

Corporate Korea corks the bottle as women rise

By Norimitsu Onishi

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SEOUL, South Korea: In a time-honored practice in South Korea's corporate culture, the 38-year-old manager at an online game company took his 10-person team on twice-weekly after-work drinking bouts. He exhorted his subordinates to drink, including a 29-year-old graphic designer who protested that her limit was two glasses of beer.

"Either you drink or you get it from me tomorrow," the boss told her one evening.

She drank, fearing that refusing to do so would hurt her career. But eventually, unable to take the drinking any longer, she quit and sued.

In May, in the first ruling of its kind, the Seoul High Court said that forcing a subordinate to drink alcohol was illegal, and it pronounced the manager guilty of a "violation of human dignity." The court awarded the woman \$32,000 in damages for the incidents, which occurred in 2004.

The ruling was as much a testament to women's growing presence in corporate life here as a confirmation of changes already under way. As an increasing number of women have joined companies as professionals in the past half decade, corporate South Korea has struggled to change the country's thoroughly male-centered corporate culture, starting with alcohol.

An evening out with colleagues here follows a predictable, alcohol-centered pattern: dinner, usually some grilled pork, washed down with soju, Korea's national vodka-like drink; then a second round at a beer hall; then whiskey and singing at a "norae bang," a Korean karaoke club. Exhorted by their bosses to drink, the corporate warriors bond, literally, so that the sight of dark-suited men holding hands, leaning on one another, staggering toward taxis, is part of this city's nighttime streetscape. The next morning, back at the office, they are ready to fight, with reaffirmed unity, for more markets at home and abroad.

Many professional women manage to avoid much of the drinking by adopting well-known strategies. They slip away while their male colleagues indulge in a second or third round of drinking. They pour the drinks into potted plants. They rely on male colleagues, called "knights in shining armor," to take their turns in drinking games.

Companies, too, have begun to respond. Since 2005, Posco, the steel manufacturer, has limited company outings to two hours at its mill in South Korea's southwest. Employees can raise a red card if they do not want to drink or a yellow card if they want to go home early. At Woori Bank, one of South Korea's largest, an alarm rings at 10 p.m. to encour-

age workers to stop drinking and go home using public transportation, which stops running before midnight.

"My boss used to be all about, 'Let's drink till we die!'" said Wi Su-jung, a 31-year-old woman employed at a small shipping company.

Wi, who was out enjoying the sun in central Seoul, said the atmosphere began changing as more women joined her company in the past couple of years. "The women got together and complained about the drinking and the pressure to drink," she said. "So things changed last year. Now we sometimes go to musicals or movies instead."

Kim Chil-jong, who was taking a walk on his lunch hour, said he owned a nine-person publishing company. In the last couple of years, he hired two women for the first time.

"We drink less because of their presence," Kim, 47, said. "Before, I'd encourage my workers to drink whenever we went out, but I don't do that anymore."

Still, at least 90 percent of company outings — called "hoishik," or coming together to eat — still center on alcohol, according to the Korean Alcohol Research Foundation. The percentage of women who drink has increased over all as they have joined companies.

Over all, South Koreans consume less alcohol than, say, most Europeans, according to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, a research organization financed by industrialized nations.

But Cho Sung-gie, the alcohol foundation's research director, estimates that South Koreans rank first in binge drinking: the goal is to drink as much as possible, as quickly as possible, so that co-workers loosen up.

Companies have awakened to the potential dangers of bingeing: health threats, decreased productivity and, with more women working, the risk of sexual harassment.

The foundation, though financed largely by the alcohol industry, is considered the authority on the country's drinking culture. It runs programs on responsible drinking and abstinence, and assists companies to organize outings not centered on alcohol. Chang Kih-wung, a manager in the education team, has even joined company outings to the movies.

"Usually, a company decides to do something about drinking after a guest, often a foreigner, visits and makes a comment like, 'Man, people drink like crazy here!'" Chang said. "So they'll invite me for a

lecture or organize a single activity — then they forget about it and go back to drinking."

Traditionally, this corporate culture often began at the job interview itself. Asked whether they liked to drink, applicants knew that there was only one correct answer.

"If they said they didn't drink, we'd think that we couldn't work closely together," said Lee Jai-ho, 40, an engineer at a paper mill that was bought by Norske Skog of Sweden in the late 1990s.

Lee said he was asked whether he was a good drinker during his job interview in 1992, and he asked the same question of job candidates later. The company's hard-drinking culture changed, however, after it changed to foreign ownership.

It is this fear of not being accepted as full members of the team that has led many women to drink to excess. A 31-year-old lawyer for a telecommunications company, who asked that her name not be used, blacked out during a company outing shortly after she became the first Korean woman to serve as a lawyer in the legal division three years ago. "During my studies, I always competed against men," she said. "So I didn't want to lose to men at hoishik."

She drank so much during dinner at a Chinese restaurant that she remembered nothing past 9 p.m., though the outing lasted until 1 a.m.

However, as more women have joined her division, she said, the emphasis on alcohol has decreased.

"Before it was always grilled pork with soju followed by mixed drinks," she said. "Now, I can suggest that we go to a Thai or Italian restaurant."

Not all men were so flexible, though. In the case of the 29-year-old graphic designer, when she was interviewed at the 240-employee online game company in 2004, she was also forced to submit to an "alcohol interview," according to the court ruling. She could drink only two glasses of beer and no soju at all, she said.

Her boss, though, liked to go out with his 10-person marketing team — six men and four women — at least twice a week until the predawn hours and brooked no excuses.

One time, he told her that if she called upon a "knight in shining armor," she would have to kiss him. So she drank two glasses of soju. Another time, after she slipped away early, he called her at home and ordered her to come back. She refused.

At the trial, the boss said he was so intent on having his subordinates bond that he sometimes used his own money to take them out drinking. He called the woman a weirdo and said of the lawsuit, "I'm the victim."

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