

New Women in Colonial Korea

A sourcebook

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4 The “Modern Girl” question

Editor’s introduction

The idea of “modernism” was in vogue in Korea in the 1920s and 1930s. An editorial in *Samch’ŏlli*, a popular magazine, points out that the fad had resulted in a situation where something was not considered to be valuable or serious until it had had the adjective “modern” applied to it, as in, for example, “modern girl,” “modern boy,” “modern art,” “modern suicide,” “modern style,” or even “modern *kisaeng* (entertainer)” (Iminsaeng 1930).¹ Perhaps the most provocative and eye-catching manifestation of the use of “modern” was in the label “Modern Girl.” The discourse of the modern and the new politics of gender were undergirded by both a general fascination with the Modern Girl and a deep anxiety about the ramifications of this new idea. The Modern Girl Around the World Research Group proposes “Modern Girl as a heuristic category for investigating globalization and gendered modernity” and explores “how global commodity and cultural flows have shaped modern femininity in divergent contexts” (Modern Girl Around the World Research Group 2005: 246, 286). It is likely that Korean intellectuals learned about the Modern Girl from Japan, a window on modernity for colonized Koreans, as noted by Pak Yŏnghŭi. The Modern Girl phenomenon in Korea reveals the shared spirit and materiality associated with the Modern Girl around the world (Birnbbaum 1999; Conor 2004; Modern Girl Around the World Research Group 2008). However, the phenomenon never became very widespread in Korea, largely because of the impoverished economic conditions due to colonization and the lack of a critical mass of middle-class or working women who could have been a powerful base for consumerism and new adventures in urban modern space. Nonetheless, the Modern Girl was something of an icon, discursively constructed in the mass media as a caricature with her short haircut, silk stockings, make-up, Western shoes, jewelry, and other accessories. If this outer appearance represents the Modern Girl’s materiality, she was also portrayed as decadent, morally depraved, and money-hungry.

In 1927, a popular magazine, *P’yŏlgŏn’gon*, held a “great debate” (*tae nonp’yŏng*) on the “Modern Girl and Modern Boy.” The writers who were

invited to participate were all male, a fact that succinctly captures the male perspective that generally predominated the discourse on the Modern Girl in Korea. The “great debate” reveals attitudes in which the Modern Girl is regarded at once as a figure of promise that offers needed change and as a portent of potential danger and an object of suspicion. However, the overall tone and focus in this debate are much more on the disreputable image of the Modern Girl, whose depiction often had echoes of certain aspects of the portrayal of entertainers, prostitutes, or dancing girls. This portrayal tended to provoke both irresistible curiosity and outraged disgust (Yun 1937).² Just as in Japan, where, as Barbara Sato notes, “most Marxist, socialist, and conservative intellectuals” denounced the Modern Girl as “an outright imitation of tainted Western styles with American roots,” (Sato 2008: 264), the Modern Girl drew severe criticism from most intellectuals in Korea. At the core of the criticism lay the perception that the Modern Girl embodied the decadent culture of capitalism, was obsessed with Western material culture, and lacked virtue or moral integrity. Pak Yŏnghŭi’s essay sharply outlines the popularized image of the Modern Girl, who wears brightly colored, expensive Western clothing, silk stockings, high-heeled shoes, short hair, and bright red lipstick (Source 29). The point that Pak is ultimately trying to make is that anyone who displays these features of the Modern Girl must be a female entertainer, symbolizing the decadence of a bourgeois society. In a similar vein, Ch’oe Haksong views the Modern Girl as “gorgeous and seductive,” and “far from virtuous or chaste” (Source 31). She is often associated with the dance hall, the movie theater, and the *kisaeng* house (bar for entertaining), all of which manifest the decadent, *fin-de-siècle* mood.

Instead of focusing exclusively on the popular image of the Modern Girl as decadent, Yu Kwangyŏl’s and Sŏngsŏin’s essays contemplate the deeper philosophical significance of the Modern Girl. Yu Kwangyŏl makes a clear distinction between the material and the spiritual elements that constitute the modern and warns of the tendency to define the modern exclusively in terms of material goods and outward appearances (Source 28). He argues that the true modern stems not from Western-style clothing and short hair but from cutting-edge consciousness, advanced knowledge, and a pioneering vision for the collective welfare. From a similar standpoint, Sŏngsŏin identifies two kinds of Modern Girl: one who is liberated from the old without having taken on a new direction or vision and thus is characterized by vanity and caprice, occupied only by fashion and superficial concerns; and the other, who has taken the opportunity provided by her liberation from the traditional paths to forge a new practice (Source 30). In this way, Yu and Sŏngsŏin position the Modern Girl as an embodiment of the transition from the old practices to the new ways, an ambivalent figure who could manifest different possibilities depending on whether she focuses on material consumption or moral vision and advanced knowledge.

28 Yu Kwangyŏl: What is modern?: The great debate on Modern Girl, Modern Boy

[*"Modŏn iran muŏt iya—Mo-dŏn kkŏl, Mo-dŏn ppo-i nonjaeng," Pyŏlgŏn'gon 10 (December 1927): 112–113*]

What do we mean by "Modern Boy" and "Modern Girl"? The editor of *Pyŏlgŏn'gon* has asked me to address this question. Some may simply answer that "Modern Boy" refers to a boy of the modern times (*kŭndae a*), and "Modern Girl" refers to a girl of the modern times (*kŭndae ch'ŏnyŏ*). However, just as all of our knowledge can be fundamentally challenged through critical scrutiny, the meaning of these familiar phrases is not so straightforward upon closer examination.

First, should the phrases be understood as referring to something completely materialistic (*mulchil*) or purely spiritual (*chŏngsin*)? When I use the word "spiritual" here, I am referring to the mind (*uisik*) of those visionary contemporaries. Are they creations of the twentieth century, or is there anything to be learned by seeking out the use of these phrases in our most immediate past in the nineteenth century? Or perhaps they are labels for our contemporaries who have a vision for the future and are trying to lead us into new times? In other words, do they hold on to contemporary liberal ideas, or have they acquired knowledge that is even more advanced? My space here is too limited to consider the entire world; therefore, I am going to restrict my thoughts to the Korean situation only.

Is the phrase "Modern Boy" related to a feudal idea? No. Although remnants of the feudal system have continued into contemporary times, they belong to the past generation. If the idea of "Modern Boy" is not feudal, is it part of a liberal ideology that argues, "individuals should be free"? Of course this is a modern idea; however, the truly modern is the idea of collectivism based on rational rules. Those who hold this view can be considered rightfully modern.³ In parallel with the spiritual aspects, outward signs point to modern sensibilities. Those who wear traditional jackets (*top'o*) and topknots (*sangt'u*) belong to that past. Those who wear Western suits and gold-rimmed eyeglasses and indulge themselves in their own pleasures believe in =,⁴ which is the most widespread conception of the modern. Simply following material trends of the modern does not make someone a modern man. Those who know nothing and simply reject traditional garb in favor of Western-style suits cannot be called modern. Conversely, those who reject Western suits and instead choose shabby clothing are not necessarily un-modern.⁵ The important matter is whether or not they have the right mind and direction; that is, the newest consciousness that has evolved in the most modern times. You can recognize modern men by their eyes full of passion. They may have disheveled hair and shabby clothing, but they strive for the collective good. They are the pioneers of our times, equipped with the most advanced knowledge. Appearances are of no consequence. Who could deny that dog shit, even if it is wrapped in the finest cloth, still smells bad?

If we take the same approach to women, we should not assume that a woman who has rejected the traditional, body-covering, long-sleeved robe (*changot*) is more modern than a woman who continues to wear it. By the same token, we cannot assume that a woman walking about freely in the street is more modern than a woman confined to the inner chambers. A woman with short hair in a Western suit is not necessarily more modern than a woman in a short white jacket and black skirt. Again, the critical criterion should be her inner consciousness, not her outward appearance or behavior.

I would say that, even if a man or woman is wearing old-fashioned clothing, he or she could be considered a modern boy or a modern girl as long as he or she possesses a cutting-edge consciousness. Some years ago, there was a laughable trend in which some people thought a woman who wore a *rubashka*, a Russian jacket, had short hair, and walked around the broad streets in Seoul (*Kyŏngsŏng*) must be a Modern Girl. Yet, all these [outer appearances] are irrelevant. Why should they be considered modern? When it comes to short hair, for instance, our Buddhist nuns shaved their heads. [Are they modern?] Some women in the United States and Russia cut their hair short, but this is just a way for them to have fun with their appearance. How is short hair a sign of modernity when it existed in ancient times as well as modern times? With regard to clothing, there is no such thing as old-fashioned versus modern fashion, as long as one can freely wear something comfortable. Only consciousness has a historical genealogy, and so the distinction between modern and advanced modern can be made. Therefore, I would call those who have a cutting-edge consciousness and act as pioneers in our time "Modern Boy" or "Modern Girl." Hey, those of you who think you are modern because of your outer appearance! Come forward if you disagree with me, and I will enlighten you.

29 Pak Yŏnghŭi: Characteristics of "Modern Woman" and "Modern Man" in a bourgeois society: The great debate on Modern Girl, Modern Boy

[*"Yusanja sahoe ūi sŏwi 'Kŭndaenyŏ' 'Kŭndaenam' ūi t'ŭkching—Mo-dŏn kkŏl, Mo-dŏn ppo-i nonjaeng," Pyŏlgŏn'gon 10 (December 1927): 114–116*]

The topic of "Modern Woman" or "Modern Man" is not something I consider important, so I am not interested in treating it in a scholarly way. What I intend to do here is synthesize and critique what I have observed in day-to-day life and answer questions, such as what kind of a product is the so-called "Modern Man, Modern Woman," and what is the function of this product.

Recently (I should say six months ago), we began to hear the phrase "Modern Girl!" used over and over in Korea, especially in the capital city of Seoul. Of course, the phrase originally comes from English, but it was probably transmitted to Korea through Japan. I vaguely recall seeing a series of

photographs of so-called "Modern Girls" and "Modern Boys" in Japanese newspapers or weeklies sometime ago, but I did not pay much attention to them at the time. Since then, I have begun to hear people use the terms "Modern Girl" and "Modern Boy" in Korea. When I talk with friends in the evening, as the autumn sunset glows through the streets, some will shout, "There is a Modern Girl!", as if they were so glad to meet a sister after a long separation. Or, when I hurry down an alley alone, I sometimes catch sight of a young lady who seems different from other women. I don't know much about women, but I cannot help but think that she looks like an "entertainer" (*yunyô*) because her appearance is seductive, and her dress is sensual.

Whenever I have encountered this kind of situation, I have used a technique that I learned from my friends who are more familiar with these matters in figuring out if these girls are "Modern Girls." But I cannot resist wanting to define what a "Modern Girl" is exactly. What kind of girl can be appropriately labeled "Modern Girl"? Is it based on what they wear, their behavior, their ways of speaking, their knowledge and points of view, or their social skills? Although it is not an important issue to me, whenever I run into these women, I'm reminded of the question. While chatting with friends who are interested in the phenomenon, I asked one of them how he would define the term "Modern Girl," but he could offer no definition. His reply was: "Well, you know, she is like . . . don't we just know?" Of course, as he said, she is like blah blah blah, but shouldn't we have a better definition? So I came up with my own brief definition.

First, as everyone knows, the word "*modô*" is a conversion of the English word *modern*. Then you add *girl*—"an unmarried woman"—or *boy*—"an unmarried young man"—to *modern*. If we want to know immediately who qualifies as a "Modern Girl" or "Modern Boy" among the people walking through the streets of Seoul from their appearance, we just need to look at their clothing. Based on what I have heard and seen, it seems that only women wearing Western clothing can be called "Modern Girls." Even if she is not wearing Western dress cannot be called a "Modern Girl." Even if she is wearing Western-style clothing, the dress has to be cheerful and bright with an alluring color, along with silk stockings that go all the way up to the thigh, where lace wraps around as if to protect the hidden area. She must also have a short "haircut," like artists of the old times. She wears high-arched, sharply pointed shoes that resemble black pigeons crawling on the ground. Everything she wears looks expensive. It wouldn't be unusual to find her sporting a hat because of her short hair. Her lips are naturally red from the boiling blood of youthful passion, but she still wears bright red lipstick. The indescribable redness of her lips stirs strong feelings in passers-by. My colleagues call this type of woman a "Modern Girl." She has a slim face.⁶ Perhaps this is what people think is beautiful these days.

Of course, there is a male counterpart too. I think a "Modern Boy" refers to a man who is physically fit, pleasant to look at, and whose facial complexion is more like a woman's. He has a male's body, with a woman's face. He follows the vogue of this style or that, like the "flared sleeves" (*lappa sode*), which

may have already gone out of style by now. I have no clue about how much knowledge the Modern Girl or Modern Boy has, or whether they hold any social consciousness, feeling a sense of duty or responsibility. However, one can usually spot them at a café, theater, or bar, as I sometimes do.

In summary, they stand out because of their careless, free pursuit of pleasure, extravagance, and decadence. Who are these profligate and decadent people who are incapable of supporting themselves, but lead a luxurious lifestyle, playing around without any restraint? In the case of women, they are likely to be entertainers or prostitutes. For men, they are sons of capitalists or descendants of the bourgeoisie. Woman entertainers and prodigal sons reflect the typical problems coming from the private-ownership system ensconced in capitalism. The life and destiny of the Modern Boy and the Modern Girl symbolize the decadence of the bourgeois society. Modern! Modern! The "Modern Girl" and the "Modern Boy" you often see in the streets are the epitome of the depravity of the bourgeois society. Therefore, I would define the "Modern Girl" and the "Modern Boy" as the group of decadent men and women who symbolize contemporary bourgeois society.

30 Söngsöin: Modern woman: The great debate on Modern Girl, Modern Boy⁷

[*"Hyöndae chök (mo-dön) ch'önyô—Mo-dön kköl, Mo-dön ppo-i nonjaeng."* *Pyölgön'gon 10 (December 1927): 117–118*]

Modern Girl! "Liberated" contemporary lady! The term "Modern Girl" has a dual reference. The first type of girl it refers to is the sort that is liberated from the old ways but hasn't taken on a new direction or vision. The only thing they possess is the Western-style clothing that they wear, their opinions, which are as capricious as duckweed, and a beauty that excites people. They are the so-called XXX ideologies of this and dilettantes of that. They possess incredibly long legs, speak with glibness, nibble chocolates, and brush their cheeks with red powder. They can down two or three drinks without blushing. They look down on literature and painting and treat poetry like shit. They like to critique, but can't produce their own creative writing. They pretend to read, but have never read any book of value. On the surface, they may look smart, but when they do something stupid, their pathetic sulking is hard to bear. They have vigorous appetites, and as a consequence, they produce ample waste. They advocate the single life, but, in reality, they're often in relationships with men. They speak loudly about birth control and planned pregnancy, but, once married, they immediately become pregnant and walk around showing off their big bellies. Really, they're like a rubber pouch filled almost beyond capacity with all of their contradictions.

The second type comprises those who are liberated from all the old ways and are on their way to creating something new. They desire to stand with men on equal footing. Unless there are some inevitable differences between

men and women in personality or character, they want to live, work, study, and play in the same conditions that men do. In fact, they want to go even further and participate in breaking down the economic structures of capitalism with men. On the subjects of marriage, giving birth, divorce, and others, they seek the most rational ways to cope with these issues.

Of course, we can't find a "Modern Girl" who already practices these new ways yet, but no one can doubt that they are on their way. I think that there are many "Modern Girls" of the first type who have a great deal of potential to become a "Modern Girl" of the second type. Still, we can't deny the fact that women have been bearing a lot more of the burden of the old customs than men have. So, when women try to break away from these burdens, they're likely to dabble in this and that. We should be somewhat generous in understanding them.

31 Ch'oe Haksong: A symbol of decadence: The great debate on Modern Girl, Modern Boy [excerpt]

[*"Tek'adan ūi sangŭng—Mo-dŏn kkŏl, Mo-dŏn ppo-i nonjaeng," Pyŏlgŏn'gon 10 (December 1927): 118–120*]

I have nothing to do with "Modern Girl" or "Modern Boy," and yet, when I spot them, I feel something. At gatherings with friends, if someone brings up the issue of the Modern Girl or the Modern Boy, I always offer my opinion. Still, I have neither a completely critical view of them nor a kind of well-integrated, thorough conception. The terms "Modern Girl" and "Modern Boy" are just used as laugh lines, without any coherent meaning attached to them.

Nonetheless, it is true that "Modern Girl" is often associated with piano or motion picture, and "Modern Boy" with a *kisaeng* house (entertainment bar) and movie theater. My fuzzy image of "Modern Girl" is someone who is gorgeous and seductive, like an actress going to a dance hall, far from being virtuous and chaste. Similarly, "Modern Boy" is a kind of indolent and shadowy figure, flirting (유희) and chasing after pretty women's buttocks. He conveys not a hint of sincerity or uprightness. Perhaps these negative impressions have to do with the usage of the terms "Modern Girl" and "Modern Boy" as synonyms for "bad girl" (*pulyang sonyŏ*) and "bad boy" (*pulyang sonyŏn*). However, what remains true is that we don't perceive them as being virtuous and honorable.

I don't know English, so I don't know the true meaning of *modŏn*. However, *modŏn* means "modern" or "contemporary" according to the interpretation by those who know English. So the phrases *modŏn kkŏl* and *modŏn ppoi* mean "Modern Girl" and "Modern Boy." In slang, they can be called "lass of the modern day" (*sich'e kyejibae*) and "lad of the modern day" (*sich'e sanae*). Then why is it that such a notion of the modern is used in an unflattering way? Some harsh people call them *moltoen kkŏl* ("bad girl") and *moltoen ppoi* ("bad boy"), instead of *modŏn kkŏl* and *modŏn ppoi*, while others even make negative

comments on their chastity. All these comments seem too severe. I think it isn't fair to talk about Modern Girls and Modern Boys on the basis of how they look on the surface, rather than what they really are. Yet, it's not entirely a waste of time to think about possible reasons why people regard the modern negatively.

I am not sure what the term meant in the past, but the overall meaning of the word "modern" these days refers to Western style (*yangp'ung*). Some time ago, there were people who blindly loved anything Western, although that attitude has diminished. They were obsessed with Western clothes, food, and even beds. The same thing happened in Japan; some Japanese felt distraught over not being able to change the color of their eyes to blue. One can infer that such attitudes and following the foreign trend are likely to invite ill feeling in onlookers. Or arguing for free love! Some Modern Girls and Boys go out with two or three different lovers in a single day, enjoying their company briefly and then breaking up with them in succession, a behavior that makes people hate Modern Girls and Modern Boys.

I'm not saying that people should not try new ways of life. Nor am I putting a limit on free love. But I believe that people need critically to consider a new approach before they undertake it. Before advocating free love, one should first think of what life would be like in a society where free love is practiced. Instead, our contemporary "Modern Girls" and "Modern Boys" are too easily distracted by flowery words. They spend their leisure time playing the piano or violin and singing about free love. More often than not, they talk about love suicide or getting drunk after rejection—all of which succinctly manifests the decadent mood of the *fin de siècle*. I clearly see the debris of this world's decline. As I think about it, I wonder if the future path of "Modern Girls" and "Modern Boys" is nothing more than dew on the tips of leaves, shining under the morning sun.

Notes

- 1 This editorial analyzes the nature of "modernism" as a by-product of the excessive development of globalized capitalism and argues that, while "modernism" in foreign countries, especially the United States, is a kind of "pathetic" cultural lifestyle of consumer class, Korean modernism is "handicapped" or "abnormal." The abnormality, it argues, is inevitable because Korea does not have the economic foundations in which phenomena such as modernism can take root and evolve. In other words, modernism in colonial Korea is shaped by mere imitation, without the material base to support it.
- 2 When Yun Sŏngsang discusses women's fashion, she sheds light on both the negative image of the modern girl and the true ideal of women's fashion. She writes
When asked who is a "modern woman in vogue," everyone first imagines the so-called "Modern Girl," who likes permed hair, colorful clothes, high heels, sensual make-up and making odd body language. One cannot deny that she is the most typical image of a modern woman in vogue.
- 3 The actual sequencing of clauses in this paragraph has been rearranged in order to convey the author's intended meaning.

- 4 Instead of a specific word, the author used the symbol "≡." It may have been used in order to avoid censorship.
- 5 In the original, the phrase reads, "shabby clothing is not necessarily modern," but, judging from the context, the author seems to have intended "... un-modern."
- 6 The original reads, "she has a slim and round face." There seems to be a contradiction between the senses of these two descriptors. I chose "slim" because that was the typical representation of the Modern Girl.
- 7 Sŏngsŏin was one of the pen names of Pang Chŏnghwan.

Cartoons

Cartoon 1 New Woman with a violin

Source: *Sin yŏja* 2 (1920): 40

Two men in traditional Korean dress on the right point to a "new woman" who is dressed in Western style and holding a violin case. A young man on the left, also dressed in a Western style coat, is looking after her longingly.

MAN A IN KOREAN DRESS: What's that?

MAN B IN KOREAN DRESS: That's supposed to be a contemporary version of Yanggŭm. [Yanggŭm is a traditional Korean string instrument.]

MAN A: Gosh, she looks awfully arrogant. Who would marry such a woman?

YOUNG MAN: Oh my, she is so pretty. If I weren't already married... [I would have liked to date her]. She is so fashionable. I would like to talk to her, but she doesn't even notice me.

