Women, gender, and social change in colonial Korea

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Reform! . . . Liberation! This is the call of women who have been confined to the deep, dark, inner chambers for thousands of years . . . Truly the time has come for change . . . In order to reform society, we must first reform the family, society’s most basic and fundamental unit. In order to reform the family, we have to liberate women, who are the masters of the house. And we must first liberate women if we are to catch up with the rest of the world, be competitive, lead lives that can be respected by other states, and transform our social structure.

—Inaugural editorial, Sin yŏja (1920)

In 1920 the inaugural issue of the journal Sin yŏja (New Woman) called forth a new world, premised on the liberation of women. Likening women to slaves whose time for awakening had come, the journal modeled the feminist group Seitō (Bluestocking) in Japan. Its founder, female literary figure Kim Wŏn-ju, envisioned the journal to not only provide space for and voice to the literary and artistic expressions of its female contributors but also inspire its targeted female readership to effect social change. Women were to work in society, make gains beyond acknowledgement provided by “empty slogans” such as “equality” or “respect for women,” and “build a social order that is the envy of the world.” Although Sin yŏja published only four issues, as Korea’s first journal with a clear feminist platform, it attests to shifting attitudes in regards to gender relations in early twentieth-century Korea. Sin yŏja also heralded an explosion of public discussion concerning the “woman question” within an expanding publishing landscape enabled by the Japanese colonial state’s Cultural Politics (munhwa chŏngch’i) in the aftermath of the 1919 nationalist March First movement (Robinson 2014).

This chapter provides an overview of the dynamic transformations related to gender during the colonial period from 1910 to 1945. Determining whether things were better for women under Japanese colonial rule than in the previous Chosŏn period is not the aim. The lived experiences of women depended on a multitude of factors, including their socio-economic class, marriage and reproductive status, education and skills, age, family support, religion, and location (e.g. urban, rural, industrial, near a railroad), among others. Rather, this chapter finds more productive an examination of the development of social institutions in the realms of education, labor, law, religion, and health which promoted gendered norms, behavior, and structures. These,
in turn, shaped the opportunities that became available to women. Evolving at the interstices of transnational and transcultural encounters, Japanese imperialism, and Korean nationalist politics, these institutions grappled with Korea’s patriarchal traditions at the same time they endorsed modernist practices.

The end result was a reconfiguration of Chosŏn Confucian gender ethics as manifested by the modern “Wise Mother, Good Wife” (hyŏnmo yangch’ŏ) construct. Scholars place “Wise Mother, Good Wife” at the core of a new gender discourse emerging around the turn of the twentieth century, propagated through schools and debated in public literary spaces and the courtroom. (Choi 2009b; Yoo 2008; Lim 2011) Stress on women’s maternal role was particularly reflected in colonial reproductive politics. (Park 2014a; Kim 2008b) The high value placed on women’s roles in the domestic sphere buttressed a colonial order premised on the nuclear family as the basic unit of society. It also, however, made possible for the agency women exercised on issues pertinent to them by providing the means by which women worked within, challenged, and negotiated those social institutions, thereby destabilizing the very harmony families managed by wise mothers and good wives were to provide. Nevertheless, gender politics of colonial Korea solidified the patriarchal nature of the household, laying the groundwork for continued institutionalized forms of gender inequalities (Shin 2006; Moon 2005) and the “heteronormative assumptions” of the post-1948 South Korean state (Choi 2015). Social change for women was also uneven, concentrated in urban areas and on a relatively small scale.

Reframing women

As discussed in the previous chapters, the sense of urgency felt among Korean leaders in the aftermath of the 1894 Sino-Japanese War and encroaching Japanese imperialism fueled attempts to redefine Korea’s intellectual traditions, guide reform efforts along the rubric “civilization and enlightenment” (munmyŏng kaehwa), and redirect duties and loyalties of the people to new conceptualizations of Korea as a nation. Accordingly, women and the domestic sphere with its related institutions and practices became a major focus of attention. The highlighting of the household and the most intimate human relations among family members as significant components to nation-building stemmed from a longer tradition. Confucian worldviews linked the domestic to the rise and fall of the dynasty, radiating outward to a universal harmony “all under heaven.” Thus, the Chosŏn court targeted kinship practices, promoted Confucian values of filiality and wifely chastity, and prescribed spatial and symbolic divisions in the home based on sex (Deuchler 1992). Likewise, Korean nationalist thought in the late nineteenth century continued the organic relationship between the family and the larger collective. On these grounds, gender ideology was an integral part of Korea’s pursuit of modernity, and women as in other parts of the world were incorporated into nation-building projects. Early twentieth-century primers for women highlighted biographies of exemplary women—foreign and Asian—who as filial daughters, faithful wives, or sacrificing mothers performed extraordinary and patriotic feats (Hyun 2004). The roles women performed in the domestic space framed their citizenship and shaped their interpersonal relations, education, work, and health care. For example, in response to news of the 1898 petition to King Kojong on behalf of women’s formal education, one writer supported the cause, arguing that it would enable women to become better companions and helpmates (naejo) to their husbands and educators of their children (Oh 2009). Women, hence, were to contribute to the nation through their husbands and sons.

What a woman was to be or do, however, defied simple definitions. “Woman” was a novel social and political category that had to be conceived on new grounds. In fact, there was no Korean word for “woman.” Just as the term nation (minjok) did not exist in the Korean vocabulary
before this era, so too did writers experiment with terms such as punyŏ (literally, married female) and puin (married woman) before settling on yŏja (female person). The term today used to translate “woman,” yŏsŏng, did not commonly appear in print media until the 1920s. These early discussions of women often portrayed them as a metonym for the nation or marker of civilization. The position of women reflected the status of the nation and provided the rationale for reform measures such as the eradication of concubinage, child marriage, and social stigma against widow remarriage (Yoo 2008). Women’s education was promoted so that women could partake in nation-building processes and the causes of “civilization and enlightenment.” Nonetheless, these discussions also attributed women with a humanity that granted them not only the potential but also the opportunity to act as autonomous and equal individuals. At the same time the 1898 petition mentioned earlier expressed women’s “loyalty and devotion to the country,” it also asserted women had the same capacity as men at learning and thus the ability to contribute to society in public and direct ways (Oh 2009). It is this tension between women-as-individuals and idealization of women-in-the-household that continued to characterize gender politics of colonial Korea.

Women’s education, shifting the domestic

The notion that proper womanhood was defined by her domestic roles coalesced in the new schools that became available for girls. Besides court-regulated female occupations such as the medical worker ṭunyŏ or entertainer kisaeng, women did not receive formal education during the Chosŏn dynasty. This changed starting in 1886 with the Christian mission school Ewha haktang, the predecessor of today’s premier Ewha Woman’s University in South Korea. Other schools soon followed. Between 1886 and 1910, an estimated fifty private and mission girls’ schools were established (Choi 2009a). The state opened the first public high school for girls, Hansŏng kodŏng hakkyo, in 1908. The term “Wise Mother, Good Wife” first emerged in Korea in 1906 in a mission statement for a private girls school modeled on Japanese schools. Students were to learn the academic subjects and crafts that would prepare them for their future as mothers and wives. As private, mission, and public girl schools set out to educate women, the “Wise Mother, Good Wife” ideal evolved “through a convergence of Chosŏn’s Confucian notions of pudŏk (womanly virtue), Japanese gender ideology of ryōsai kenbo (“good wife, wise mother”), and American Protestant missionary notions of domesticity” (Choi 2009b).

After Korea became a colony in 1910, the Educational Ordinances of the Government-General of Korea (GGK) stipulated that higher education for girls was to “foster in them feminine virtues . . . the education given there . . . must conform to the cultivating of moral character and equipping them as good housekeepers,” thereby institutionalizing “Wise Mother, Good Wife” in a gendered curriculum. Schools were to train girls for their future tasks in the home and incorporated domestic curriculum such as sewing, cooking, and childrearing. However, by emphasizing instruction “in the knowledge and art useful in making a livelihood,” the GGK also laid the groundwork for technical, scientific, even vocational education students received. (Kim, In prep) It also shaped the scientification and professionalization of housework, emphasizing hygiene, thrift, and utility in the 1930s image of the “Wise and Prudent Professional Housewife” (Yoo 2008).

Access to education, however, remained severely restricted. Many families remained reluctant by custom to send their daughters to school or were limited due to finances. Moreover, the GGK disqualified many private and mission schools from operation and did not mandate primary education in Korea as the Japanese government did in Japan. The number of girls’ high schools dwindled down to six by 1919, half the number of high schools for boys (Yoo 2008). More
than 90 percent of Korea’s female population remained illiterate, with the literacy rate improving only to a dismal 16 percent in the late 1930s (Choi 2013). Sex ratios in schools remained skewed. In 1937, colonial statistics recorded a number of 64,809 female students, less than one-third the figure of male students. Women seeking higher education often had to leave the country, with Japan as the most common destination for study (Park 1990). Higher education marked women with a middle- or upper-class status, prone to leftist critiques of its bourgeois and urban nature (Choi 2009b).

While schools idealized women’s role in the newly designated private spaces of the family and home, they did expose their students to new ideas and cultivated skills that presented women opportunities to participate publicly in society in ways they were unable to before, such as travel abroad, produce work in literary publications, or financially support oneself as a professional (Wells 2004). This gave rise in the 1920s to the phenomenon of the New Woman (sin yöşön). Associated with the female student, the term was used to differentiate young women educated in the new forms of learning from those perceived as more traditional women. New Woman also indicated the visible presence of “a small group of elite women who became public figures in art, literature, educational, journalism, and politics” (Choi 2013). A contradiction emerged. On one hand, educated women were symbols of modernity, civilization, and pride. On the other hand, their very public engagements raised anxieties as they permitted new forms of social interactions between men and women. Performed in new urban spaces of leisure such as the café, dance halls, theatre, restaurants, train station, and department store, such male-female relations were seen to compromise women’s sexual morality. If women postponed or rejected marriage or motherhood, they posed a threat to the stability of the family. Women’s consumptive behavior suggested an orientation to the individual self that flew in the face of “Wise Mother, Good Wife.” These castigations converged on the media icon of the Modern Girl, whose flagrant materialism, loose sexuality, and lack of morals were often conflated with the New Woman. Such anxieties ignited public discussions on love, female sexuality, marriage, and family. What differed now from earlier discussions was that women such as those involved with the journal Sin yöja actively participated in these debates, having gained the language and will to articulate publicly their opinions, desires, and critiques (Kwon 1998; Yoo 2008).

The gendered configuration of women as housewives also opened the grounds on which women demanded new relations with their husbands, thereby altering relations within the family and producing new social affects and practices such as romance. They called for “free love” and “free marriage,” or the freedom for women and men to choose their spouses, producing what Bodurae Kwon calls the emergence of romance. Male-female relationships could be based on mutual respect, companionship, love, or shared mission and camaraderie such as Red Love in leftist circles (Barraclough 2014). The romanticized domestic ideal of the “Sweet Home” that unfolded in the 1930s may have strategically marketed material goods such as modern residential architecture and household products to urban housewives and placed men in income-earning roles as “Salaryman,” but it also “invoke[ed] the idea of a nuclear family based on love, respect and sense of selfhood” (Choi 2014). Some couples, inspired by such ideals, adapted new-style weddings as well, such as wearing Western dress of male suit and white bridal gown and hosting the wedding at the venue of a church (Jung-Kim 2008). In fact, newspapers sensationalized “stories of women who committed suicide due to early marriage, forced marriage, male infidelity, or failed relationship or marriage” (Jung-Kim 2005). Insinuations of a lesbian relationship may have further scandalized the double-suicide of female students Hong Ok-im and Kim Yong-ju. But these reports suggest that women sought to actualize their desires for new kinds of relationships with their partners to the extent that they would choose death when
those relationships did not seem possible, in this case a forced marriage for Kim, who the media portrayed as indifferent and absent.

Other women such as artist and writer Na Hyesŏk questioned the double standard placed on women that castigated any sexual transgressions on the part of women while accepting men’s multiple liaisons. She critiqued the “Wise Mother, Good Wife” ideal altogether, noting that she had not “heard of any curriculum that emphasizes ‘good husband, wise father,’” and saw it “making women into mere appendages of men” by exhorting women’s “conduct as good spouse and wise parent” but failing to “develop the mind.” Kim Wŏnju’s 1926 short story “Awakening” depicts the classic theme of love-betrayal-abandonment, but here the devoted and filial (to her in-laws) housewife protagonist leaves her husband and child upon learning of her husband’s affair, mirroring Henrik Ibsen’s Nora of A Doll’s House, literature that was central in colonial period discussions surrounding New Women and critiques of the patriarchal family system (Kim 2010). Civil courts faced suits from women filing for divorce from cheating husbands and from families who sought the return of their wayward daughters-in-law (Lim 2013). Na Hyesŏk herself divorced after she pursued an affair of her own, unhappy in a marriage with a philandering husband (Choi 2013). Unfortunately for many women, they discovered that their relationships with men often fell short of the ideals they fostered during their education. Kim Hwallan forewent marriage altogether, determined to dedicate her life to the cause of women’s education (Wells 2001).

A maternalist agenda

Women’s relationship with their children was just as ambivalent. The bio-politics of the colonial government oriented women’s bodies and reproduction for the management of the colonial population. In the efforts to “mobilize Koreans as crucial human resources,” colonial administrators understood population increase as a means of national/imperial power and thus “made explicit the maternal role and centrality of fertile bodies for the state and empire,” particularly in the context of imperialist expansion into Manchuria after 1932 (Park 2014a). This skewed reproductive labor as the responsibility primarily of women, placing women’s sexual, conjugal, and reproductive experiences and capacity under medical and scientific scrutiny. In this way, women’s bodies became legible and governable. The means of collecting this data brought women in contact with the colonial state via researchers who were often bio-medical physicians. Knowledge of female bodies invited interventions in the most private spaces in the attempts to reform practices determined detrimental to the pro-natalist agenda of the colonial state. For example, women’s child-birthing and -rearing customs were the subject of health campaigns that ostensibly sought to address the problem of infant mortality. Certain forms of contraceptives were restricted, presented as harmful to women’s bodies and moral conduct, but as all forms became unavailable with escalation of the Pacific War, access was likely denied when they conflicted with pro-natalist mobilizations (Kim 2008b). Anxieties about sterility fueled the publication of informative articles on venereal diseases. They also provided the rationale for the introduction of prostitution licensing and systematic inspection of women in sex industry-related work to monitor venereal disease (Park 2014b). This intersected with new forms of sex workers such as the kisaeng, the female entertainer with Chosŏn roots but transformed in the new colonial economy (Barraclough 2012b), and the Café Waitress and Bar Girl, whose emergence was directly related to the new leisure spaces of urbanizing metropolises such as Seoul (Jung-Kim 2005).

Ironically, while promoting the interests of the Japanese empire, reproductive bio-politics of the colonial state in Korea inadvertently converged with interests of women, particularly
those in relation to reforms in the family. For example, Japanese physician Takaki Kudō’s gynecological research of incarcerated Korean women concluded that the custom of marrying women early or at a young age, often before the maturity of their reproductive organs, produced “sick wombs” that directly correlated to Koreans’ higher propensity towards female murderers, particularly of spousal- or husband-murder, relative to other countries (J. Park 2013). While Kudō’s statistical contradictions and data manipulation are suspect, his research promulgations condemned early marriage and the maltreatment of women by their mothers-in-law and husbands, practices deemed oppressive to women. Likewise, concern for the reproductive health and increased viability of women’s fertility promoted eugenic arguments for birth control (i.e. “limiting birth” sana chehan) and smaller families. Mothers were to plan and space the timing of their pregnancies so as to maximize maternal health through prolonged postnatal care which was believed to produce healthier babies. Albeit a pro-natalist position, these arguments were presented by women at the same time they pushed female-centered reasons on the agenda, such as postponing pregnancy to gain time to pursue one’s education or interests (Kim 2008b). Women also advocated the health screening of potential husbands so that women could avoid the misfortune of contracting venereal disease and implicitly encouraged women’s agency in choosing a spouse. In addition, women were exhorted to learn the new sciences in school and wield modern health practices on themselves and in their homes so as to safeguard the viability of their fertility and the health of their family members. This formed the rationale for women’s higher education in the health fields and allowed for the professionalization of women in nursing, midwifery, and medicine (Kim, In prep). Moreover, many women actively sought new medical interventions, whether in the form of patent medicines, infant welfare clinics, or gynecological expertise of physicians, not to meet imperialist goals but for personal reasons, such as to resolve perceived problems with fertility (including the conception and successful raising of sons beyond infancy) or modernist visions of domesticity (Kim 2014).

Nevertheless, female-centered arguments on the whole were subsumed to colonial bio-politics that prioritized the stability of nuclear families with women entrenched firmly in their proper domestic roles. Women may have sought medical intervention to meet personal goals, but those goals were often conditioned by the patriarchal nature of the family that necessitated the birth of sons for lineage or household preservation. Women may have employed modern practices and material goods, yet the new lifestyles they promoted, whether in the Christian home, “Sweet Home,” or other home based on newly envisioned male-female or parent-child relations, continued to premise women’s role in the domestic space. In short, women became subjects, citizens, and members of society foremost in their biological and social roles as mothers, as expressed in the phrase “mothers of citizens” (kungmin chi mo, 國民之母) repeated in different expressions throughout the period. This explains the categorization of women in colonial administrative thought into reproductive and non-reproductive bodies.

Mobilizing women

The division between reproductive and non-reproductive female bodies is perhaps most flagrant in the realm of health and medicine. The bio-medical research on women’s bodies, for instance, posed different questions and calibrations for women who experienced and had yet to experience menopause (Park 2014a). Puinbyōng or “women’s disease” was presented in print media as of concern for women before menopause. While women were to be “Wise Mothers, Good Wives,” it became apparent that some women were excluded from this moniker, particularly those involved in sex-related work. Health screening of female sex workers operated on a logic that placed them as the vectors of venereal disease and hence a threat to the stability of the nuclear
family, not on notions of the women’s rights to adequate medical care. Medical discussions of women’s health marginalized other concerns such as cancer that did not focus on or were not related to women’s reproductive activity (gestation, delivery, lactation) and fertility (Kim 2008a). Perhaps the most extreme form of colonial mobilization of non-reproductive female bodies was the system of Japanese military sexual slavery, euphemistically coined “comfort women” (위안부), which recruited an estimated 200,000 women. This system inflicted and sanctioned institutionalized sexual violence on particular women by imprisoning women to provide sexual services to the Japanese military at the warfront (Chung 1997). Built on a theory of male sexuality and morale in war, this system disproportionately mobilized lower-class Korean women, enabled by patriarchal practices in Korea related to the labor and sex trafficking of women (Soh 2008). This raises the question of Korean complicity in the recruitment of “comfort women” and operation of this system as well as the continued silencing of these women’s voices in the contemporary gendered, discursive practices that place the chastity of Korean women and men’s humiliation or failure to protect that chastity at the center of the issue (Yang 1998b). “Comfort women” were not to be mothers. In fact, they were to use condoms in a time of restricted access to contraceptives, and many testimonies attest to the forced abortions inflicted on their pregnant bodies. Moreover, their reproductive health was of little concern, and many report infertility and other lingering gynecological problems in its aftermath.

The industrial sectors’ mobilization of women’s labor also operated on an axis of women’s reproductive capacity. The visibility of the Factory Girl or 여공 (여공) in the 1920s and 1930s developed in the context of rapid industrialization and rural impoverishment brought about by the colonial government’s industrial promotion policies (Yoo 2008). Korean women’s entrance in the colonial wage market was a highly gendered process. Young rural women migrated to work in factories as part of family strategies that relied on their wages. In so doing, they forged new identities and experiences that changed new dynamics in family structures and contributed to debates on new womanhood. Their employment heavily deployed sexual division of labor based on women’s marital and reproductive status. Employers exploited gendered domestic norms to naturalize manager–worker relations, with female workers placed under the paternalistic (and potentially sexually abusive) care of male managers, a common plot in colonial literature (Barraclough 2012a). Women workers were perceived as temporary wage laborers, working between childhood and marriage, in tasks premised on their supposed feminine skills and traits—dexterous fingers, patience, docility, and endurance. They dominated light industries in textiles and food processing. Women who worked after marriage often held jobs that offered flexibility such as in cottage industries or piece work that could be accomplished at home, agricultural wage work, the service sector in urban areas (restaurant, street vendors), or part-time/seasonal hires in food processing or rubber factories (Kim 2009). Vocational training or education offered female workers was overwhelmingly focused on “womanly skills,” “moral cultivation” with etiquette, and “rules for factory life” and not on technical skills that would further their possibility for promotion or permanent employment. Similar management techniques resurfaced in postwar industrializing South Korea, accounting for the pattern noted by Seungsook Moon of women “mobilized to be domestic” (Moon 2005).

Female workers, however, did not sit idly to their poor working conditions. Female workers organized numerous labor unions and strikes, raising demands such as maternal leave, the right to nurse their children while working, and protections at the workplace. Some resisted with their feet, their high turnover plaguing managerial efforts to secure worker productivity. In fact, other non–elite working women too formed consciousness of selves as working women and took part in organized labor activities (Jung-Kim 2005). Both kisaeng and café waitresses published their own journals, Chang Han (Lasting Regret, 1927) and Yŏ sŏng (Woman’s Voice,
1934), respectively, seeking to better their working conditions. Female students too organized strikes in protest of student life such as dormitory regulations. In the 1920s, Korean nursing students at mission hospitals waged strikes to protest their conditions both as students and as hospital workers (Kim, In prep).

Many women found other opportunities to mobilize. During the colonial period, women’s range of activities expanded tremendously, forming over 400 women’s organizations organized around a broad array of religious, educational, political, and social issues. The Protestant Church presented women with unprecedented opportunities to receive education and exercise leadership (Strawn 2013). The establishment of the Korean Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) in 1923 was the culmination of Korean Christian women’s groups and stood at the forefront of women’s organizational efforts promoting the rights and equality of women in education, work, and the family (Choi 2013). In fact, many of the women leaders who led more radical or alternate lifestyles were leaders in Christian organizations. Other religious practices such as Ch’ŏndogyo, successor to the indigenous Tonghak religion, Buddhism, and shamanism arguably posed challenges to traditional gender roles as well and perhaps deserve more scholarly analysis. In 1927, women’s organizations coalesced under the umbrella of the nationalist women’s organization Kŭnhoe. Dominated by socialist women, Kŭnhoe articulated an understanding of gender oppression as emerging from socio-economic structures. Increasing pressure from colonial censors and masculinist nationalist or socialist imperatives, nonetheless, curtailed the integration of class struggle in the women’s movement as feminist platforms became sidelined (Wells 1999). Leftist critiques did not disappear, however. Recent scholarship on leftist literature suggests that while mainstream socialist narratives may not grant “revolutionary agency nor autonomous subjectivity” to women’s struggles and subsume their activities under the revolution, leftist women writers such as Kang Kyŏng-ae produced a variant feminism to address the plight of lower-class women (Park 1998; S. Park 2013).

Besides the pen, the courtroom was also used by women to protect and promote their interests. A discussion of women’s rights would not be complete without an examination of customary laws related to the family. Since the Chosŏn period, kinship regulations held implications for women’s rights in regards to property and ritual inheritance, marriage, divorce, exercise of legal authority, and responsibilities toward the household and its members. The categorization of women into primary and secondary wives, for instance, resulted in mothers being the arbiter of social status and legitimacy to their sons in elite families (Deuchler 1992). Scholars point to Japanese colonial legal practices that maintained “customs” such as corporal punishment and kinship practices in a modernized legal system with a series of customary laws (Lee 1999; Yang 1998a). Colonial regulations restructured the family into nuclear households, appointing the eldest son to inherit the household headship and slating younger brothers to separate when they marry, becoming heads of their households (Sorenson 2013). While customary family law continued the patriarchal principles of patrilineality and primogeniture, conflicts arose when widows presumed the role (albeit temporary) of house-heads in the absence of sons. As house-heads, widows wielded the authority to appoint the next house-head, adopt, and manage inherited property. When interests of widows clashed with those of the lineage, it was often left to the courts to resolve (Lim 2011). Women figured prominently in legal suits involving adoption and inheritance, both as the plaintiff, as women exercised legal agency to protect their interests, and as defendants, reflecting the anxieties posed by the reality of women’s mobility. Their physical absence (women did leave their husbands, failed to receive a legal divorce, or lived with other men in relationships without marriage and therefore were not recognized by courts) posed problems for lineages that no longer saw these women as serving their households (Lim 2013).
Yet the courts often ruled in favor of widows within the context of shifting definitions of family that increasingly became defined legally as nuclear. This was consistent with other legal practices that ruled in favor of the rights of the nuclear family over that of the lineage. Revisions in 1939 to the family law opened adoption to sons-in-law and non-kin, claiming to expand heirship rights to daughters indirectly through their husbands. Nevertheless, colonial customary family law failed to grant widows full inheritance rights as permanent house-heads or expand women’s inheritance and property ownership rights in general. By solidifying the patrilineal household-headed nuclear family now backed by modern law, the Japanese colonial state preserved the patriarchal family order. The postwar South Korean state continued the house-head-based nuclear family system until the 2005 Family Law revision, which effectively abolished the house-head system (Shin 2006).

In reflecting on her divorce, Na Hyesŏk noted the powerlessness men faced, “I feel great pity for the men of the educated class in Korea. They aren’t allowed to enter the political arena, which should be their primary arena. There’s no way for them to use the knowledge they have acquired and developed.” Like the rethinking of womanhood, masculinity too faced a myriad of challenges to redefine itself in the face of Japanese colonial rule. Korean men, while unable to take high leadership positions in politics or the government, were able to take high-profile positions in the arts, industry, and society. Whether it was the Social Darwinist-infused sacrificial spirit of patriotic soldiers in muscular nationalist narratives, confidence of the successful entrepreneur, or emasculated and perhaps effeminate media icon Modern Boy (the counterpart to Modern Girl), images of Korean modern manhood varied (Tikhonov 2007; Jung-Kim 2005).

Yet, marriage and fatherhood were not as life-altering for men as they were for women. As Na continued, “I also feel pity for the women of the educated class, that is, New Women. They still spend their childhoods and married lives within the feudal family system, so that their lives are incredibly complex and chaotic.”

The colonial period witnessed a reconfiguration of womanhood that remained premised on women’s roles in the domestic space yet was infused with new conceptualizations of equality, rights, and humanity. Female education guided by the framework “Wise Mother, Good Wife” served foremost to produce mothers and housekeepers who met collective directives. Education outfitted women with not only what was presented then as advanced scientific learning and skills but also the tools and confidence to raise their voices in the world of publishing, organizations, and courtrooms. The colonial period produced a generation of educated women who would take leadership roles in postcolonial Korea. Their activities and publications brought to the forefront the “woman question.” Women’s critiques themselves, however, failed to move beyond the framework of the family as the basis of society. Even the journal Sin yŏja’s radical call for women’s liberation was premised on her location in the domestic space. It is this “woman question” and patriarchal nature of the family now codified by law and practice that both emergent states (DPRK and ROK) had to grapple, as other chapters in this volume attest.

Glossary

“Wise Mother, Good Wife” (hyŏnmo yangch’ŏ)
Cultural Politics (munhwa chŏngch’i)
Sin yŏja (New Woman, the journal)
“civilization and enlightenment” (munmyŏng kaehwa)
New Woman (sin yŏsŏng).
Notes

References


