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# **Life Since Then: Reconstructing Korean Women's Educational Experiences and their Lives**

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**Abstract:** This study examines Korean women's educational experiences during the Japanese colonial period in Korea (1910-1945). The primary research approach is discourse analysis of the language used in interview data and written documents.

The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of Korean women in relation to women's education during the Japanese colonial period in Korea (1910-1945). The initial question motivating this research was: How is it that a human being becomes a woman through the educational process? In order to begin to answer this question, the researcher interviewed five women who were the original attendees of Kyungsung Public Girls' School from 1924 to 1932. At the time of the interview, these women were all well into their 80s and 90s. Written documents were also analyzed to supplement and enhance the perspectives of the interviewees. These documents include newspaper editorials and popular magazines of the era, and reports by Japanese officials with regard to the education of women in Korea.

## **Historical Background**

During the last century, Korean social systems underwent many changes: from a monarchy to a republic, from a hereditary hierarchy system to one of more or less equal social status, and from feudalism to capitalism. However, there is one dominant system that has still prevailed and that has not eroded over time. That system is the patriarchal system which assumes the predominance of men over women. The patriarchal system has made Korean people value traditional female virtues of being a good daughter, a good wife, and a good mother. Education under this patriarchal value system seems to function as an important mechanism to produce a 'virtuous' woman and thus to maintain the Korean patriarchal system.

Before the establishment of the first public girls' school in Korea in 1908, women's education was conducted at home and focused predominantly on female morality and attitudes and on household skills. The early education offered by the girls' schools provided two levels of primary and secondary education and took a form that actually did not differentiate between adult and child education. Under the social structures of Japanese colonialism and Korea's traditional patriarchal system, women's education in Korea developed and institutionalized, with a focus on young girls rather than on adults.

This paper examines the discourse produced by the interviewees in the form of extended narratives. In these narratives, the speakers recount their experiences as members of a privileged minority of women – privileged because educational opportunity for females was extremely limited at the time.

## **Research Design**

This study is based primarily on the interview data collected from the five Korean women who attended the first and only public girls' school in Seoul in the 1920s and 1930s. This study focuses on an in-depth discourse analysis of the language used in both the oral and written

data (Schiffrin, 1994; Chafe, 1994; Brown and Yule, 1983). Through a discourse analytic approach, the researcher examines patterns in linguistic use that underscore the attitudes and perspectives of the various participants involved in women's education at the time. The entire database contains exceptionally precious historical and personal information that becomes all the more powerful through a systematic macro- and micro-level examination.

### Findings

The data used in this paper reveal not only that women's education in Korea has never been politically neutral, but also that it has been, and perhaps still is, essentially for the benefit of men. While the school as a new learning place may have looked entirely different from the home as the traditional learning place, the values and attitudes that the school actually emphasized for the girls were identical to those that were traditionally emphasized at home. These values reflect the dominant ideology of the Korean patriarchal system. In examining the narrative data, it becomes immediately clear that the values taught at school served to maintain the male dominant social order, thus sustaining the oppressed status of females.

An examination of the data from popular media also reveals that the educational movement to provide equal opportunity for females in Korea is simply a move to perpetuate and even strengthen the already conventionalized patriarchal system. The following example excerpted from the *Toklipshinmun* (a newspaper for the popular Enlightenment Movement) will illustrate:

**If the government builds a school for boys, it should build another for girls.**

Therefore, we want the government to enforce the same law **regardless of gender**, age, and social and economic status. Boys will grow up to be government officials, merchants, and farmers and girls will grow up to be their wives. Therefore, if a wife has as much learning and knowledge as her husband, the home will be fine and if a wife has children, she will know how to raise her children and teach them so that the children will be good and will be educated well in the hands of their mother before they go to school.

**Women's work is therefore no less important than men's work**; rather women's work has the importance of bringing the posterity of the nation. **How we can look down on women as less than men and treat them unequally in education?** (Editorial of *Toklipshinmun*. (5/12/1896)) [my translation] [emphasis add]

Here, the logic appears to be that boys and girls should receive equal treatment with respect to educational concerns (relevant passages marked in bold). But, underlying the argument for equal education is actually a masked attempt to further enhance, support, and serve the men (relevant passages marked with underline).

Against a backdrop of this type of male dominance, the Japanese also targeted women's education as an important social issue. However, in the case of Japan, education of Korean women was considered as a means to better control and manipulate the Korean population in general. The following excerpt from a Japanese official will provide and explicate to show just to what degree Japan used women's education as an insidious means of control.

**Korean girls' education is as important as boys' education.** Economic fusion and social fusion are the root and stem of colonial policies, and out of the two, the latter, that is social fusion is much more difficult. However, if successful, it becomes a stronger

cement that consolidates the root and stem of the society. **For this, the short cut begins by influencing women... It is obvious that women who are emotional but less egocentric and self-conscious are more easily influenced than men. It is also true that once influenced, it is difficult to repair. And also if women are influenced, then men are automatically influenced.** Thus if we do not touch the far bottom of the bottom in this way, the basis of ruling will not be solid. **Eroding the Korean home means eroding the entire society.** This way, emotional fusion will be permanently achieved. Therefore, if possible, Japanese women must be hired as teachers and we must make them go into Korean homes and try erode them permanently. Therefore I believe that women's education has an important implication. (Hara. (1910s). Journey to Korea. Recited from Hyun, 1998. p.42.) [my translation] [emphasis added]

For Japanese imperialism, women's education is a means to suppress Korean power. Women's education was considered an important means of influencing women, eroding the home, and dominating the entire society. Here women are only the target to influence the new dominant values and maintain the patriarchal social system. The purpose of education is only found in the connection of the two verbs of "influence" and "erode" (the verb, "influence" is used four times and the verb, "erode", three times.). Thus, education falls totally into the major means for the dominance of a certain group over other groups

The pervasive patriarchal values can be found even in the motivation of women to go to school. The narratives of Sunhee Jung illustrate this:

I married my husband when he was 16, a junior in secondary school. My husband left Korea to study at Waseda university, in Tokyo, when he was a senior, without finishing the secondary school. One day, I happened to look at his work on his desk, such as his drawings and study materials. **I'm so surprised at the tremendous difference from my level. I only graduated from a four-year-course elementary school. Tremendous difference. How can I, with my discretion, support him as a wife? In order not to be estranged.** If estranged as a spouse, second wife, first wife, hisasigami (modern hairstyle influenced from Japan), chignon (Korean traditional hairstyle of a married woman), at that time. That idea might have come to my mind, even though I was young. **So I said to my father-in-law, "I want to go to school."** So I started my study again. (Narratives of Jung, Sunhee.) [my translation] [emphasis added]

On a macro level, we can see that the impetus in Jung's life to return to school was her sudden realization of her own insecurity which arose from the sharp differences in the education level between her husband and herself ("tremendous difference," uttered two times in two contiguous sentences). On a micro level, in her narrative about her past experience, Jung's consciousness shifts freely from past to present and past again. This shifting stream of consciousness is deeply related to such emotional aspects as surprise or panic. These emotional moments are expressed by the present tense (as in "I'm so surprised..." and "How can I...support...") while factual information is expressed by the past tense marking (as in "I only graduated..."). In the original Korean, Jung uses a variety of markers which enhance the strong interrelationship between present tense marking and heightened affective involvement.

Clearly, the gender relations between Jung and her husband were not balanced or equal. The right to make decisions at any level was in the hands of her husband. Through her language,

she seems to have been very passive about this unequal relationship and silently accepted the Korean custom that enabled men to marry again without divorcing the first wife; she was afraid of that potential possibility. While women may have been able to attend to school as a result of the educational reform, the choice seems to have been primarily motivated and justified by the desire to maintain and improve their relationships with men.

Another major learning place for women was home. At home, practical teaching of female skills and mentality for girls were emphasized. The following excerpt from Jung's narratives illustrates this:

Ha::haha, **“girls of marital age going around any other place other than school, that’s not good.”** My grandma drove my friends away. But then I **couldn’t move** an inch. I couldn’t come out of my house. And at home, the kitchen, the place for cooking and the place for seamstress where they are sewing. In the sewing room, I was collecting the colorful pieces of cloth. And in the kitchen, if they cook, I said **“me too,”** huh **“Me, me.”** So **I, too,** tasted and watched what they did. **That was the major work, so, even if I got married at fifteen,** I did needlework for the marriage. I was told that I was treating well with so many family members. Since I was so little, so much training I received, because they were afraid of my being expelled and going back, due to not doing the housework well. umh **“You, if being expelled and coming back, will be killed with a cup of poison,” they said. So, ‘if I go back because of the toughness of life, I must be ready to die.’** Whether you like or not, once you get married, you must stay in the marital home until you die. Without that, you can't go. That’s it. Under that rule, **we have been living.** (Narratives of Jung, Sunhee.) [my translation] [emphasis added]

Socially acceptable women appear to be made through systematic and long term training, although informally. Home was a very important place to reproduce these women. The judgmental message of Jung's grandmother regarding the girls' attitudes denotes highly valued expectation for Korean girls at the time. Jung's grandmother as a successor of the social norms provides judgment for the 'good' or 'not good', confining or limiting Jung's possible experience (The Korean prefix, "an (not)" as in "anjota (not good)" is used to express the opposition to "jota (good)"). These norms follow the possible range of Jung's acts (The Korean prefix, "mot- (unable)" as in "mothuda" (can't) is used here to provide the meaning of being unable or not possible.) Thus, the judgment of being good or bad set the possible range of behaviors. This direct quote is emphasized by the use of the pronoun, "that", which not only repeats but also emphasizes the previous phrase, "girls of marital age going around any other place other than school" as a condensed form.

While Korean girls learned the household skills such as cooking and sewing by following other women (as seen in the repetition of "me too" or "me, me".), the skills were also taught together with mental training. These skills were considered important and closely related to prepare for future marital life of women and thus the importance of skills were imbued as a key to make a happy living. At the end of this excerpt, Jung's internal thought is shown. Here, the shifts of verbs (come → go; kill → die) as well as the change of subjects (you → I) denote how women can internalize the ideology that tightly connects the skills and female mentality. The interviewee ends her narratives in this excerpt by generalizing her situation into Korean women at the era with the use of the subject, "we" ("Under that rule, we have been living.").

Traditional values for women taught at home were also emphasized at school. Under the Japanese imperialism, Japanese manners were taught as important feminine attitudes by Japanese female teachers. The following excerpt will illustrate:

**We learned Japanese manners such as walking along the floor on our knees. We learned totally Japanese manners at school....We used what we learned....**How to place an ashtray, and how to drink Japanese tea. (Narratives of Shim, Dongsook.) [my translation] [emphasis added]

The female virtues that support the patriarchal system provide specific ‘feminine attitudes.’ Under the Japanese occupation, Japanese ‘feminine’ attitudes were taught regularly by Japanese teachers. The interviewees tell that they did not resist these attitudes because the behavior looked ‘more feminine’ and well educated. The specific historical and political situation of Korean society conducted a defining role of how women should be through selecting and allowing some experiences. By doing what they learned, women internalized the social values in their lives.

Educated women in the early 20<sup>th</sup> were called ‘new women.’ While the educational opportunity for these new women was very limited, the opportunity to study in a higher-grade school or to get a job was extremely limited. A woman at her graduation lamented about her reality as follows: “first of all, although I want to study more, where can I go? ... if I give up my study for work, is there any job? ...if my situation does not allow me to study and if I cannot work for the society, I can consider marriage. But my opinion about marriage is different from my parents’, thus although I would marry, I’m just in worries.” (Kim, 1924, pp.32-33)

### Conclusion

This study provides a detailed and intricate view of women’s education through voices never before heard and serves as a comparative basis for the tracking of issues of equality for women up to and including the present situation in Korea. In the Korea’s urgent political crisis of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, women’s education was an important social issue among Korean people. However, women were not recognized as independent individuals who were contributing to Korean society as full members like men. Women’s roles and identities were recognized only in relation to men, such as their sons or husbands or fathers. In this divided role, women fall into the class of secondary members of the society whose identities are defined only in relation to men.

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