture industry following the IMF crisis.

Yasue Kuwahara describes the Korean state’s turn to the culture industry as a direct response to the IMF financial crisis of 1998 when President Kim Dae Jung established the Korea Institute of Design Promotion and the Korea Creative Content Agency while also giving priority to cultural industries within the government budget (2). Hyejung Ju also argues that the IMF crisis “triggered a radical restructuring of Korea’s industry and society as a whole” with the Korean government facilitating political and economic support of the media and culture industry through the enactment of the “New Millennium Vision” policy in 2001 (35). “This future-oriented policy encouraged a variety of governmental actions to grow Korea’s cultural businesses overseas” and is seen to have been highly successful with the exportation of Korean network television programs increasing by “more than 30 percent annually from 2001 to 2005 and the export revenue of Korean televised programming increasing from only $10 million in 1999 to over $132 million by 2006 (ibid.).

The IMF’s demands that the Korean state implement social and economic reforms geared towards globalization and neoliberalism resulted in the allocation of more political power to the state which had to respond to the IMF demands with a sweeping restructuring of industries to apparently great success. Besides the television industry, the Korean government also invested heavy sums into the K-pop industry. By 2013, $300 million of the government budget was allocated to the promotion of the popular music industry abroad (Lie, 129). The Korean state’s involvement in the development of the Korean culture industry is clear, as are its goals of specifically aiming toward foreign export. This historical context and the models of the Korean culture industry are thus more or less modern visions of Adorno’s concept of the culture industry. Adorno, in his argument towards the modern context of art transformed into mass
produced commodity, designates the culture industry as arising from the social elite searching for new avenues of capital realization (99). It was under this logic that the Korean state made a direct attempt to stimulate a culture industry through the implementation of the neoliberal state policies, with the goal of finding new potentials for capital accumulation in the face of the IMF financial crisis.

While currently the webtoon industry has grown to represent a sizeable culture industry on its own, during the moment of the IMF crisis the webtoon industry had not yet emerged. As described by Dal Yong Jin, webcomics in Korea began with “picture diaries on personal homepages” in which cartoonists would upload their cartoons to the internet independently during the late 1990s and early 2000s (196). The term webtoon itself was only used for the first time in the year 2000 when the internet search engine Chollian produced a webtoon service on August 8, 2000. Prior to this, digital comics in Korea were simply referred to as internet comics. Shortly thereafter, the webtoon industry began to take upon the structure it resembles today with the release of webtoon portals by heavy-hitter South Korea based internet portals Daum in 2003 and Naver in 2004 (ibid.). Following this was the initial growth of webtoons in popularity and the beginning of the standardization of the structured form of the graphic narrative that has come to define it. By the year 2009, webtoons would experience a new phase of mass proliferation with the introduction of the smart phone to Korea and the subsequent release of webtoon phone apps (ibid., 197). The release of smart phone technologies would prove to be a significant boon to the webtoon industry as webtoons were perfectly suited for consumption through the smart phone. Through the development of smart phone technology reading webtoons became incredibly convenient and accessible. No longer restricted to viewing through computers, the smart phone enabled consumers to carry entire libraries of webtoons on their persons at all times.
By the year 2014, according to a report released by the Korean Creative Content Agency (KOCCA) in 2015 titled “Webt’un sanŏp hyŏnhwang mit silt’aejosa” [Status and Survey of the Webtoon Industry], the number of webtoon platforms had reached 28 in total, including several foreign based webtoon platforms, with a total number of reported webtoon series reaching 121,165. 88% of these were hosted on the Naver platform and another 5% were being hosted on Daum Kakao (30). The reason for this large skew of numbers is Naver’s Challenge League service which accounted for a total 103,799 webtoons alone. Naver’s Challenge League service is a platform in which amateur webtoon artists may publish webtoons freely and compete for popularity while being offered no monetary compensation. This strategy for publishing is found also in other webtoon platforms such as the industry’s second highest ranked series holder Daum Kakao which had a total of 5279 webtoons within its own amateur league platform, but it remains clear that Naver is by far the most popular platform for amateur webtoon creators (ibid., 26).

The report published by KOCCA also presents significant insights into the structure of the webtoon industry in Korea. In the report, KOCCA outlines four distinct types of webtoon artists/authors: (1) professional; (2) amateur; (3) recognized amateurs; and (4) agency run artists/authors. Of these four only the professional artist/author is established within a contract with webtoon portals based on royalty payments for their works negotiated according to the number of views their works accumulate. Artists are categorized as belonging within the amateur status if their works belong to the amateur sections of webtoon portals that allow independent parties to upload their content at will. The recognized amateurs are the webtoon artists whose works have either reached a significant level of popularity within these aforementioned amateur sections, such as Naver’s Challenge League, or if they have received an award for their webtoons. Webtoon artists in this category have a strong chance to be offered professional status.
The final category of webtoon artists, agency-run artists, are artists who belong to webtoon agencies within what is referred to as an “incubation system.” These individuals may be considered trainees who are being prepared for and managed by specific agencies in the webtoon industry with the goal of eventually entering the industry directly as professionals through their representing agencies without having to go through the amateur phase (ibid., 26-27). Agencies within the webtoon industry are beginning to grow according to the KOCCA, and besides preparing new professional webtoon artists for the industry also work with and manage established professionals acting through negotiations with portals and facilitating publication and promotion. As of 2014 there were nine domestic agencies dealing with webtoon artists of which seven were established after the year 2009 (ibid., 34-35).

What this structure of the webtoon industry reveals is that the majority of webtoon productions and artists are produced with no monetary compensation as the majority of works may be designated to be within the amateur category. As described by Dal Yong Jin,

“[f]or cartoonists, digital technologies work as a double-edged sword: as an opportunity and threat. While Naver and Daum Kakao compete to get high-profile cartoonists to post on their sites, the majority of artists are poorly compensated if at all. It is fair to say that the business model of webtoons is based on exploiting their desperation for exposure.”

(201)

Even amongst professional webtoon creators there is a severe stratification of income. Jin further shows the plight of contemporary cartoonists citing a report from the Korean Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism that states as of June 2010, “only 10% of cartoonists among respondents earned $30,000 per year, while 47% of cartoonists made less than $10,000 per year” (ibid.). The monetization practices of the webtoon industry is one that relies on high volume production of narratives, views, and consumption but also works to single out individual works
and creators based on their popularity. Thus, the webtoon industry is an incredibly competitive market where certain high-profile creators become incredibly successful while the majority are found to struggle to make ends meet and live in a state of precarity while waiting for their big break.

The internet content industry functions in a way that is almost inverse to the culture industry that Adorno imagined. Instead of a reduction of narratives or art controlled by the elite and delivered to a passive mass, we find that in the digital age of content distributed through the internet we are flooded with a critical mass of content incredibly vast. The content industry of the internet, unlike the culture industry of Adorno’s modern era, is able to exploit its content producers in a way that was not possible before due to advances in technology. The content industry of the internet is able to obtain its mass of content at minimal cost simply by providing the platform for its content producers. From there it’s a process of market competition to determine which of the producers are to be paid, and only those producers whose content reaches a certain level of consumption are ever rewarded. Thus, the culture becomes determined essentially in a bottom up process so to speak, that is nonetheless exploitative with the vast majority of labour remaining unpaid for. This industry practice however does enable a much more diverse array of narratives within its content. This is one of the reasons that more narratives critical of the state, capitalism, etc. can appear within the webtoon industry in contrast with other forms of mainstream popular culture media. The nature of the content industry on the internet allows for a far wider range of narratives to be presented to the market, and then left up to consumer choice. Critiques of capitalism may thus emerge from the capitalist market itself. The webtoon Annarasumanara is a critique of capitalist everydayness, but it functions and is a product realized through the capitalist machine as a digital commodity.
The way webtoons produce capital then, or that is to say, the reason why the content industry is interested in producing and providing a platform for all of this content at all, is similar to the ways in which much of the internet generates capital. Generating traffic by attracting viewers to sections of the World Wide Web and placement of advertisements on pages. For the two dominant internet portals Naver and Daum, webtoons are useful for the corporations at large by bringing users to their portals. Recently, there have been new attempts to monetize webtoons more directly by charging viewing fees. This process is quite recent and has not been implemented across the board, more often these are restricted to particular established webtoons or taken upon by newer webtoon specific platforms such as Lezhin Comics. This model has as of yet been met with mixed results and faces difficulties as webtoons have been available for free for the majority of their history to this point and many remain so to this day (Jin, 201-202).

Outside of these models, webtoons have been further monetized through the implementations of advertisements directly within their content, i.e. product placement, and then secondly through the implementation of webtoon characters and content within external advertisements, referred to as “Page Profit Share” (KOCCA, 59). These types of endorsements are worked out between the webtoon creators, external corporations, and the webtoon agencies with more accomplished webtoon creators being able to negotiate better compensation and rates. KOCCA has presented figures stating that with “brand webtoon” contracts, webtoons that will include product placement and specific brand promotions, a rookie webtoon creator will be paid a rate of between 1.5 million KRW to 2 million KRW per manuscript while recognized webtoon creators have been found to be paid 10 million KRW per manuscript (ibid., 47). This interaction between the commercial sector and the webtoon industry shows that the webtoon industry has indeed reached a status of popular mainstream culture, as nothing can better qualify the mainstream than the attraction of corporations seeking to advertise and promote brand association.
As webtoons have grown in popularity, they quickly became developed within their own culture industry, but also it is important to note that webtoons are heavily integrated within the Korean popular culture industry at large. The webtoon has come to be highlighted as an exemplary case of trans-media storytelling, where one fictional narrative becomes presented across multiple textual forms and integrated within multiple media technologies (Cho 2016; Jin 2015). In KOCCA’s report, fifty cases of trans-media productions of original webtoon narratives have been produced in the form of television dramas, movies, performances, and animations. A further twenty-three trans-media projects were reported as being in the production phase (KOCCA, 62-63). However, rather than marking a unique quality of webtoons, I argue that this feature of the webtoon as a source of trans-media storytelling is exemplary of the webtoon’s integration into the Korean popular media industry at large. As articulated by Jung Bong Choi:

“[T]he peculiar formation of cultural landscapes in Korea is a keystone for the polygonal yet overlaying pattern of Hallyu. Popular cultures in Korea grow out of the airtight interdependence among various sectors of the creative industry, which endows multitalented celebrities with untrammeled mobility across diverse genres—film, dramas, talk shows, popular music, musicals, comedy shows, advertisements, home shopping, and the like. This in turn encourages what might be called intermedia or intergenre pollination” (38)

As stated by Choi, the interconnectedness of the popular media sectors is a characteristic of Korean popular media at large; in this way the implementation of webtoon characters and settings may be considered as a parallel to Korean pop culture celebrities being implemented within a diverse array of genres and medias. Korea’s popular culture industry works in such a way that the various sectors function together in a symbiotic relationship, for example an entertainment show may feature a rising music celebrity for the purposes of attracting viewers
while simultaneously promoting the celebrity’s visibility and status in the popular culture market. Within the past year, high profile webtoon artists Cho Seok [Cho Sŏk] and Yoon Tae-ho [Yun T’aeho] have also been featured as special guests on popular Korean entertainment shows “Running Man” and “Infinite Challenge.”

One distinction that could be made between the webtoon’s transmedia quality and Korea’s popular culture intermedia relationships is that webtoons provide a new library of source material for narratives in other media forms. This aspect of webtoons as source material for the popular culture industry at large has some interesting implications as the production process of webtoons. While perhaps problematic for its heavily unequal financing of webtoon creators, is nonetheless fundamentally in an inverted relationship with consumers compared to standard pop media narrative construction. Soap opera dramas, for example, are produced in a gatekeeping process through which producers filter a small selection of pitches with the aim to target narratives that will ensure as wide mass appeal as possible. Webtoons as source material for the pop culture industry at large thus present an opportunity for new and more diverse narratives, as the pool from which a success is chosen is much larger. As written earlier in this chapter, the internet platform context of the webtoon industry enables an incredibly large and diverse library of content. Webtoons selected for transmedia storytelling are then those webtoons that perform significantly well within the competitive market of the webtoon industry. One such instance of a successful webtoon turned TV drama is titled *Misaeng* or “Incomplete Life,” written by Yoon Tae-ho, and is another example of a critique of everyday life under neoliberal capitalism. The drama went on to become a national success with many viewers/readers sympathizing with its narrative depicting the struggles of everyday life within the corporate work structure.

A further testament to the webtoon having achieved popular mainstream culture status within Korea is that it has also entered the realm of *hallyu* or “Korean Wave,” a term referring to
the rising consumption of Korean media outside of Korea. Webtoon portals have begun exporting the webtoon format and domestic webtoons abroad. In 2012, Daum Kakao partnered with venture capital project Tapasmedia to release Tapastic, a webtoon service platform that translated 52 Korean webtoons for release in the US while also recruiting 1200 designers and authors (Jin, 204). Naver corporation’s offshoot company based in Japan, also released a webtoon platform in 2014 titled Line Webtoon targeting primarily the US but also the global market at large. According to Line Webtoon’s Head of Content Tom Akel, since its release in 2014 Line Webtoon has experienced a significant level of success reporting 10 million daily readers and 35 million monthly readers as of the year 2016 (Akel 2016). The Line Webtoon corporation has also been working to collaborate with many non-Korean entities for the promotion of their service such as American comic book figure Stan Lee and highly successful internet art platform DeviantArt.

Sangjoon Lee describes this complex history of the past decade of hallyu studies in the introduction to an edited volume that works to consider a new phase of the Korean Wave dubbed Hallyu 2.0. This new phase of the Korean Wave is described as originating within recent trends in digital media technology. In his poignant and effective summarization of the history of hallyu studies, Sangjoon Lee looks to myriad works by scholars within the field of hallyu studies to trace the history of the past decade of research upon the Korean Wave from the context of the socio-political context of the Korean Wave itself. With the rise of the Korean Wave, the Korean government has also turned its attention to its national culture industry and invested heavily in building it. Siho Nam states in his article on the cultural political economy of the Korean Wave (2013), “a primary goal of Korean national cultural and media policies is to help Korean corporations expand their power in this increasingly competitive global cultural industry. The Korean government established the Korea Foundation for International Cultural Exchange
(KOFICE) to orchestrate all governmental and private endeavors pertaining to the Korean Wave” (221). Nam then cites an official statement from KOFICE stating the ideology behind its founding:

“Different countries around the world are cultivating their cultural industries competitively. They are in an intense competition to take cultural industries as the means to revive the nation’s economy and to step into the global stage. Korea, too, is focusing on the unlimited potential of its cultural industry and has recognized the cultural industry as a new growth engine” (KOFICE 2008, cited in Nam 2013, 221)

The academic institution itself has not existed separately from the political economy surrounding the Korean Wave and as Sangjoon Lee states, “[a]cademic-industry collaboration, based upon this logic [of the KOFICE] has been flourishing in Korea for several years. The Korean government has poured in enormous number of research grants, fellowships, and financial supports and incentives into selective research institutes and universities” (9). Citing Young-Hwa Choi (2013), Lee backs up this claim referencing figures that show new academic departments within universities dealing with cultural industries, digital culture and media, cinematic contents, and etc. have jumped from 932 in the year 2006 to 1,478 in 2010. Young-Hwa Choi criticizes this relationship between academia and the industry within Korea saying that this has resulted in the inability for scholarly work upon the Korean Wave to be critical as the majority of academic institutions within Korea have been provided governmental grants to research strategies for the sustainment and development of the Korean Wave (271). Sangjoon Lee also refers to two other scholars who make similar claims towards this collaboration between the Korean government interests and academia: Kyung Hyun Kim is cited as finding that most essays written on the Korean Wave, including English-language works, have emphasized data on growth of the Korean foreign tourism industry or annual figures from the entertainment industry, and Seung-
Hye Sohn is cited as claiming that “academic discourse in Korea has rapidly transformed to explore the possible contributions Hallyu can make to boost the nation’s economy” (221).

What is interesting about the webtoon’s position within the Korean Wave is the difficulty of orienting its Korean cultural status. While the Korean narratives translated and released in non-Korean languages may be considered forms of Korean culture exported abroad, the webtoon is also being exported as a media form as well. The form itself, its vertical layout, digital imagery, and synergy with the smartphone, is originating from within Korea but its manifestation within Korea was also the result of a process of global media technological developments, namely the internet, the computer, and the smartphone. There may be a will to separate the webtoon in its form from the realm of culture and instead relegate it as belonging within the category of technology or software seen perhaps to exist separately from culture which is often characterized as something more ephemeral and humanist within the form of values or the like. However, when considering other popular culture materials such as those belonging to the K-pop industry and its relationship to the music video and pop music form popularized by America’s MTV, would the case of the webtoon form and individual narratives not also be comparable? This is not to argue that the webtoon form should be designated as being inherently a Korean media form, but instead to challenge the easy separation of media within national boundaries. The form of the webtoon emerged within Korea but was also heavily influenced by the international terrain of media and technology, so should the webtoon itself be considered a hybrid form of culture? And if so what should we make of webtoons now being made for Line Webtoon by American cartoonists? Where do we separate the centers and peripheries of culture, or its national boundaries, when considering the webtoon in terms of its form heavily integrated and connected to technology and media trends? As within this chapter, there is clearly a domestic and national context to the Korean webtoon, and its political economy and socioeconomic
dynamics are easily conceived within this nation based framework. The state’s interest in the webtoon as well may be seen similarly to the framework of the *hallyu* movement as a national institution/campaign. The conclusions of the KOCCA report actually state that the webtoon is significant to the Korean media industry at large due to its quality as a source of transmedia storytelling and further states that as the webtoon has become an established “genre” within the Korean cartoon industry the webtoon industry should now look outwards with the goal of globalization, and actually proposes the implementation of federal government support for the webtoon industry’s global expansion effort (137-139). The KOCCA further emphasizes that to expand its global exportability, investments should be made into producing better translations of Korean webtoons (139).

Due to the nature of Korea’s popular culture industry in its intermedia connectedness, the expansion of one popular media form internationally is beneficial to the popular culture industry at large and in turn the Korean nation at large. However, besides the nation’s interest in the industry itself, when considering the interactions and nature of the cultural forms and products themselves we are faced with a context that exists in very different dynamics to the nation as an institution. To illustrate this point, I present one recent development within the webtoon industry’s transnational product. In February of 2016, Line Webtoon released for the first time an animated production of one of their most popular originally Korean webtoon series, Noblesse, on popular anime and Asian drama streaming service Crunchyroll as well as on Youtube. This production, as a feature of Line Webtoon and not Naver, was produced specifically for a global/non-Korean audience. The content of the half hour long feature was kept faithful to the original series, while omitting several parts of the narrative for the sake of time, but interestingly the animation featured an all Japanese voice cast reading a script that was entirely in the Japanese language and then presented with English subtitles. Undoubtedly, this has to do with
Line Webtoon’s choice to produce the animation through well renowned Japanese anime studio Production I.G., known for having worked on Psycho Pass and Ghost in the Shell, instead of a Korean animation studio. The video animation has received high praise and over a million views as of the summer of 2016 on Youtube, and over 3000 comments. The move by Line Webtoon to release an animated feature of the webtoon is undoubtedly related to the numerous cries from fans within comment sections pleading for an animated release, as would be typical within the manga industry which Western fans may be more familiar with. This is notably different to the domestic Korean situation in which fans are found to often write asking for a film or television drama adaptation, or even predicting that a webtoon will become an adaptation in the future (Cho 2016). The difference between the Korean consumer and the Western consumer is held within different media cultural contexts and while initially a Japanese language adaptation of a Korean webtoon seems odd, it makes sense when filtered through the transnational cultural context of manga and anime. The dynamics of transnational culture is thus seen to be complex and filtered through many dynamics: existing congruent media forms, local contexts, and the relationship between the local to the global are all factors within the popular media industry at large.
Chapter 4
The Transnational Webtoon and the Visual Form Translated

As shown in the previous chapter, the Korean webtoon has successfully penetrated markets outside of Korea with platforms such as Line Webtoon being highly successful in traffic and attracting non-Korean consumers. Annarasumanara is also one of the many webtoons to have been officially translated and released on the Line Webtoon platform. This translation of the webtoon however raises the question of how the two modes of being of the webtoon discussed in the previous chapter intersect and interact. The webtoon Annarasumanara is at once a digital narrative and also a digital commodity, and is furthermore a reflection of the particular context within the region of South Korea. What does it then mean for this particular regional and historical subjectivity of the webtoon to then be packaged, commodified again, and exported to an external audience?

To begin, the translation of the webtoon and the original are far from equivalent. In the English language translation, certain meanings are inevitably lost such as the intention behind the character Na Ilŏng’s name. The character of the magician whose name in the original webtoon is the Korean alphabet character “ㄹ,” is translated into the English version as “L.” These two alphabet characters are of course not equivalent in their meaning as they are separate symbols that hold meanings within different codes, at most they share a comparable phonetic form. It is likely that the decision on how to translate the name came from the standards of romanization of the Korean alphabet. However, in the original webtoon the use of the letter “ㄹ” as the magician’s name held a symbolic meaning relevant to the theme of the webtoon. The name of the alphabet letter “ㄹ” is pronounced as “ri-eul,” and so the intention of Ha Il Kwon in naming the magician “ㄹ” is a play on the pronunciation of the letter being similar to the English word
“real.” The magician’s name thus holds a symbolic meaning as a playful pun heavily tied to the theme of the real and reality within the webtoon. In the English translation however, this aspect of the magician is completely lost through the name change to the letter “L” which signals nothing in the narrative, and is instead only in place due to the technical process of transferring alphabets across the languages. Of course, this is not just a problem facing the translation of Annarasumanara. There is no such one-to-one equivalent form within any process of literary translation as argued by Walter Benjamin in his essay “The Task of the Translator” and exemplified in his famous example of the words Brot and pain, two words that share the same meaning but differ in their “way of meaning.” Though the words point to the same referent they hold different connotations because of the differences in the words’ surrounding language, the meaning of the word is contextualized within the particularities of the language and this then “permits the word Brot to mean something other to a German than what the word pain means to a Frenchman” (Benjamin, 257). For this reason, even literally equivalent words will be different in meaning across the two versions of the webtoon. When Ai is worrying about being able to afford rice, the English formation of the word “rice” is different from the Korean word ssal, which not only signifies uncooked rice specifically but also will hold a different connotation of meaning to a speaker of the Korean language. The language connotations surrounding the individual word affect its meaning, but so do the particular subjective meanings associated to words. The English word “mom” and the Korean word “ŏmma” are different because they occupy different nebulas of connections to implied meanings, symbols, and words, within the separate cultures and languages they belong to. The character of Ai saying the word “mom” is thus the same as the character saying the word “ŏmma” but also entirely different.

The translation of Annarasumanara takes this separation between translation and original even further than the traditional literal context by extending it to the images themselves. The
decision to “translate” only occurs for two examples, but is significant enough so as to affect the translation as a whole.

The first example I will point to is presented in figure 27 below. On the left is the original version of Annarasumanara with the official English translation placed on the right. The section of the webtoon being compared here is the section containing the representation of Ai’s father as a paper cut-out head on top of a toy, first presented in figure 7 on chapter 2 of this thesis. As can be seen in the English translation section of the webtoon on the right of the figure, the text surrounding and in between the images has been translated from Korean to English, but even the images presented between the text have been translated. While the paper cut-out of Ai’s father’s head remains the same, the toy body he is using has changed from some unknown, at least to the author presently writing, generic toy in the original webtoon to a brightly coloured Lego man in the translation. The original meaning of the image of the toy in the webtoon acts as a general signifier of a toy, a toy that is real and exists somewhere in the world we live in. The translation however swaps the toy robot for a Lego man. The Lego man unlike the toy in the original is an instantly recognizable commodity belonging to the corporation The Lego Group based in Denmark, well-known and marketed throughout the world. It is unclear whether the translation of the webtoon is intentionally utilizing the placement of the Lego figurine as a monetization strategy, i.e. whether or not they functioning as an advertisement for Lego, but what is clear is that the actual referent behind the image itself has been changed from the original. In a traditional understanding of translation, the decision to change the image would be completely counterintuitive because the photographic image is able to circumvent the differences in “ways of meaning” across languages and contexts and brings the referent directly to the viewer. The decision to change the referent has thus been made for some reason other than the goal of effectively bringing the narrative to the reader.
Figure 27. (LEFT) Ai's father as a toy as presented in the original as shown earlier in figure 14; (RIGHT) English translation comparison; Annarasumanara; ep 3; http://www.webtoons.com/en/drama/annarasumanara/ep-3/viewer?title_no=77&episode_no=4
However, looking at the previous figure 27 again, the toy body of Ai’s father was not the only aspect of the image to be augmented. The section of the panel in which the toy representation of the father is surrounded by a crowd of like toys, argued in chapter 2 of this thesis as representing the generation of workers affected by the IMF crisis, has been entirely removed and instead we are presented with the lone figure of Ai’s father sitting in a structure built of Lego. The particular historical context and connection made in the webtoon is thus lost. In the translation of the webtoon, Ai’s father is not an example of one of the many people who “failed” to manage themselves in the face of economic crisis but instead a single failed individual.

I believe the decision to change the image was decided based on a new form of translation ideology that is emerging within the context of international marketing strategies of media. In the marketization of media for foreign markets, video games in particular, two approaches are utilized: localization and culturalization. Adam Barsby, a writer for the gaming industry news and events website “Gaming IQ” presents a quote from Kate Edwards, the Executive Director of the International Game Developers Association and credited as being a pioneer of the culturalization strategy, in which she sums up these two marketing strategies as follows:

“While localization assists gamers with simply comprehending the game’s content through translation, culturalization allows gamers to engage with the game’s content at a potentially more meaningful level. Or conversely, culturalization ensures that gamers will not be disengaged by a piece of content that is considered incongruent or even offensive in the game’s environment” (Barsby, 2013).

Localization is essentially the translation of language in the media alone so that it can be readable to a foreign audience, culturalization in contrast is the strategized augmentation of
content to better appeal to the regional market trends and cultural tastes of targeted foreign markets (Luis Munoz 2014). Barsby presents another quote from Kate Edwards in which she argues the need for culturalization as follows: “Game culturalization is vital because it takes a step beyond localization, making a more fundamental examination of a game’s assumptions and choices, and then assesses the viability of those creative choices in both the global, intercultural marketplace as well as in specific locales” (Barsby, 2013). Culturalization of content can thus be akin to forms of censorship, such as the augmenting or limiting of blood and gore, removing explicit drug use, or depictions of nudity or sexuality, but can also be decisions to augment content for the sake of appeal or better integration into the local culture. Culturalization is an extension of the mode of translation to reconsider the original artwork and then reassess it and attempt to maximize its potential commerciality. The concept of culturalization is thus the mode of translation organized through relationships of capitalism.

As described in the previous chapter, the Korean Creative Content Agency has itself taken note of the growing potential for the webtoon industry to be marketed abroad, and as of 2014 actually gives the recommendation that “better” translations of webtoons be made for the sake of better foreign market penetration and industry growth. Culturalization strategy could be one form of what the webtoon industry would consider as “good” translation methods and is a logical connection to make, with the KOCCA even alluding to the logic of culturalization practices by saying that efforts should be made in producing translations that better fit “local cultures” of the regions targeted for export (KOCCA, 139). The goal of the webtoon industry is fundamentally rooted in the motivations of capital and its efforts in translation are for the purposes of readying their commodity, the webtoon, for foreign markets. The decision to augment the images of the webtoon are thus based in the logic that this change will better appeal to the foreign market audience the industry is aiming for. Walter Benjamin declared that
translation is a form, and in order to “comprehend it as a form,” we “must go back to the original,” for, he wrote, “the laws governing the translation lie within the original, contained in the issues of its translatability” (Benjamin, 254). Under this context of capital enterprise seeking to penetrate foreign markets, the “translatability” of the original is evaluated by its marketability and then the form of translation in this relationship of global capitalism seeks to maximize that quality specifically.

Figure 28 below shows the second image content that has been changed in the translation in the same side-by-side comparison as presented in the previous figure, original on the left and translation on the right. This panel is the same panel presented in chapter 2 of this thesis, in which the character Ai is running along a path of money chasing after a banknote caught in the wind. In an interesting decision by the webtoon platform, all of the depictions of Korean money in the artwork have been replaced with American money, the example shown in figure 12 being only one such example. Whereas the Korean version of the webtoon uses a 10,000 Korean Won banknote, the English version uses an American 10-dollar bill. This switch in imagery effectively separates the webtoon from its strongest symbol of its Korean context while simultaneously attempting to instead realign it with an American context. The strongest symbol of the Korean nation is replaced with its American counterpart. In this situation, again, the goal is clearly not just the literal conversion of meaning or providing a readable text to a foreign reader. If the goal of the translation were to point the reader to the same referent as the original then the image would be forced to stay the same: the English equivalent for a Korean 10,000 won bank note would of course be a Korean 10,000 won bank note. Furthermore, by changing the Korean 10,000 won note for the American 10-dollar bill, not only has the nation represented in the specific symbols been changed but so are the other meanings implicitly associated with those currency amounts. The 10,000 won bank note is the most common note used in South Korea,
Figure 28. (LEFT) Ai on the path of money as shown in figure 11; (RIGHT) English version; ep. 1; Annarasumanara; http://www.webtoons.com/en/drama/annarasumanara/ep-1/viewer?title_no=77&episode_no=2
distributed from ATMs and representing a value that is associated with carrying a certain weight of value within the collective consciousness of Korea, but in the US the most common bills are the 20-dollar and 1-dollar amount. Furthermore, the currency represented within each of these banknotes, the 10-dollar bill and the 10,000 won banknote, are also not equivalent in the global currency market.

In both the examples of the unknown toy and the Lego man and the Korean banknote and American banknote, the original image and its replacement in the translation are not equivalent. However, in addition to being not equivalent in meaning they are unequal. The Lego man represents a highly valued and commercially successful brand, whereas the unknown robot toy is just that, a generic unknown commodity. The Korean and American banknotes are held in an even more tense relationship of unequalness through their relationship and interaction on the global currency markets, whereby the American dollar holds the privileged position of occupying the standard by which the Korean won is measured. While the currency values may fluctuate and dip so that the 10,000 won banknote is at times momentarily higher in value than the 10-dollar bill, it has at no point dethroned the American dollar as being the standard measurement of global currency. This additional meaning held by the American banknote, as the symbol of that capital value from which the currency of the world is measured, as the standard for global capital, thus adds a layer of geopolitics to the translation of the webtoon Annarasumanara.

As of 2016, the LINE Webtoon platform has been released in six countries outside of its native origin under the Naver Webtoon platform in South Korea. Those countries are China, Taiwan, Indonesia, Thailand, Japan, and the United States. Though these platforms are connected to physical locations existing in each of those countries, because they function through
the internet the actual physical regionality of these locations does not matter in relation to accessibility of their media, except for the case of Japan’s webtoon platform which limits its access to users in Japan. These platforms are thus strategic entry points into the foreign markets that the Line webtoon corporation utilizes. These platforms themselves are organized by localization and culturalization strategies; the platforms are of course presented in the local language of that region but are also organized so that specific webtoons are chosen for translation on particular platforms. Of the seven platforms, Annarasumanara has only been released on three, the American platform, the Thai platform, and the native Korean platform of its original. Given that local language is the most significant requirement for accessibility to foreign markets, the American platform takes the position of being the entrypoint for all English-speaking regions as of this time. This means that there is no Canadian rendition of the English translation of Annarasumanara featuring Canadian 10-dollar bills. It is therefore this American visual “translation” of the webtoon that becomes the standard base layer image which other English regions read. The American Line Webtoon platform has an additional feature that separates it from other foreign platforms however. Out of all the Line webtoon platforms, including the Korean native Naver webtoon platform, only the American platform features inbuilt structuring that enables webtoon fans to contribute their own translations of the literary text to the platform. Thus, only the American platform features a variety of translations of webtoons in a highly diverse array of languages. The only official translations on the American platform are in English, with the rest being categorized as fan translations. This added feature enables the American platform to function as the hub for translations of webtoons into languages of regions that the corporation has not entered yet, and manages to do so through contributions made by fans that are not given any monetary compensation. All fan translations of the webtoons are contributed by volunteers with Line Webtoon simply providing the software and hosting
services. Because the fan translations are all part of the American platform, the fan translations into the various languages all utilize the same American translation imagery as the official English version but also translate based upon the official English translation of the webtoons. More surprisingly however, the official Thai translation of the webtoon on the separate Thai server also utilizes this same American version of the image. The official Thai translation of Annarasumanara does not replace the Korean banknote with Thai banknotes but instead uses the webtoon which features Lego men and the American 10-dollar bill. It is not apparent however whether the official Thai translation is a translation from the original Korean text or from the official English translated text. The structure of the Line Webtoon corporation in addition to its translation decisions has thus elevated the English translation of the webtoon above the position of the original, so that it is now the version from which other translations are derived.

This interaction, or series of interactions rather, demonstrates that any conclusion of the success of the Korean media industry in penetrating foreign markets as being subversive or a weakening in the global hegemony of the West is misguided and simplistic. The media industry is motivated by the logic of capital and thus does not work to undermine the systems of hegemonic power but instead navigate them with the goal of extracting capital. The American version is exalted and placed in the higher position because the logic of capital states that it will be more marketable, i.e. larger global population of English speakers meaning a larger pool from which to extract potential free labour, and more relatability to the American dollar bill and the Lego man compared to the Korean counterparts.

The interesting case of Annarasumanara, a beautiful and powerful piece of art that works to critique capitalism, thus occupies this position as a whole in its full artifact form in relation to the capital logic of the industry it emerges from. As an art piece, it functions to interrupt the logic of capitalism, but is also embedded within that same logic. This is the reality of how the
capitalist enterprise functions, for if the form of translation organized through the logic of
capitalism seeks to maximize the cultural product’s foreign marketability, then the translatability of the webtoon *Annarasumanara* as valued through the capital logic, its marketability, is that its critique of capitalism is commodifiable.
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