

Gender Issues and Feminist Movement in South Korea



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Nationalism vs. Feminism

- Modern Korean nationalism emerged as a response to imperialism by western countries and Japan in the 19th century
- To successfully withstand imperialism, Korean people were, thus, externally inspired to struggle against and resist foreign intervention and domination, asserting their national identity in the process
- Nationalism questioned women's traditional behavioral norm and roles based Confucian teaching in relation to the reform of Korean society

- Korean women's traditionally subordinate position and roles were questioned, on the one hand by the influence of foreign religions and customs which were introduced by Christian missionaries and Korean intellectuals who traveled to the United States and Japan (Park younghyo, 서재필)
- On the other hand, Donghak Sasang (The Eastern School of Thought), which was based for Korean nationalism, advocated women's equality with men at the end of the Chosun Dynasty(최재우, 1860)
- Its thought contended that all human beings are equal regardless of their class, caste, and sex

- Education was the first public domain women entered in Korea as that was in western countries. → the pioneers of women's education in Korea were Christian missionaries → in 1886, Ewha Hakdang, which developed into Ewha Women's University
- In 1898, for the first time in the Korean history, a girls' school, Sunsong Girl's School, was established by Korean women, in other word, by the support of a women's organization, Changyang-hoe → the first women's political activity in the Chosun Dynasty
- 96 girl's schools were established from 1905 to 1910 → however, the purpose of those schools was to educate women to be "a wise mother and a good wife"

- On to women in the independence movement and the feminist movement:

- after the annexation of Korea by Japan, women took part in the war against Japan by fighting in the battlefields or by raising funds

- that experience made women come out of the home and organize women's groups nationwide (30)

- as a result, women's status would be enhanced through their participation in the Movement

- the Movement provided opportunities for many women to become involved in a political activities

- Such experiences also provided a basis for women to promote feminist movement

- The emergence of nationalist feminist organization (1920-1930s)

- introduction of feminism as one of western ideologies by intellectuals who had studied abroad

- New Women

The most important ideology to influence Korean feminist movement in the 1920 was Marxist feminism due to the Russian revolution of 1917

→ Introduction of Marxism resulted in splitting the (women) nationalists into two groups: reformist and communists

→ Communist women organized 조선여성 동우회 (Korean Women's Association) which can be regarded as the first feminist organization in Korea → Its aim, based on Marxism, was to emancipate Korean women from feudal bondage

→ meanwhile, one of the main organizations of reformists was the Young Women's Christian Association

- **Gunwoohoe** (1927-1931): The split between communists and noncommunists was criticized. Nationalists agreed to build a joint organization in order to obtain independence from Japanese imperialism. In 1927, Gunwoohoe, a coalition of women communists and reformists (Christians) was born
- Gunwoohoe is one of the most important organizations in Korean women's history in terms of its scale, ideology, and activities → It had 64 branches scattered in Korea, Japan, Manchuria, and had approximately 10,000 members who were across all classes

- The organization's primary goal was to recover independence from Japan; however, due to the Japanese suppression, it was not publicly discussed. At the same time, it clearly manifested its important goal of enhancing women's status

- They maintained the abolition of all social and legal discrimination against women (the abolition of discrimination against female workers in wages and demand for paid maternity leave before and after birth) → Had clear ideas on women's issues at that time

- In 1931, another split between communists and reformists led to the dissolution of the organization. Reformists did not tolerate constant arrests of the leaders of communists for their involvement in anti-Japanese colonialism, insisting on focusing the movement on the enlightenment of women
- After the late 1930s, Japanese oppression was getting severe, all movements of both sides diminished to near extinction. The feminist movement and feminism also disappeared

- After the national independence from Japan, the United States had been regarded as the emancipator of Korea from Japanese imperialism and was a great help to South Koreans in surviving Korean Civil War. Through all those events, western culture, mainly introduced by American soldiers and mass media, had been admired and imitated, which led to South Korean people despising and ignoring traditional Korean culture until the late 1970s

- In the late 1970s, political dissidents against military government began to revive nationalism in a different way. This nationalism was associated with an appreciation of Korean tradition, rejecting American influences

- Kwangju Massacre provided an important momentum for the revival of nationalism—that is, anti-American sentiment

- New nationalists defined South Korea as a new colony of the advanced country, particularly the United States, and emphasized that struggle against neo-colonialism should be given priority

- This anti-Americanism was integrated into democratization and was directly associated with the revival of nationalism

- The movement gained support from university students and intellectuals

- The re-emergence of feminist movement coincided with re-emergence of nationalism by fully participating in the democracy movement in the 1980s

- Korean women activists developed **their own clear awareness** of exploitation and oppression by patriarchal capitalism with the promulgation of International Women's Year (1975) and Decades for Women (1976-1985) by the UN, and the introduction of Women's Studies

- Established new feminist organizations (KWAU: Korean Women Association United, 한국여성단체연합)

- But some male nationalists considered feminism as a phenomenon of western ideology, and feminist struggle in South Korea as a mere imitation of western models. Others dismissed women's issues as a "secondary contradictions," regarding the women's movement as sectarian which weakened the all-consuming struggle for democratization

Confucianism vs. Feminism

- Confucian ideology functioned as a mechanism that oppressed women by inventing sex difference(남녀유별), honored men, abased women(남존여비), The Three Way of Obedience (삼종지도): when unmarried, obey her father; when married, obey her husband; when widowed, obey her son, Seven Evil Conducts(칠거지악) : Disobedience to parent-in law, Failure to bear children, Adultery, Jealousy, Contracting a serious malady, Garrulity, Theft
- **Koreanised Confucianism** in sixteenth century: the obsession with ritual formality and dogmatic ideological imposition; the great emphasis on consanguinity to maintain the status quo

- A strict division (separation) of the public and the private spheres inadvertently gave women a room to build and exercise their own power (the power of a wife of yangban class over her daughter-in-law and servants, having keys of a grain store, the power relations between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law) or to build their own culture. That provided women with a sense of personal power, including “mother power,” which is not translated into a structural power.

- However, such women's subculture functioned ultimately within the patriarchal system. Thus, the value of women that is classified as faithful wife (열녀), filial daughter (효녀), (a wife of the first born son or the eldest daughter-in-law (종부) and the power of women, including mother power, which can be only obtain by having a son—that is, woman must get married and must be a legitimate wife, were recognized and measured by patriarchal ideology. All those values and power that women got are related to the relationship with a man.

- Mother power: psychological and even physical power that women can possess by becoming a mother

→ However, this mother power can be only obtained by having a son, being a legitimate wife. In other words, giving birth to a son means that women have a venue to move from being a powerless daughter-in-law to becoming a powerful mother-in-law.

→ However, it is not a power that all women can enjoy, and further mother power basically stays at the personal/familial level

- **Institutionalized motherhood:**

- 1) only mother and legitimate wife could exercise power and authority by rewarding mother's devotion;

- 2) the conduct of widows in a lineage served as a major index for grading the prestige of the lineage;

- 3) the prohibition of remarriage in order to curb the rapidly increasing number of candidate for the state examination for bureaucrats, that is, women's conducts were used to regulate the numbers of aristocracy;

- 4) the prohibition of concubine's son taking the state examination (mother's lineage was used at will for the purpose of limiting the number of candidates for the exam in patrilineal family)

- And how does mother power affect women's right movement in Korea?

→ By conferring mother power on women and by having women feel as if they had power (in fact, it is a limited power that could be exercised in a confined area by a limited persons), a patriarchal society efficiently control women's movement. This is because it is not motherly to feel oppressed

- In the early 1990s of Korean society, although economic developments had been substantial, behavioral adjustments to it occurred slowly and were sometimes justified by tradition.

- An underlying Confucian moral code that assumes a primary role for women was very strong, and it was maintained by custom and was further reinforced by Family Law such as the hoju system (the headship of family).
- Attitudes among women about their own roles have been changing, while men's attitudes have been changing much more slowly.
- Further, women's leaders see the "major problem" as "women's consciousness": women still believe that they should be "good wives and mothers"

- In other words, Korea's situation is one in which material culture has changed substantially while the behavioral culture has adapted within the constraints justified by tradition.
- Women still don't have an equal footing with men, even though modernization and industrialization have led to improved educational opportunities for many Korean women, and employment options have changed.

Minjung Movement vs. Feminism

- Minjung: mass people's movement
 - originated in the suffering of young women factory workers whose struggles for basic rights both challenged the military regime and riveted the attention of the budding democratic movement
- In 1980s (1) democratization and labor movement (Minjung movement) → focused on women as a revolutionary agents and laborers (2) the first grassroots organization (Women for Equality and Peace)

- Socialist feminists place stronger emphasis on patriarchy and the broad array of gender issues women face across class lines
- Marxist feminists place greater emphasis on the class aspect of women's oppression, focusing on women workers and women of urban and rural poor

Feminist Groups in Korea

- Women's movement groups tend to be divided into two groups: radical or reformist

- Radical groups

- 1. Identified with broader human-right issues: torturing of prisoner, democratization of the political system, reunification with North Korea

- 2. Their name does not imply radical changes in women's status and role, and is not either interpreted as "radical" in radical feminism in western society (transformation of society)

- 3. Rather, their language is often neo-Marxist, combined with nationalism (Marxist feminism by American standard)

- 4. They support political change which they feel eliminate restrictions on individual freedom in Korea society

- 5. Prefer not to use English out of nationalistic and anti-American sentiment

- 6. A product of the 1980s, tend to have younger member

- Reformist groups

1. Generally moderate to conservative (liberal feminism)
2. Believed that to be effective you must be perceived as legitimate, so they are concerned with changing the provisions of the Family Law, equal employment opportunity and jobs (Equal Employment Opportunity Act), and consumer protection
3. Use traditional lobbying techniques, sometimes identified as pro-government
4. Don't mind using English in discussing issues

- However, on to sexual violence (Sexual violence is defined as rape, sexual assault, sex talk, exposure, sexual harassment, gang rape, and marital rape), virtually all groups supported changing sexual violence laws. This issue popped up on the scene in 1991 and 1992 when the Sexual Violence Relief Center used media presentation to make it a national issue

- Korea was shown to have the third-highest rate of reported sex crimes against women in the world. In other words, in 1990s, sexual violence became as a crosscutting issues.

- Thus in Korea in 1990s, there are two strands of women's group

- that is, radical group which is Marxist feminism and reformist group which is liberal feminism by western standard. However, there is no radical feminism by western standard that focuses on women's sexuality controlled by men as women's oppression.

The Limits of the Feminist Movement in Korea

- Since women's movement has developed around issues related to socio-economic structures, women's rights issues, especially in the private sphere, have been neglected in the movement
 - Have been asked to put aside their own demands in order to support a struggle for independence and democracy
- Child care movement has not been successful due to the psychological resistance of mother
- The double burden of housework and wage labor prevents women workers from a full participation in organization activities

Thank you very much!

