

*Colonial Modernity in Korea*

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Published by the Harvard University Asia Center  
and distributed by Harvard University Press  
Cambridge (Massachusetts) and London, 1999

SEVEN

*The Price of Legitimacy:*

*Women and the*

*Kŭnuhoe Movement, 1927-1931*

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In fact, much the same sort of movement and mixture went on in old England as we find in older Herodotus, who also, in telling what had been, thought it well to take a woman's lot for his starting point.  
—George Eliot, *Middlemarch*

A growing number of historians both inside and outside Korea are becoming disenchanted with the dominance of the nationalist paradigm for interpreting Korean history in the twentieth century. Not only are the evaluative categories of nationalism unhelpful when examining the activities of the nationalists themselves, but they also hinder the historian from investigating large and important areas of experience that fall outside the interests of nationalists then and now. Recent challenges to the nationalist approach, however, have tended to demystify specific nationalist figures and movements chiefly by attacking their nationalist credentials, and thus they inadvertently reinforce the operation of nationalist categories. This chapter attempts an indirect critique of nationalist historiography

and a more direct critique of the claims of nationalists during the 1920s and 1930s by raising the question: What happens when one takes the position of women as one's starting point?

This course does not enable the historian to sidestep the nationalist paradigm. On the contrary, it forces one to tackle head-on the central claim of nationalism, namely, that nationalism works on behalf of all and therefore it is in everyone's interest to work on behalf of nationalism. From their inception, women's movements and issues in twentieth-century Korea have been drawn into the orbit of this generic pretension. Moreover, unless one holds an essentialist view of "femaleness," one can hardly say that Korean women ought not to have been involved in nationalism—or become "nationalists." In this case, it might not be the nationalist paradigm that is at issue so much as a version of nationalism in which women either were or are thought to have been passive, a version that closer attention to a wider base of materials might call into question. But if it can be argued that women actively contributed to the substance of Irish nationalism, for example, it is not at all easy to do so in Korea's case.<sup>1</sup>

It is not easy moreover to conceive what a "female" version of nationalism might constitute, especially in the Korean case, other than a redefinition of nationalism so fundamental that it would no longer be recognized and supported by most male nationalists. Where nationalism is based on the priority of ethnic and linguistic identity, movements to reorganize in earnest the power relations between men and women seem irrelevant, or worse, a violation of the priority that will weaken the national project. It was not possible for Korean women to share jointly in whatever benefits nationalism promised without some such major reorganization of their society. But that, to the men, was not what nationalism was about. Yet if women decided not to help further the nationalist aspirations of the men, it was possible they would fare even worse in their efforts to change gender dynamics. As it was, activist Korean women had to rely on promises, in a kind of strategic deal, that once nationalist objectives were realized, women would be rewarded. But since Japan's expulsion from Korea and the reorganization of gender relations were not at all the same thing, there was no guarantee that in a politically liberated Korea women would not find themselves subjected even more firmly to reasserted precolonial traditions or some other male-centered prescription of womanhood. It is a moot point whether this was not actually the case under the two decades of Park Chung Hee's rule.

Be that as it may, what I wish to argue is not what women should or should not have done, but that the experience of many women and their movements in the 1920s and 1930s undermines the common viewpoint that by working for nationalist objectives women also worked positively on behalf of the causes they believed were specific to their historical situation. I argue, further, that although some women were conscious to a degree of this subterfuge of nationalism, they were hindered in their pursuit of an independent agenda by lack of support from other women, hostility from Korean men, the nationalists' stranglehold on debate, and the subsumption of women's liberation under the socialist agenda. They were of course also affected in many ways by the Japanese version of modernization, but this is far too large a topic to expand upon in this chapter.

Korean society historically presents an almost prima facie case for using gender as an interpretive framework. The metaphysics, mores, human functions, architectural designs, spatial divisions, and state ideology of the Chosŏn dynasty were so consciously organized with reference to gender principles that instead of a social construction of gender one might justifiably speak of a gendered construction of Korean society. This is confirmed by the fact that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when pressure for social reform intensified, gender—particularly the role of women—became a central issue. In the 1920s, when restrictions on Korean publications were relaxed, debate on gender issues exploded, a debate strangely absent from subsequent nationalist histories of the period.

Women's movements in the modern era were initially associated with religious movements such as Tonghak (later Ch'ŏndogyo) and Christianity, a finding that agrees with Gerder Lerner's "discovery" in her second volume on the history of women in the West.<sup>2</sup> At the turn of the century, educated Korean Protestants in particular strongly promoted reform of social practice and thought regarding women, partly for moralistic reasons but also as part of a campaign to "strengthen the nation." Thus began the tradition that spans the Ch'anyanghoe of the 1890s and the Songjukhoe of the 1910s (discussed below) and the National Debt Repayment movement of the 1910s, the various *aeguk puinhoe* (patriotic women's societies) of the 1920s and 1930s, and some religious women's groups and certain features of the Korean Women's Development Institute in contemporary South Korea. Brought into being by nationalists, it is this

tradition that worked most on behalf of nationalist goals and tolerated the subordination of "women's" issues in the process.

In 1920, an alternative movement was introduced through the new journals and newspapers by some highly educated women such as Kim Wŏnju (1896–1971), the first Korean woman to found and edit a journal,<sup>3</sup> and Na Hyesŏk (1896–1948). This movement can in many respects be characterized as a liberal-feminist movement, and it activated a debate on gender that proved its undoing, as the discourse was taken over by males and diverted toward issues of "patriotic" virtue and "national" import: gender was treated as it had been in early Chosŏn—as a morally prescriptive endeavor. By the mid-1920s it was clear that many males, bereft of their power to rule the nation, were hostile to any move by women that would affect the gender balance of power, something "modernity" ostensibly offered women.

At this point a split ensued between the earlier religion-based (and now comparatively "conservative") groups and the newer, more iconoclastic women's groups associated with socialist organizations or ideas. Cognizant of the easy isolation of the liberal feminists, socialist women addressed basic conditions of rural and new laboring women. These rival groups joined forces in 1927 in the Kūnuhoe, the "sister" body of the united front organization, the Singanhoe. Although numerically inferior, the socialists proved more articulate in their explication of women's conditions and requirements. In the process, however, women's issues as such lost clear definition as they were merged with generic socialist goals.

Sharing the fate of the Sin'ganhoe, the Kūnuhoe also dissolved in 1931. Through the remainder of the decade, the image of the "new" or "future" woman was steadily transformed by the rise of commercial media, under Japanese and Korean direction, from a conscious self-determining being to a "modern" mother compliant with the fashions of glossy magazines and the obligation to support the modern advancement of her children. Heavy political pressure drove the more radical groups underground and the religious and conservative leadership into a truce with the Government-General or even into the service of its programs.

Although, given the imbalance between male and female power and resources, it is difficult to see what strategy might have been more fruitful, acceptance of the notion that women's goals could be attained by working for nationalist and, to a lesser extent, socialist

agendas appears to have been a costly procedure. The severity of the struggles of South Korean women since 1948 is in part a consequence of the way in which the women's movements related to nationalist and socialist movements during the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>4</sup> My object is to examine the dilemma in terms of the historical data, beginning with some observations on problems surrounding the elevated status awarded the nation in analyses of modern historical experience.

### The Strength of the Nation

Prasenjit Duara has reminded us recently of the need to free modern Chinese history from preoccupations with the nation-state.<sup>5</sup> Hardly less must be said about Korean historiography, especially concerning the history of women on the Korean peninsula, where nationalism put down such deep roots and so successfully inculcated the utter naturalness of the nation as the basis for all else that one might reasonably doubt that any considerable importation of a Western linear-teleological mentality was required.

The primacy of "nation," however defined, is an aspect of nationalism itself. It is only within nationalism that the nation is considered so crucial; only within nationalist thought does it appear to be the self-evident basis of statehood. Social Darwinism, which is sometimes used to account for Korean nationalism in its late nineteenth-century phase, applies to nations (if at all) only if the "nation" has already been made the natural unit of competition. The same circularity is true of organic conceptions of the national community, which, as elsewhere, was (and is) espoused by most Korean nationalists, including the early Sin Ch'aeho (1880–1936): transferring the idea of the organic unity of the individual to the nation and then describing its internal and external relations in these terms is supposed to prove that the nation must be organic. "History" thus becomes the expression of that organism. If I wish to save the history of Korean women from this idea of the nation, it is not because I have no regard for the nation as such, but because I find the view that the pattern of history does or should correspond to the imaginations and ambitions of various nationalisms a demagogic one, and one that can normally fulfill itself only by curbing the expression and pursuit of other views.

What alternative, then, does a gender perspective on history offer? Here I distinguish between feminist historiography and gender

studies. A long tradition of feminist historiography interprets a given historical experience through an analysis of gender dynamics. Some key feminist theories attribute to gender composition the material structures and cultural form of societies in general; others are more modest and apply feminist principles to specific, limited historical issues that might not be about gender per se.<sup>6</sup> This chapter is not about feminist historiography, but I am indebted to it for many insights and guidance.<sup>7</sup>

Gender studies I take to mean that which makes any of a multitude of gender issues the subject of analysis. It implies an awareness not only that gender relations, dynamics, and perceptions should be given far more attention in historical analyses but also that those are of the highest importance in understanding the cultural formation of societies. In particular, gender studies in its recent manifestation entails a restatement of an older position, that ideas and culture enjoy agency in history.<sup>8</sup>

As ideas of history, particularly in their approach to nationalism, both Marxist and non-Marxist structuralisms considered gender to be so much a matter of cultural form that it could only be admitted as an effect for which underlying structural causes must be found. This exclusion of cultural dynamics from the realm of causation and from the status of structure has, in fact, handicapped Marxists in their endeavor to topple nationalist historiography. The view that culture is an effervescence, a derivative of movements in social and political structures, precludes real understanding of nationalist culture. Or to put it another way, insofar as nationalism does not lend itself to structural analysis, it has been deemed "mere" culture or even simply emotion. Culture, it has been thought, cannot account for things, at least not important things: it can only be accounted for. Hence culture could not be accepted as a starting point of a historical explanation or be treated as an agent of historical development. Nationalism thus became an enigma, Benedict Anderson's "failure" of Marxist analysis.

It is important therefore, when treating the relationship between gender and nationalism, to recognize that culture was being formed and fought over and that history was being made in the process. For understanding the nature of the cultural struggle in colonial Korea, gender dynamics are an excellent starting point. By "gender dynamics," I have in mind the interaction among the beliefs Koreans held about gender origins, roles, and relations, the forms gender re-

lations took in their society, and the new forms that some envisaged and proposed. To say this interaction has historical agency is to claim that the nature of societies and changes in them is in part explicable in terms of this interaction. At the same time, a cultural approach is suitable for an inquiry into the relation between gender and nationalism and as a method of unmasking the way in which nationalism operates.

### Breaking down the Myth

It is always helpful to remember that the people we study engaged in daily, repetitive rounds of work, meeting, and talking and functioned as family members, companions, and so on. It is important to realize that Koreans in the 1920s and 1930s did not relate everything to nationalist projects, as if there were no other reference points in their lives than the fact of Japanese rule. It was actually a very heady time—there was almost too much going on. Society was undergoing the structural change, with all its attendant problems, of industrialization; an urban labor force was emerging and organizing, people were moving away from hometowns to work at new things, and rural people were experimenting with innovations in agriculture and with cooperatives. There was an explosion of printing—books, journals, newspapers. Education was expanding vigorously among the populace. From the universities of the colonial power, Korean students were bringing back knowledge of new professions, new politics, and all kinds of thinkers from T. H. Green, Tolstoy, and Ibsen to Kropotkin, Smith, and Marx—and Ellen Key and August Bebel.<sup>9</sup> Tradition was being challenged as never before. And whenever tradition was debated, the gender question served as a catalyst.

Women had opportunities as never before. They were being educated; joining the workforce, some as journalists, teachers, and nurses; and large numbers were being drawn from rural families and herded into strictly supervised factory employment. These activities were so contrary to the traditional female prescription that both female and male writers and activists demanded revision of the received culture of gender. The sources on this are abundant, but until recently and, in most current writing on Korea under Japanese rule, still, women's concerns that are not directly linkable to nationalist or socialist movements and aims have been dismissed as frivolous. This simply repeats the accusations of the period itself. Some of the

women's concerns, however, related more concretely to the changes and challenges facing Koreans than did many of the nationalist preoccupations. It is the fate of these concerns that raises the question, Did participation by women in nationalist movements and debates further their causes? (By "their causes," I mean the causes they espoused, not causes I or anyone else would prefer they had espoused.) Significantly, placing gender dynamics at the center of analysis involves a similar critique of the socialists' attitudes toward women's concerns.

### Background Movements

We can usefully distinguish two phases in women's movements between 1890 and 1920, despite some overlapping: (1) a period of modernization, 1890-1910; and (2) a period of mobilization, 1910-20. The first phase reflected two ideas: the low status of women was a symbol of national backwardness, so that raising their status through education and legal reforms would enhance the overall level of civilization and strength; and the oppression of women was seen as a hallmark of traditional society, so that their rescue from oppressive family and social customs would signify the onset of a new society. It is remarkable how explicit was the insight that Korea's society was gender-based. In the second phase, aspirations for social equality were not put aside, but the emphasis shifted to mobilizing women on behalf of independence movements.

When young activist intellectuals engaged in a critique of neo-Confucianism in the 1880s and 1890s, they immediately raised the question of women's status. A limited form of public debate commenced in 1896 with the establishment of the Independence Club (Tongnip hyŏphoe) and its newspaper, *Tongnip sinmun* (Independence newspaper). Here, the position of women was offered as an example of neo-Confucianism as a hierarchy of oppression and an enemy of progress. The first shot in this campaign, regarding women, was fired by Sŏ Chaep'il (1866-1951), founder of the Independence Club in an editorial in *Tongnip sinmun* on April 21, 1896, in which he argued that only stupidity had allowed men to believe Korean women were in any way inferior to Korean men. The antidote was equal education for males and females, from which would ensue social equality and an increase in national strength. In September of

that same year, Sŏ advanced the argument that gender relations were a crucial index of a nation's degree of civilization.<sup>10</sup>

Some two years later, in September 1898, over one hundred wives of aristocratic intellectuals formed the Ch'anyanghoe and established a girls school. In a petition to Emperor Kojong, dated September 1, the leaders stated: "We women . . . have founded the school for the purpose of contributing to the strengthening of the nation through loyalty and patriotism."<sup>11</sup> In this petition begins the application of the labels "old" and "new" to Korean women and their customs. The Old are absurd, imprisoned, and subject to husband, father, and son; the New are enlightened, socially active, and partners with their husbands. Following the failure of the Ch'anyanghoe's campaign to have this school, Sunsŏng School, and other women's schools recognized and funded by the government, women's education passed into the orbit of religious movements.

In April 1907, the first of several aeguk puinhoe, or patriotic women's associations, was founded on the belief that if women demonstrated the will and ability to serve the country as citizens, men would be stripped of excuses to oppress them. The association's activities included efforts to reduce the national debt as well as promotion of female education. Although the idea of women participating in national life was a radical departure from tradition, the programs were far from revolutionary. Despite rhetoric by men about social equality, reform of customs was limited to raising the marriage age, allowing the remarriage of widows, and questioning the institution of concubinage. Korea does not seem to have had a woman as forthright as the Chinese activist Qiu Jin, who in 1906 had declaimed: "The young intellectuals are all chanting 'Revolution, Revolution,' but I say revolution will have to start in our homes, by achieving equal rights for women."<sup>12</sup> Perhaps Ko Hŭijun comes closest in her observation that the National Debt Repayment movement provided Korean women with an opportunity they had been awaiting for five millennia, a means of building a new world.

Shortly after Korea became a Japanese colony in August 1910, a Christian organization named the Songjukhoe (Pine and bamboo society) was formed among teachers and pupils of girls schools in Seoul and P'yŏngyang, and a national network was organized with secret monthly meetings for the inculcation in women of the "spirit of independence." Immediately before the outbreak of the 1919

March First movement, Kim Maria (1891-1944), who had studied in Tokyo and was an associate of Hwang Aedök (Esther Hwang, 1892-1971) and Na Hyesök, arranged for female students to distribute pamphlets calling for female participation in the movement.<sup>13</sup> Subsequently, 471 women and girls were arrested; among them were 68 teachers, 154 students, 73 in public service, 41 farmers, and 23 workers.<sup>14</sup> The movement produced a few outstanding female heroes, such as the martyred Yu Kwansun (1904-20), who were hailed for their dedication to the national movement. Saying that women could not leave the struggle all to men, Kim Maria in April 1919 founded the Tachan aeguk puinhoe (Korean patriotic women's society), forging links with the Korean Provisional Government in Shanghai. By 1920 the association boasted 2,000 members and a platform of national self-determination and rights identical to that of male organizations of the time.<sup>15</sup> But threatened with arrest, Kim Maria fled to Shanghai.

1910s  
The Tachan aeguk puinhoe was representative of women's movements of the time, which, however, were few in number. Its Christian membership and inspiration, leadership by a newly educated woman, reliance on schools, and conformity to male organizations' goals typify this phase. Their participation in the national cause did raise male estimation of Korean women, just as the war efforts of the suffragettes engendered greater respect for women in Britain. Thereafter, women became active in a wide range of "public" spheres; their activities and, from time to time, their opinions were featured in publications.

However, identification with national causes appears to have been closer in this decade than during the previous one. Issues of gender reform and female social equality gave way to struggle alongside men for the same ends as men. Despite the magnitude, relative to traditional times, of the female presence in the March First movement, I have been unable to find any statement specific to women. By comparison, the 1919 Chinese May Fourth movement, which was also precipitated by Japan's imperialist activities, was explicit on women's issues. Confucianism was severely attacked for sexual inequality, filial piety, and its one-sided demand for female chastity. Why was the March First movement so silent on these issues? Was there a women's platform, or only a determination that women would do their bit for the nation? Part of the answer might be that these issues had been raised already in Korea in the 1890s,

especially in connection with a Christian critique of Confucianism. But part of the answer clearly is that for the men who drew up the charter and generated the movement, the cause of national political independence, after a decade of actual rather than imagined imperial occupation, had taken precedence over the issue of gender relations.

### Gender Dynamics in the 1920s

The Government-General's reform of laws on the press and assembly after the March First movement opened up new opportunities for women to express their views. The term "New Woman" was instated, and ideas of female liberation from a liberal feminist viewpoint were printed. The initial impetus came from Kim Wōnju's new journal, Sin yōja (New woman); Na Hyesök presented her feminism through another journal, Yōja kye (Women's world). The acumen of these and other highly educated women and their truly revolutionary views piqued male interest, and in 1920 a debate on gender burgeoned among all leading nationalist and cultural publications. In the process, men recaptured the debate and, by dint of their greater numbers and resources, quickly steered it in their preferred direction. Before long, Kim Wōnju, Na Hyesök, and other feminist women such as the novelist Kim Myōngsun (1896-?) were ostracized,<sup>16</sup> and the women's movements split.

Much more than among men, the split in women's movements was basically between, on the one hand, Christians and nonsocialist nationalists who identified with the Korean YWCA (founded in 1922), church social programs, and the various women's patriotic societies and, on the other hand, the socialists and communists who identified with the Chosōn yōsōng tonguhoe (Korean women's socialist league; founded in 1924) and the organizations of their husbands. A general characterization of the two sides has arisen, according to which the nonsocialist women were conservatives whose politics consisted of financial support for the Provisional Government and affiliation with groups such as the Patriotic Youth Corps (Ch'ōngnyōn aegukdan) and whose object was the amelioration of women's conditions through education and reform. By contrast, the socialist camp is seen as radical and feminist, pursuing class revolution and thoroughgoing female liberation. This, generally, has been considered to be the basic situation when the two streams merged in the Kūnuhoe in 1927.<sup>17</sup>

Christian and nonsocialist activists were numerically far stronger than those in left-wing women's groups. Their views were also less susceptible to censorship and, in contrast to the liberal feminist viewpoint, which was anathematized by males and conservative women and almost immediately smothered by the preponderance of male writings, enjoyed much wider and more frequent publication. Male psychology was clearly an influence on the plot throughout this period, but is too large a subject to analyze in this chapter except incidentally. Suffice it to say that the humiliation engendered by the Japanese removal of the traditional male elite's prerogative to rule and the consequent subjugation of Korean men rendered them extremely sensitive to any suggestion of loss of prerogatives in the home, let alone any call for Korean women to assert themselves against Korean men.

Women's liberation was, however, a topic over which Korean men and their journals competed energetically. The editorial of the second volume of *Kaehyök* (Creation) identified three areas in which Koreans must pursue major reform: labor, women's status, and race. The poor treatment of women in Korea was blamed on the "Chinese" principle of *namjon yöbi*, whereby women were designated male possessions. To rectify this, two main courses were advocated: to persuade men that the *namjon yöbi* construct was artificial, not a law of nature, and to effect recognition of the sanctity of female personhood (the editorial having already urged recognition of the sanctity of labor). On this basis, and "for the sake of the times, for the sake of Korea," men should support women's liberation. If young women actively promoted female education throughout the land and led the "ignorant," women would understand and act upon their own personhood. The editorial was cautionary, however: given that developments in women's rights in Korea "lag far, far behind" those in European nations, immediate demands for application of women's rights were deemed impracticable. What was envisaged was "natural liberation," something that required men and women to grow in awareness together, even if it took 100 years or more.<sup>18</sup> Presumably the term "natural liberation" signified a repudiation of any radical social reform.

A subsequent article on family systems repeated the castigation of *namjon yöbi* and the call for recognition of a woman's complete, free personhood (*in'gyök*). It is significant, I believe, that in both this article and the editorial, the lack of female personhood was linked to the

general order and health of society. In the editorial, it was made responsible for a pathological social formation; in the article it was the reason for the suppression of individuality altogether.<sup>19</sup> But neither writer could refrain from pointing out that female liberation should be supported for the sake of the strength of the nation. This was hardly a feature of the interests of men in Korea only. Much of the discussion of women's rights in China concerned practical arguments. Luo Jialun (a male), for example, argued in 1919 that women's liberation would make the nation strong, since slavery of 50 percent of the population prevented formation of an independent spirit and individual self-determination for men and women alike.<sup>20</sup>

In its September issue, *Kaehyök* included a survey of twenty prominent figures, all male, on the subject of female liberation. Only one respondent, Yi Pyöngjo, president of the culturalist Munhüngsa, expressed reservations about the idea, fearing it would open up a can of worms—free love, debate on chastity, and so on—and claimed it was secondary to democratic and legal reforms. Others stressed the theme of personhood (*in'gyök*) and the artificiality of gender prescriptions, and two respondents even stated that women should enjoy absolute equality with men. Two others opined that the whole issue was for women to decide. One of these, Yu Chinhüi, considered it curious that men should be calling for female emancipation, since that surely implied liberation from male oppression, which could therefore only ensue from women's own consciousness and action. Nevertheless, he observed that women could enjoy complete liberation only after a revolution of society had been accomplished (but what this meant was not explained).<sup>21</sup> The other, the linguist Kwön Ch'igyu, simply thought men had no business inquiring into women's issues. It was, he said, "like barging in on someone else's dinner party."

Kwön's response does point up a crucial problem in the debate on women's issues in this period, a problem that soon crippled ideas and movements trying to address female concerns on their own merits. It is one thing to express modesty in relation to others' affairs, quite another to disclaim responsibility and push them aside. For those men who avoided the "woman" question, the latter appears to have been the dominant reason: it was too uncomfortable and they balked at incorporating these women's demands into their visions of a new society and nation. These demands, after all, went far beyond reform of kitchens, or other so-called women's quarters. It is notice-

able how interest fell off among *Kaebyōk* contributors after the fourth issue, and nothing significant appeared again until an item on divorce in the thirty-fifth issue. Likewise, news items and thoughtful articles on gender in the Shanghai *Tongnip sinmun* (1919-25) simply disappeared as soon as something "vital" arose, such as formation of the Kungmin taep'yohoe (National delegates conference) or submission of Korea's case to the Washington and Pacific conferences of the League of Nations.

Nevertheless, it is possible that if more men had left the whole issue to women, the outcome might have been more positive for the women. Yet few male writers and activists could let the question lie, and in the absence of enough women who had the means and education to publicize their views, men willingly pushed their advantage when not otherwise distracted by "important" matters. It has been observed of the Chinese male domination of this debate during the same decades that one of the reasons "may be that female emancipation was used as a weapon directed as much toward destroying the existing society as for creating real independence for women."<sup>22</sup> This applies much more neatly to Korea in the late nineteenth century, when men perceived that their society was a concrete expression of traditional gender ideals and could not be changed without gender reform. But Japan's direct colonial occupation complicated the situation. Although social change was still desired, most Korean male activists felt obliged to resist the social changes that the colonial regime was effecting and became intolerant of women's movements that could not readily be used to discomfort the enemy or aid national liberation. In addition, the normal male reluctance to surrender traditional prerogatives over women was exacerbated by the perception—or reality—that under the colonial system women, unlike men, stood to gain from social change.

The greatest continuity between the late nineteenth century and the 1920s was a belief in education. The twenty male public figures cited above uniformly subscribed to the omnipotence of education as a means of female emancipation. This can be related to the intense energy expended on education during the first half of the 1920s following the rescinding of the more draconian colonial educational policies. Education was, for the culturalists especially but by no means exclusively, expected to enhance greatly the Koreans' chances of gaining national independence. For women, or more accurately, for the nonsocialist activists among them, education was valued su-

premely as a means of raising the economic and social status of women and improving their life in the family. Through local church networks, these women conducted widespread activities among rural women. The object of their reformist education was health and hygiene, kitchen management and diet, home economics, and child-rearing practices. Many leaders in this enterprise, such as Kim Hwallan (Helen Kim, 1899-1970), gained prominence nationally and later provided leadership for the Kūnuhoe. But their faith in education and seemingly nonpolitical approach brought them into conflict with the small but growing number of socialist women, for whom education signified raising women's political consciousness and whose object was not reform but revolution.

### The Kūnuhoe Experience

The Sin'ganhoe (February 1927 to May 1931) was a united front movement, designed to pool the resources of socialists, communists, and other left-of-center nationalists in a bid to wrest back some self-determination for Koreans and ultimately to restore political independence. The idea was to bury ideological hatchets to the degree necessary to unite around the common goal of national liberation. It may be a measure of the impact of female education programs that women decided in July 1927 to organize an affiliate body, the Kūnuhoe (Friends of the rose of Sharon), in order to ensure that women's concerns were represented and addressed in the united front. They also published a journal, *Kūnu*. Probably on account of the organization's socialist elements, the 530-page history of Korean women from the Enlightenment period to 1945, published in 1972, disposes of the Kūnuhoe in one sentence as an early movement for women's liberation.<sup>23</sup> Yi Kyun'yōng's recent 650-page work on the Sin'ganhoe mentions the Kūnuhoe a mere ten times in passing, without analysis.<sup>24</sup>

The genesis of women's socialist movements between 1924 and 1927 was unpropitious. Male socialists' views of the proper understanding of the "woman" question had already been clarified in the March 1923 general meeting of the left-wing coalition, the Chosōn ch'ōngnyōn tang, when a program of action on women's issues was proposed. Among the 150 delegates present from 80 organizations, only eight were women, who represented four nascent socialist women's groups. Of eight items proposed, four (reform of the family

system, resistance to the good mother / virtuous wife ethic, freedom in marriage and divorce, and abolition of prostitution) were approved, and four (resistance to male violence, reform of women's social system, support for women's economic independence, abolition of customs disadvantageous to women) were rejected. All the rejected items concern problems that concerned women primarily or required males to change their habits and attitudes. The approved items all involved aspects of reform that were believed to have national implications. The first item had long belonged to the attack on Confucian or, more aptly for socialists, "feudal" tradition, the second repudiated the Japanese prescription of the time, the third was equally congenial to male interests, and the fourth was an aspect of anti-Japanese ideology, since the new, generalized, urban prostitution trade was attributed to colonial policy.

The women's socialist league, the Chosŏn yŏsŏng tonguhoe, was founded in May 1924 by 30 women under the watchful eyes of 50 males and 10 police agents. When the relationship between female liberation and class liberation was raised, it was agreed that feminism was a logical corollary of socialism and that female liberation therefore depended on class liberation. As Marxist-Leninist theories of imperialism took hold in the socialist movement, especially after the Comintern instructed Korea's communists, from 1926, to form the united front, all Koreans bar collaborators were deemed a class under the Japanese, with the consequence that women's liberation was made secondary also to national liberation.

Yet the issue was not entirely closed. In founding the Kūnuhoe three years later, its leaders made it clear that they wished to reassert the urgency of the woman question and reinstate the principle that gender change was vital to genuine social transformation. The July 1927 manifesto proclaimed that the reason women were putting aside schism was to unite behind two major struggles, one against "feudal legacies" and the other against "modern contradictions." As in the Sin'ganhoe, the Kūnuhoe platform and prospectus strategically refrained from mentioning Japan directly, but unlike the Sin'ganhoe the issue of modernity was raised as a specific area for attention. The manifesto claimed that, contrary to men's impressions, the lot of women had deteriorated in recent times. "Far from having been eradicated, the former legacies of the old era remain potent as ever, and on top of this are piled the stresses of modern times." Although it conceded that all problems were interrelated so that one

could not solve one without mending the whole, this did not mean, it argued, that particular women's issues should be submerged under a general viewpoint: only by addressing women's problems in their own terms could anything effective be done. Less cautiously, the manifesto ended with the flourish, "The day women liberate themselves, the world will be liberated!"<sup>25</sup>

The prospectus outlined seven specific objectives.

1. Complete abolition of all social and legal discrimination against women;
2. Eradication of all feudal customs and superstitions regarding women;
3. Abolition of early marriage and the institution of free marriage;
4. Abolition of female slavery and licensed prostitution;
5. Amelioration of the economy of rural women;
6. Abolition of wage discrimination and the institution of paid maternity leave;
7. Abolition of dangerous labor and night work for women and boys.<sup>26</sup>

By 1929 membership in the Kūnuhoe had risen to 2,970 women, including 260 residing abroad, mostly in Tokyo. The largest provincial concentration of members was in South Kyōngsang (623 members), followed by South P'yōngan (502) and Kyōnggi (224) provinces. Between them, North Hamgyōng and South Hamgyōng provinces accounted for 489 members, and the organization was well represented throughout the peninsula. The heaviest metropolitan concentration was in P'yōngyang (452), followed by Seoul (224), Pusan (127), Tongnae (117), and Tokyo (105).<sup>27</sup> The relatively large Japan-based contingent accounts for the growth in influence of socialist women by 1929 and suggests familiarity with Japanese feminist ideas.

According to a report submitted early in 1929, the Kūnuhoe had by that time focused mainly on educational, social, and political-economic activities, as well as membership drives. Social activities included relief for flood victims in the northeast and assistance in hygiene reform; political-economic action involved promotion of debating societies, lecture tours, instruction in handicrafts, and support for women involved in labor disputes, particularly in the Wŏn-san area. But by far the greatest amount of energy had been expended on educational work: literacy campaigns, construction of

kindergartens and schools for women and poor children, night classes for women, and so on. In connection with education, campaigns were mounted to eradicate what was called "superstition" (*misin*).<sup>28</sup>

Although education was always deemed vital, impatience was evidently growing over the weak focus on social and economic activism, an impatience that reflected the ideological division within the movement. The general meeting in Seoul in July 1928, attended by 50 delegates from around the country, was marked by mutual recriminations, threats to leave the organization, and resignations by some elected officers.<sup>29</sup> After two years of domination by the non-socialist women, socialist leaders in 1929 had gained enough influence to effect a limited radicalization of the movement. The prominent socialist Hŏ Chŏngsuk (1902-91), an executive officer of the Kūnuhoe from July 1928 till her arrest in December 1930 during the Kwangju movement, published an article in 1929 in *Kūnu* in which she suggested that the Kūnuhoe ought to be the key to opening up the whole women's liberation enterprise to the masses.<sup>30</sup> A significant number of other articles pushed the same line. Chŏng Ch'ŭlsŏng (1897-1958), a founding member of the Kūnuhoe, delivered a powerful, satirical critique of the "lucky" women who talked glibly of the new age for women while remaining blind to the mass of women for whom conditions had only deteriorated.<sup>31</sup> Chang Rin, a male Kūnuhoe adviser, called for a campaign to unite female farmers and laborers.<sup>32</sup> As a result of this pressure, the prospectus was revised in July 1929, with four principal additions: (1) abolition of sexual discrimination in education and expansion of women's higher education; (2) freedom of divorce; (3) freedom of speech, press, and assembly; and (4) establishment of medical facilities and child-care centers for laborers and farmers.<sup>33</sup>

Friction among Kūnuhoe members came to a head during the November 1929 Kwangju student movement and its aftermath. Under Sin'ganhoe and Kūnuhoe sponsorship, this protest by middle- and high-school students expanded into a major national movement. The Government-General acted swiftly to forestall the uprising, arresting the leadership of both united front organizations. Nonsocialist Kūnuhoe members thereupon urged that the movement be depoliticized and concentrate on the elevation of women's conditions through education and other "safe" avenues. But as in the Sin'ganhoe, the Kūnuhoe socialists campaigned for the dissolution and re-

organization of the united front. Both bodies were dissolved, but neither was permitted to reorganize by the Government-General.

### Meaning of the Experience

In a study of women's movements, Nam Hwasuk advances the thesis that the lack of progress with their objectives was in large part due to the insufficient consciousness of the numerically superior "conservative" Christian female leaders. In particular, the cause of the stagnation by 1925 of education-based enlightenment activities is to be found "in the ideological limitations of the [enlightenment] groups themselves." Religious and educational programs "could not hold out any promise at all to rural women, who were in a condition of absolute poverty."<sup>34</sup> It is not clear that the evidence bears this out, since any decline in enthusiasm or the pace of development of schooling in city and town after 1925 was relative only to the extraordinary energy and expansion of the previous four years. The "decline" was a feature rather of elite education, such as attempts to establish a university. There is evidence in Nam's own work that conservative women were not as irrelevant to the masses as she claims. Although she tends to portray the "new" group of left-wing women as potters and the "old" group of Christian reformist women as their clay, she indicates that the socialist women divided over pressure to include nonsocialist women in their membership in order to secure a wider base<sup>35</sup> — as later occurred in the Kūnuhoe.

There is in any case no question that membership in educational and religious-based women's organizations far outnumbered that in their socialist counterparts. The issue is their relation to the Kūnuhoe and the wider women's movement: their position on liberation, their aims, and whether any progress was made toward those aims. The "conservative" women appear, on examination, to be far more radical, indeed iconoclastic, than has often been supposed. In contrast to many of the socialist leaders, who gained influence largely through their marriages to male socialist activists, the more influential among the nonsocialists, usually Christian women, made the very antitraditional choice of remaining single. Moreover, they cut their hair short and often refused to follow restrictive female clothing traditions, for which they published their reasons.<sup>36</sup> They intruded on male occupations and became self-supporting. Although they were happy enough to support, with modifications, the good mother / virtuous

wife ethic that Confucian tradition and modern Japan supported, they insisted on a good father / virtuous husband ethic as well: the first Korean woman to divorce her husband for infidelity was the Christian educator Pak Indök (1897–1940).<sup>37</sup>

However, there was no single viewpoint or clear-cut position among the nonsocialist women on the meaning and methods of women's liberation. Of the Christians it may be said that they believed in self-determination and self-respect, and that this was predicated on a "spiritual" liberation that redefined the ethics of gender relationships. The suppression in the early 1920s of the "liberal-feminist" stand of Kim Wönju and Na Hyesök robbed the other nonsocialists of a precisely defined position. Elements of Kim's and Na's principles were, of course, retained, but not so much as part of a coherent, proactive viewpoint as part of a response to changed circumstances in education and employment. Their external inspiration was drawn chiefly from the writings on freedom of love, marriage, motherhood, and divorce of the Swedish reformer Ellen Key, who was also popular among Japanese women activists. References to Key appear repeatedly in most of the cultural and nationalist journals of the 1920s, particularly in *Sinyösöng*, *Tonggwang*, *Pyöl-gön'gon*, and *Hyesöng*.

This interest disposed nonsocialist women to focus on female self-determination and equal rights in marriage, family, and occupation for which their new educational attainments were judged to equip them: this was what it meant to be a "new woman."<sup>38</sup> It was also the rationale behind their sense of mission to those who had not yet benefited from the new education, and this meant campaigns among rural women. It is important not to underestimate the extent of nonsocialist activity among rural women. There was a network of YWCA organizations throughout the peninsula and a corresponding network of secular women's youth organizations called *yöja ch'öng-nyönho* (not to be confused with the *Yöja ch'öngnyön tongmaeng*, which was affiliated to the socialist *Yösöng tonguhoe*).

As for work among poor rural women, Kim Hwallan, a Kūnuhoe officer and a spokesperson for the YWCA philosophy and activities, became increasingly convinced that rural education was the most pressing task. In the late 1920s she was perhaps the most widely respected female leader in the country. When in November 1927 she spoke in Seoul on the topic of women's rights, the auditorium was

reportedly filled one hour before her address and an equal number of people had to be turned away.<sup>39</sup> In mid-1930, she left for Columbia University in New York to complete her doctoral dissertation, "Rural Education for the Regeneration of Korea."<sup>40</sup> At the welcome dinner held on her return in January 1932, 118 guests attended, "the largest crowd ever seen for such occasions."<sup>41</sup>

Here, of course, we run up against a central problem: given this general perception of the need for rural education and reform, what specific place did rural women occupy? Were women taken as a starting point, or were they subjects of an overall national mission, in which women's activities were simply parallels of men's in an enterprise spearheaded by men? There is no reason why women *should not* have promoted education: in fact, given the previous exclusion of women from education, this promotion ensured that women would not be left without a voice in the new form of society that was perforce developing around them. And the very emergence of educated women campaigning for women's education and social reform was a clear break with the past that opened up new possibilities for women in the future. The question remains, however, whether the leaders of these developments were operating within a "patriarchal" framework of programs and vision. If *gender* issues are to take central stage here, then this is not a minor concern.

But was there awareness of this in the debates of the time? In a sense, there was. The socialist women's critique of the educational campaigns break down into two broad charges: first, that they maintained the traditional male view of gender relations; and second, that they were complicit in the Japanese colonial regime's modernization programs. In relation to the first charge, it is evident that prominent male leaders were eager both to support the educational campaigns and to keep them within proper bounds. Yun Ch'ihö (1865–1945), for example, founder of the Korean YMCA, educator, and arguably the most influential Methodist leader since the 1890s, not only approved but actively supported the educational and rural activities of nonsocialist women. He looked upon the training of female physicians such as Dr. Esther Kim (1876–1910; Korea's first female physician; also known as Esther Pak and Kim Chömdong) with great satisfaction, commended Kim Hwallan highly for her educational work for women through the YWCA and Ewha College, and used his influence to ensure Pak Indök was given every support in her successful

experiment with the "folk high schools,"<sup>42</sup> a rural education venture modeled closely on a Danish educational experiment that continues in Scandinavia today.

More interested in working directly for the improvement of Koreans' spiritual, mental, and material well-being than in political work against Japan, Yun was also more positive than many national leaders about women's efforts to emancipate themselves from traditional marriage culture. Familiar with Judge Lindy's companionate theory of marriage, which stressed the importance of sexual fulfillment and compatibility, Yun was prepared to give his children considerable choice in their marriage partners.<sup>43</sup> While viewing the condition of many wives as one of slave-like drudgery, Yun was prepared to intervene on behalf of his daughters when they were treated disrespectfully by their husbands, refused to participate in the spread of rumors of sexual misconduct leveled against Kim Hwallan and Pak Indök,<sup>44</sup> and resolutely defended Pak Indök against attempts to ostracize her for divorcing her husband. His comments on this last case in October 1931 are worth quoting at some length:

What do I think of it? (1) In the first place, I think she has as much right to divorce her husband as hundreds of young men who divorce their wives, many of them, for no other reason than to marry more attractive girls. To pass by these heartless young men uncensured but to revile and say all manner of evil things against P.I.D. [Park Indök] is another way of saying "women ought to remain men's slaves for ever." (2) Then again what is it that a man—a Korean man—cannot do or enjoy without divorcing a disagreeable wife? . . . But a woman must be chaste, must bear all the hardships and drudgery of a wife, of a mother, of a sewing woman, of a washer woman, [and] face the danger of being kicked, beaten and dragged about by the hair without anybody to appeal to."<sup>45</sup>

On the other hand, Yun assumed that women, even as doctors and teachers, were to be confined to work among women, and he chimed in with the chorus of men who denounced women's independence as "frivolous" when it was not clearly directed toward furthering the welfare of other women. Busying themselves with other matters was "going off on a tangent."<sup>46</sup> He urged young women to retain the traditional feminine virtues of "modesty, reticence, thoughtfulness, and politeness" and of "reverence, faith, and unselfishness."<sup>47</sup> And when at the commencement ceremonies of Ehwa Women's College in March 1935 the center-left nationalist Yō

Unhyōng (1885–1967) advised the students to discard the old ethics for women, Yun expressed concern that his speech contained "unwise advice to young girls."<sup>48</sup>

Although cautious, Yun Ch'ihō was in fact more liberal in his views on female aspirations than many of his nonsocialist peers. In early 1929, the Kūnuhoe solicited written comments from male national leaders on the organization and their expectations of it. It would be tedious to analyze all the responses, and I will cite only the more thoughtful and representative ones.

Yi Chongnin (1885–1950), a well-known Ch'ōndogyo leader and Sin'ganhoe officer, described the Kūnuhoe in prose filled with metaphors from nature as a tender, green shoot that one day would mature and blossom. But remarking on the negative reactions of many men to the Kūnuhoe, he offered this advice: "Rather than crying 'Liberation, liberation, struggle, struggle,' first strive to fulfil your appropriate duties," for "rights are the wages of responsibilities," and "all complaints and discontentment in human society derive from asserting only one's rights and failing to carry out those duties that lie within one's means." Preparing food and clothing, he continued, are not functions belonging solely to "old women," and making speeches and studying books are not the only functions of the "new women." If women carried out their duties according to their abilities or condition without demanding rights, he concluded, these rights would follow of their own accord even if people deliberately worked to prevent this.<sup>49</sup> It is difficult to imagine how any real change in gender relations could ever ensue from this advice, especially given the fact that, as Yi acknowledged at the beginning of his article, Korean women had fulfilled their duties for centuries with nary a right (in the sense meant here) in sight.

The newspaper editor Song Chinu (1890–1945) opined that the most pressing task was to provide the kind of education for housewives and women in "old-style" households that was required to enlighten them concerning the "modern world."<sup>50</sup> This sentiment was seconded by one Kim Tonghyōk, who also placed it in the context of the "overall" national movement: Korea was cursed with mass ignorance, and the first priority was to cultivate "real strength" with enlightenment education. The same applied to women, the masses of whom required education as their part in the struggle to eradicate the "feudal" customs of Old Korea.<sup>51</sup> Undeniably, most of

the funding and effort behind women's education even by 1929 (when approximately 70,000 Korean females were in schools) was contributed by Christians.<sup>52</sup>

These male leaders failed to spell out their expectations of the Kūnuhoe, but the implicit message was that women's movements were to operate alongside or in partnership with male nationalist enterprises. In fact, for many educated nonsocialist women, independence from Japan was a primary concern, and so the same sort of tension existed in their movements as existed in Protestant nationalist movements. Vis-à-vis males' expectations, however, these women were damned if they did not engage in nationalism and damned if they did. A Ch'ōndogyo leader of the Chosŏn nongminsa (Korean peasant society), Yi Sōnghwan, attacked the alleged preoccupation of educated women with opportunities for more active participation in national life for the neglect of the vast majority of Korean women.<sup>53</sup> Another male, Yi Siwan, remarked that women's movements needed to face up to the great gulf that education had opened up between the few and the many.<sup>54</sup>

It is small wonder, then, that many nonsocialist women did depoliticize their activities following the Kūnuhoe's dissolution, as articles in *Tonggwang* after May 1931 indicate. Their activities, however, addressed issues that were certainly specific to women: factory work, economic independence, clothing, and family. But the gender debate had lost its pointedness; the sense of excitement, urgency, danger even, had dissipated. It became not quite incidental but certainly subordinate to "broader" issues. The December 1931 issue of the cultural-nationalist journal *Tonggwang* reviewed the year from many angles, one of which was the woman question. "The women's movement," it opened, "is a sectional movement (*pumun undong*). Therefore the direction its growth and development take is always determined by the general state of the whole movement."<sup>55</sup>

Whatever the complexity of the relationship between the nonsocialist women's movements and nationalism, the socialists were more concerned with their relation to the Government-General, that is, to the forces of imperialism. There was a double sting to their accusation that the "conservatives" indulged in reformism. In the first place, it pointed to the effect of half-measures in diluting women's consciousness of their true, oppressed condition. This, of course, is a standard insight of revolutionary socialist thinking. As William Morris put it so well, "Though making a great many poor people, or

even a few, somewhat more comfortable than they are now . . . is not in itself a light good; yet it would be a heavy evil, if it did anything towards dulling the efforts of the whole class of workers towards the winning of a real society of equals."<sup>56</sup>

In the second place, it raised an uncomfortable possibility, especially for nationalist-oriented women, that their programs differed in no important respect from the colonial power's programs, especially in the educational area. There is some substance to this charge. The Japanese monthly journal, *Chōsen ihō*, for example, carried a number of articles between June 1920 and October 1936 on Korean women's "progress"—in labor mobilization, hygiene, clothing, education, textile production, marriage and family customs, and childcare. But the charge that the Government-General's promotion of certain activities concerning women automatically ruled them out was not accepted by the "conservatives," who were not incapable of firing back acerbic retorts. In January 1931 *Pyōlgōn'gon* published an article by Chōng Ch'īlsōng, a centrist whose initial sympathy for socialism appears to have waned after dissolution of the Kūnuhoe, in which she accused the socialist group of abandoning meaningful activity altogether: "Those who now find themselves with nothing to do after all their clamor for the dissolution of the Kūnuhoe are whiling away their time doing knitting. Is *this* the transition to socialism?" (Chōng employs a pun on characters here, using, instead of the actual Sino-Korean compound for *sahoe* [meaning society or social as in "socialism"], a pair of characters pronounced "sahoe" but meaning "drawing thread.")<sup>57</sup> This brings us to discussion of the relationship between women's issues and socialism in the Kūnuhoe.

Yi Siwan, a male critic of the nonsocialist group, pointed out that there was an apparent contradiction between the "necessary" socialist principle that all parts of the social organism are affected by the same cause-and-effect relationship and the idea that there is something inherent in the women's question that makes it a special category under the oversight of a separate organization. How, he asked, was one supposed to understand its contribution toward the ideals of the whole of humanity, even if as an interim body?<sup>58</sup> Another male socialist, P'ae Sōngnyong, translator of Bebel's writings on female liberation, provided a revealing metaphor on the relationship between women's liberation and socialist liberation. The two are, he wrote, as inseparable as the warp and woof of a fabric.<sup>59</sup> In practice, this enabled the men, who after all controlled debate, publication,

and most activities, to determine the weave of the relationship so that women's issues would serve the overall pattern the men desired.

Socialist women proved susceptible to this pressure. Hō Chōng-suk argued that the woman question was part of a global situation and that its solution was bound up with this general situation. The "correct" socialist position can hardly be said to be clear at any stage of socialist debate. Engels wrote that the monogamous family was an original expression of division of labor systems and private property and that gender inequities grew in tandem with them, but he was ambiguous about whether gender as such or rather economics was the crucial issue.<sup>60</sup> More forthrightly, Plato advocated communal sexual relations, and Christian monks took vows of celibacy out of a sure belief that sexual exclusivity was the door to the concept of private property, not vice versa.<sup>61</sup> Latterly, feminist historiography and anthropology have to some degree dethroned the classical Marxist attribution of structural depth to class and its correlative ambivalence toward feminist politics. It is now impossible not to acknowledge that gender—or the family—is something around which many societies are explicitly arranged or that it can serve as a catalyst for major change.

However, the Korean debate was pursued well before feminism had prompted changes in many Marxists' views on gender. Despite some ambiguity in the Kūnuhoe manifesto on this point, as mentioned above, in the end Hō Chōngsuk proffered a straightforward materialist analysis of women's status as a dependent feature of the economic organization of society. Before the advent of "civilization," under a system of public ownership, women were equal with men. Their relegation to inferior status and oppression by men developed as a consequence of private ownership and economic diversification. Women's fate was related to the rise of classes through the transfer of ownership rights from feudal landlords to capitalists (women as commodity exchange). Hence the present ferment over women's position was not accidental but a result of historical necessity and must be solved according to this same historical necessity.<sup>62</sup> The influence of Bebel on socialist women's thinking was decisive: the "lecture" in the Kūnu journal in 1929 by the pseudonymous Tusōng, for instance, was a paraphrase of Bebel's *Woman and Socialism*.<sup>63</sup>

This construction of the past set the stage on which the Korean women's movement was cast in a supporting role in the overall so-

cialist drama. The feature article of the 1929 issue of Kūnu was written under a pseudonym, presumably by a high-ranking officer of the Kūnuhoe, who explained the relation in some detail.<sup>64</sup> The Kūnuhoe was founded, she wrote, for the specific purpose of releasing women from the fetters of the anti-female past and the capitalist present. What then of its relation to the Sin'ganhoe? The existence of a gender-specific body was not legitimate, she answered, in terms of the general principle of unity, but only as "an interim body responding to the special subjective and objective conditions of Korean women and aimed at unifying all levels of the women's movements, including thought, religion, education, church, and so on." It was not to be considered a vanguard movement of an ideological group. Nor, as a movement for the liberation of women, was its meaning to be sought simply in a struggle against Korean men, for "insofar as women, too, are one part of society, it is a necessary fact that they must act in tandem with men in the whole movement."<sup>65</sup>

The socialist literary leader, Yi Kiyōng (1895–1984), argued energetically that the women's movement should focus on the "broader" aim of socialist revolution. "In a sense," he stated, "we may say that women and laborers share the same destiny. That is, just as in the absence of liberation of the laboring classes one cannot hope for women's liberation either, so without proletarian literature one cannot establish a wholesome women's literature." Simply resisting men in society and in literature was meaningless. Instead, if women joined the proletarian struggle, they would gain considerable strength. The more women writers the better, he said, but they had to be proletarian writers before all else, joining the stream of the "ardent human liberation movement." For the real struggle was not between men and women but between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie.<sup>66</sup> It would be hard to find a clearer dismissal of a feminist gender position.

## Conclusion

It is far from evident, however, that women activists of either persuasion were more than dimly aware of any serious contradiction between their objectives and nationalist or socialist objectives. One can find little explicit discussion of this in the sources. The non-socialists were more apt than socialists to blame the lack of improvement in status and rights on male incorrigibility, which they

did often enough. But they rarely questioned the nationalist mode of operations itself: they did not link it with the fact that they had to run the gauntlet of a hostile press whenever they cut their hair, reformed their dress, or made independent decisions about their work, lifestyle, or marriage status. Logically, they were right not to make such a link, but nationalism forced the link in any case. For as long as women's activities that were not approved as "patriotic" duties were deemed irrelevant, frivolous, or anti-male, not only was the whole "woman question" itself rendered suspect, but those women who did actively support nationalist movements were unable to exert any independent influence on the definition and aims of nationalism such as would, when Korea became independent, favor a reorganization of gender relations in the interests of women.

The nationalist focus on the restoration of political rights to Koreans left little opening for activism on behalf of women's social rights. To be sure, when their menfolk lacked meaningful political rights, Korean women could expect them even less, and so the continuation of this situation was hardly to their advantage. However, the vast majority of men in Korea were not seeking to restore political rights but to gain them for the first time: only a very few Korean men—perhaps only 3 percent—had had such rights (or hereditary, aristocratic privileges, to be more accurate) before the Japanese annexed Korea in 1910, and not a great many more were in a position to grasp them if the Japanese were to get up and go. Moreover, universal suffrage was rare throughout the world in the 1920s and 1930s and was only just being extended to women in many Western states. Political rights were thus not the most pressing issue for Korean women. Greater social self-determination and reform of gender relations were, however, goals for which they had been striving actively since at least the 1890s.

Socialist women, as we have seen, placed blame for difficulties in gaining social rights on class factors and imperialism, and disappointments often led to mutual recriminations. Yet to the historian's eye, it is apparent that the strong, clear position on women's liberation articulated in 1920 and again in 1927 was progressively relativized in the course of the nationalist and socialist debates until it became a pale, ineffectual image of its former self. The *Kūnuhoe* experience, after which much of the women's movement became nonpolitical, or prey to commercial modernity, or implicated in Japanese schemes, was crucial in this development.

Part of the reason undeniably lies in the difficulties the leadership faced in securing support from other women. There was considerable confusion over the nature of the *Kūnuhoe*, for example, with debates over whether it was a religious, socialist, educational, enlightenment, or feminist movement, let alone its relation to other women's movements and to nationalism and socialism generally. The *Kūnuhoe* was, moreover, grievously short of financial backing. Its only real revenue source was from subscriptions, but even in its third year, only three branches had paid their dues. Consequently, not a single tour of the branches had been possible.<sup>67</sup> Other activities, such as reports on the condition of female labor in the new factories, were likewise hampered by this dire financial situation.<sup>68</sup>

However, although the logic of female liberation had first been published by women such as Na Hyesök and Kim Wönju in 1920, the terminology used thereafter was in the main formulated by male nationalists in relation to their own aims. On this issue there was certainly some awareness. The silence in the media concerning the *Kūnuhoe* was of great concern to its members. The feature article of their journal in 1929 complained that when the media did on occasion speak of the women's movements, its comments were characterized by a dismissive tone and cheap criticism. The only way to interpret the "unscientific, irresponsible, and mostly groundless construction of women's issues," the writer claimed angrily, "is as a deliberate policy of publicity seeking and self-advertising." Since the function of the media was to inform, she continued, why was there so little news of this new movement in Korean society—and why were not women given the opportunity to write concerning their own movements and issues?<sup>69</sup>

Linking women's liberation with nationalist and socialist liberation was perhaps the chief strategy adopted by women to gain recognition for their movements. As noted above, the most accommodating idea at the time was that women's issues were related to the "whole" in the sense that their solution depended on the solution of the "whole." But by accepting this linkage, women activists increasingly surrendered, perhaps unwittingly, their original goal of a new gender arrangement in which women enjoyed self-determination in all personal, social, and, eventually, political relations to core nationalist and socialist priorities. Few males and not many more women took seriously the idea that national change *was* gender change, which would have made perfect sense in Korea and had been hinted

at as early as the 1890s. In effect, whatever their desires regarding their own political liberation, in gender relations nationalist and socialist men favored cultural continuity, not real independence, for women. So long as nationalism and socialism focused on an external enemy, the logic of female liberation inherent in the Kūnuhoe movement was masked and at best served as a handmaiden. Only recently have women's groups in South Korea been able to offer effective resistance to male-centered perspectives on national culture and history.<sup>70</sup>