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*Confucianism  
and the Family*

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*Male Dominance and Mother Power:  
The Two Sides of Confucian Patriarchy in Korea*

Haejoang Cho

The assessment of women's status in any Confucian society is a highly complex issue, and perhaps nowhere more so than in Korea. Depending on the researcher's position and personal inclination, totally conflicting evaluations can be made. Generally, Korean society has been described as an extreme form of patriarchy, especially during the Yi dynasty. Women had no public positions and were forced to be passive and obedient to men, who were structurally central. However, there is another view, now being propagated through the mass media and supported by rather conservative scholars, asserting that Korean women are so powerful and liberated compared to their Western sisters that there is no need for any women's liberation movement. They further claim that of the three East Asian countries, Korean women are the most powerful. Their argument is based on the observation that surnames were not changed upon marriage and that, unlike China or Japan, "sexist" customs such as foot-binding or decorative wives were not to be found. They also emphasize that Korean women have extensive economic power since they have separate incomes and manage all household finances.

In fact, a contradictory image of women is now a common theme in ethnographic accounts of East Asia. Tanaka (1981, 229), in discussing "maternal authority" in Japan, distinguishes moral from jural authority. She emphasizes that a jurally dependent status in and outside the household does not necessarily imply that Japanese women fail to exert strong moral authority. Tanaka maintains that the mother's moral authority has been highly respected in Japan because mothers have been regarded as becoming the very embodiment of the family ethos, and forming the basis of one's existence. Wolf (1972) also attempts to explain this apparent contradiction by introducing the concept "uterine

family." Chinese mothers have secured their position and exercised their power within a patriarchal family system by creating focal families of their own through emotional ties of loyalty, thus binding their children to them and excluding the father.

Kendall and Peterson (1983) in the introduction of their co-edited book, *Korean Women: View from the Inner Room*, urged us to reconsider the Confucian idealization of the passive and sequestered women of traditional Korea. Drawing on early writings by missionaries, travelers, and anthropologists, they provided materials disproving this stereotyped image (Kendall and Peterson, 1983, 13). For example, Jones (1896, 223) wrote that "woman has exercised in Korean national and private life a degree of influence out of all proportion to her theoretical position in society." Gale (1898, 49) recalled how he was cross-examined by "a number of clarton-voiced females." He wrote: "One able-bodied Amazon, smoking a long pipe, pushed to the front, saying: 'I'm going to have a look at him—wouldn't they want to see me if I were in his country.'" He further generalized: "If the truth were told—we would know that the little woman in that enclosure is by no means the cypher he [the husband] pretends her to be; but that she is really mate and skipper of the entire institution, and that no man was ever more thoroughly under petticoat government than this—Korean gentleman (1898, 189)." Dallet (1954, 123) described Korean women as "violent and insubordinate, [they] sow division and ruin in their households, fight with their mother-in-law, take revenge on their husband by making his life unbearable, and continually provoke scenes of wrath and scandal." Underwood (1905, 222–23) portrayed female power more positively by saying, "[a woman of her acquaintance] was the real man in resourcefulness, energy, and ability to manage. . . . Many a Korean woman does that, however, and they are quite used to it."

In this chapter, I tackle this apparent contradiction of how a seemingly powerless position could be powerful, by examining the case of traditional Korean women. A theoretical frame of opposing public versus domestic status has been adopted as the major conceptual scheme for evaluating women during the Yi dynasty. Rosaldo and Lamphere (1974, 17–18) attempt to explain the universal asymmetry in cultural evaluation of the sexes by proposing a structural model that relates recurrent aspects of psychological, cultural, and social organization to an opposition between the domestic orientation of women and the extradomestic or "public" orientation of men. The dichotomy of public and domestic implies that although women may exercise a great deal of informal "power," the "authority" of men over women appears to be almost a human universal. A further observation is that women's status is higher in those societies where in the evaluation of status the family plays an important social function, that is, where the domestic realm itself becomes a locus of social, economic, and political power.

There are three levels of social reality to be considered in discussing women's role and status: economic roles, ideological background, and social organization. As for the first, one must note that the economic organization of traditional Korean families necessarily influenced both the ideological and psychocultural dimensions of family life. Some basic inferences about the economic functions of the family can and should be drawn prior to any other considerations. Economic production during the Yi dynasty depended on family-based labor-intensive agriculture. Most of the land was, in theory, controlled either by the state or the major clan lineages (Choi 1983; Chong 1984). Private property rights were recognized but from the middle of the dynasty they were exclusively transmitted through the patrilineal family line (Peterson 1983, 42–43; Choi 1979). The family was the basic unit of economic production and consumption. Family self-sufficiency relied for its existence on the labor of all the family members; both men and women had to cooperate for the family to survive (see Lee, chapter 13). Various studies on women's status in the agrarian societies of both the East and the West reveal that women under such social conditions played an important role both in economic production and in management, and thereby gained a "certain rough and ready equality" (Hamilton 1978, 46; Friedl 1975; Boserup 1970). However, with the rise of industrialization and a capitalistic economy, women's economic dependency upon their husbands increased. Zaretsky (1973, 263–71), in his book *Capitalism, the Family and Personal Life*, argues that the capitalist society is the first in human history to socialize production on a large scale, resulting in a split of socialized forms of commodity production and private labor. As capitalistic societies emphasize labor in the public sector of economic growth, domestic labor is undervalued and the family becomes isolated from the major sociopolitical process. Subsequently, male supremacy is institutionalized in the form of extrafamilial economic production, in sharp contrast with precapitalist societies where male supremacy was defined largely in ideological and political terms.

Second, in order to understand the ideological foundation of gender relations during the Yi dynasty, we need to understand the political history of Korea. The Yi dynasty was established by a new class of Confucian scholar-officials who legitimized their ascendancy by spreading Confucianism throughout all social segments. They expelled previously powerful Buddhist elites, and monopolized political power solely on the basis of Confucian teachings (Cha 1984). Deuchler (1980) has also shown that the founders of the Yi dynasty adopted Neo-Confucianism not merely as a philosophy of reform, but as the basis for completely rebuilding the polity. Although there were other religious and ideological influences emanating from shamanism and Buddhism, only Confucianism was publically recognized. Regardless of this, the majority of the people could not afford to approximate the practices or ideological purity as advocated by the elite. For example, they were economically unable to confine

their women. However, in the absence of empirical studies, one cannot assume that the lower classes had developed their own distinctive culture as many young scholars and students have begun to claim.

Third, various aspects of Korean hierarchical social organization, that is, "the prestige system," are critical for understanding gender relations (Ortner and Whitehead 1981, 3). A precapitalist society constitutes a quite different social order from a capitalist one. Zaretsky finds examples from ancient Greece where political participation was the activity that distinguished men's "human" life from the "animalistic existence of women and slaves." In medieval Europe, surplus appropriated from peasant families supported institutionalized religion and the aristocracy, which together defined the purpose and meaning of the entire society: both women and the peasant class were equally oppressed and defined as "ignorant." As the prestige system always has a powerful interaction with the gender system, mere facts, such as women's contribution to the economy or exclusion from public positions, must not be interpreted as a direct index of women's status. Women's status in the most precapitalist, hierarchical societies may be understood properly by examining the political system, the lineage organization, and their dynamic interaction.

Kinship organization in particular defines the most important structural relationships between men and women in precapitalist societies. Ortner (1981, 386), in her study of Polynesia, asserts that the marriage ties in Polynesia are weak. Most non-Western societies with a short history of industrialization show weaker ties between husband and wife, in contrast with stronger ties between parent and child or between siblings. Since kinship encompasses marriage ties in these societies, the "highly culturally assigned status of women as kin—encompasses their lower status as wives, and produces an overall cultural respect, or at least lack of disrespect, for women in general" (Ortner 1981, 394). In Polynesia, sisters receive greater respect than wives, and women in general are regarded more as sisters than as wives. A similar argument can be made in the case of Yi dynasty mothers, whose maternal role was of extreme importance in determining the overall status of women. Although mother power cannot be equated with women's power, understanding the sociocultural aspect of mother power is crucial to assessing women's status. Korean society might be an ideal case for studying the relationship between mother power and woman power and the mechanism by which a rigid male dominant system can be maintained alongside overwhelming mother power.

These three levels just noted are closely interrelated, but they also have their own autonomous mechanisms of transformation. Therefore, they need to be examined as separate systems employing both evolutionary and symbolic analyses. Particular importance should be given to the method of actor-centered analysis in which the focus is on ways in which an actor's perceptions of the world is shaped. The concept of the "actor" is central in that "meaning does not inhere in symbols but must be invested in symbols and interpreted from

symbols by acting social beings" (Ortner and Whitehead 1981, 5). Gender conceptions, like any other social construct, can be viewed as "functioning aspects of a socio-cultural system through which actors manipulate, interpret, legitimize and reproduce the patterns . . . that order their social world" (Collier and Rosaldo 1981, 311). Maintaining a balance between socioeconomic structure and psychocultural structure can only be achieved by examining reality from both actor-centered and system-centered perspectives.

Various data are utilized in the following section for purposes of analysis—initially through published research, historical documents, and novels, followed by data from my own research, obtained through interviews and participant observation among modern women as well as from women from rural aristocratic lineages (Cho 1981a, 1981b, 1984).

### Women, Confucianism, and Confucianization

Women's life during the Yi dynasty will be examined through the analysis of Confucian philosophy, values, and norms, following which a historical analysis will be attempted by examining the Confucianization process. The framework of the discussion is presented in table 1.

Table 10.1  
Dimensions of Female Status in the Late Yi Dynasty

|                                                                                                                                                                                | <i>Suppressing Female Autonomy</i>                                                                                                                                                                                         | <i>Encouraging Mother Power</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Economic Condition<br>(labor-intensive agriculture)                                                                                                                            | Patrilineal descent and inheritance<br>Strict sex-role prescription                                                                                                                                                        | Family-centered subsistence economy<br>Strict sex-role prescription                                                                                                                                                                           |
| Ideological Ground<br>(Confucianism)                                                                                                                                           | Hierarchical cosmic order of the heaven (male) and the earth (female)<br>Sex-differentiation and segregation                                                                                                               | Complementarity emphasized by the yin-yang principle<br>Family-oriented social order<br>Values such as respect for the aged and filial piety                                                                                                  |
| Sociocultural System<br>(1) Policy characterized by a power balance between the monarch, the bureaucracy, and the local gentry<br>(2) Supreme importance of lineage membership | Exclusiveness of lineage organization ( <i>chulga-wein</i> )<br>Importance of women's behavior for reputation of husband's family and lineage (e.g., severe restriction on women's behavior and prohibition of remarriage) | Importance of mother's consanguine identity (e.g., women's keeping of their natal surnames)<br>Social acknowledgment of women's contribution to the welfare of the family (e.g., good manager, <i>dhongbu</i> , <i>yŏlyŏ</i> , <i>hyŏbu</i> ) |

### Confucianism: Ideology of Male-Supremacy and Harmony

Although ideology does not determine the course of history, it definitely does constrain it. Yi dynasty policy set out to construct an ideal Confucian society. Confucianism served as the major source of gender definition and symbolization. *Namnyō-yubyōl* (sex-difference) and *namjōn-yōbi* (honored men, abased women) were two major principles governing the interactions between the sexes. The concept of *namnyō-yubyōl* served as the basis of the social arrangement assigning men (*sarang* and *bakal*, meaning the outer space) and women (*an*, meaning the inner space) domain, that is, the public versus domestic opposition (see Lee, chapter 13). *Namjōn-yōbi* states explicitly that the two domains are hierarchically ordered. Y. O. Park (1985), in her analysis of Confucian texts such as *Shu-ching*, *Shih-shing*, *Lun-yü*, *Meng-tzu*, *I-Ching*, and *Li-chi*, illustrates how the idea of male supremacy is found in almost all of these Confucian texts, although there may be some differences in emphasis and degree. For example, the *I-Ching* describes women as the earth who must follow men. Men are the heavens, high and destined to lead. Heaven is strong with the principle of "one" while the earth is low and soft with the principle of "many." *Samjong-jido* (A woman must follow three men in her lifetime: her father, her husband, and finally her eldest son), *chigŏ-jjak* (the seven codes for expelling a woman from her husband's home), and the rigid segregation between the sexes after the age of seven as stated in *Li-chi* were the basic rules for guiding women's life. I found that most of the old women of *yangban* families whom I interviewed had thoroughly internalized this idea of the differential status between men and women. To the question, "Why are men superior to women? Aren't both the earth and the heaven indispensable?" one woman responded: "The earth cannot step on heaven, can it?" She also explained that chastity was required only of women because the earth cannot have two heavens.

There are, however, aspects of Confucianism that support women's rights. These are related to familism and the yin-yang dynamics regulating human relations. As mentioned above, Confucianism clearly differentiates between the public and domestic domain. But it also specifies that a man cannot attain public virtue unless he internalizes domestic virtue first: "Susin chga chiguk pyŏngchŏnha," "A man can be a true public leader only after he cultivates himself and regulates his family in harmony." This implies that domestic virtues are fundamental and are inclusive of public ones. This emphasis on family-centered social order seems to have worked toward elevating women's status. Women, through their maternal identity and role, could receive considerable respect not only in the family but also in the society. In fact, the wives of high public officials of the Yi dynasty were endowed with public formal titles (Chong 1973).

Filial piety was upheld as the ultimate value in Confucianism, at least in Koreanized Confucianism. When the value of filial piety was in conflict with that of loyalty to the king, priority was given to filial piety. Public officials, for example, were expected to return to their villages to perform the three-year mourning rituals for their parents, even if that meant giving up their public positions. Filial piety extended to both sexes nondiscriminately. As mothers were highly regarded and rewarded, a woman's life goal, naturally, was to produce successful sons.

The following folktale tells us how proud and free a woman can be once she accomplishes this life goal. There was a renowned scholar and prime-minister who lived during the middle of the Yi dynasty. One day, he was having a social gathering with his fellow officials. He heard someone urinating in a chamberpot in the next room. Very embarrassed, he dashed into the room and found that it was his mother. His mother said with a calm voice: "It was the hole that delivered the famous prime-minister that did it. Should it be refrained from doing anything?" (Park 1972, 3-158). We cannot tell clearly what the main message of this story was to the social actors; it might have been just a fictional catharsis for oppressed women, or it might have been a story reflecting the reality of the overwhelming power of mothers at that time. At any rate, we can deduce from the story that the elderly mother was, indeed, a very powerful symbol. Producing sons was the most important duty for women. It was also the major means for women to achieve social status and power. A woman who did not have a son was considered a nonperson. By having a son, a woman finally became significant. In fact, an agrarian economy and the Confucian value system both contributed to making the Yi dynasty a strong family-oriented society. Under these social conditions, mothers were assigned a high social status despite the extreme sexist bias inherent in Confucianism.

The principle of yin and yang and the emphasis on the harmonious social order seem to offer another basis for women to maintain some degree of power and self-respect. Interdependence between the sexes and women's complementary roles were highly idealized. Separated from the men, women would have their own religious beliefs (shamanism and other folk beliefs) and social activities. Kendall (1985, 177), in her study of Korean shamanism, presents a comprehensive description of how shamanistic rites reflect women's interests. Furthermore, she asserts that Korean women in their religious roles deal with broader family and community concerns as compared with the religious roles of women in Chinese society. From Chinese ethnography, Kendall also notes that Chinese women were symbolically coded as relatively more unique and profane. This difference between Korean and Chinese women's participation in rituals seems to indicate that there was a stricter division between the women's and men's domain in Korea, and that Korean women

were viewed as less threatening to familial harmony than Chinese women. In fact, there was a strict division in emphasis between shamanism and Confucianism, as there was in daily life. Shamanism dealt basically with explanations and remedies for unfortunate events in a person's life; Confucianism offered a model of social order. Confucian scholars seemed to recognize this complementarity; they implicitly allowed women to perform the shamanistic rites despite their atheistic orientation.

On the other hand, women, by having their own living quarters and forming social groups among themselves, were not directly dominated by men. They developed their own hierarchy of authority and their own reward system. Young women were dominated by their mothers-in-law, but they could also find support systems and reference groups within the women's world. They could develop a separate value system of their own, which provided them with a sense of personal worth.

However, the women's subculture functioned ultimately within the patriarchal framework. Shamanism, as the religion of the "domestic" sphere, could not offer any alternative model for a new social order. The women's group itself was mainly organized through women married into their husbands' lineage. The value of women, recognized and reinforced within this reference group, was ultimately measured by how faithfully they performed the assigned roles as wives, mothers, and daughters-in-law.

#### *Confucianization: Tightened Lineage Organization and Strengthened Mother Power*

Adopting Confucian principles to govern the people, and using the ideology to gain political power, ("moralizing politics" and "politicizing Confucianism" to use Tu Wei-ming's expression [1984, 90, 105]), are two different issues. In the early part of the dynasty Confucianism was a philosophy of government, and as such it was somewhat flexible, incorporating room for change. Nevertheless, it was gradually dogmatized as Confucian rationalizations became the major source and means of obtaining power during severe periods of political strife. In the process, Confucius was almost deified and Korean society became extremely rigid (Par 1981; Cho 1986).

M. Peterson (1983, 42-43) divides the Yi dynasty into four stages: (1) the period of initiation at the end of the fourteenth century, (2) the period of implementation of a completely Confucian government during the fifteenth century, (3) the beginning of arguments about changing the social order during the sixteenth century, and (4) the period of broad Confucianization into local levels during the seventeenth century and beyond. What is noteworthy here is that the sixteenth century was a period that saw a fundamental transformation of the social order. This was accomplished not through institutional reform but through the widespread implementation and acceptance of Confucian practice

at the normative level. At the same time, lineage organizations were tightened in order to protect the status quo (Kawashima 1979; Kim 1983). The obsession with ritual formality and dogmatic ideological imposition on the one hand, and the great emphasis on consanguinity on the other, became the major characteristics of Koreanized Confucianism. The supreme importance of the consanguine principle is reflected in the practice of women keeping their father's family name even after marriage.

The Confucian mode of conduct defining women's status was confined to the *yangban* class during the early part of the dynasty, and did not restrict all women's conduct as it did in the later years. Detailed historical analyses have shown that women had many more legal rights in the areas of inheritance and adoption in the early dynasty compared with the latter part of the dynasty (Wagner 1983; Peterson 1983). It was in the fifteenth century that the strict prohibition of remarriage of widows was legalized. This policy was supposedly brought into being in order to realize the Confucian familial ideal of serving only one husband in a life time. However, a study has indicated that it was primarily established in order to limit the rapidly increasing number of candidates for the state examination. Moreover, the conduct of widows in ones' lineage served as a major index for grading the prestige of lineages and as an excuse for eliminating political rivals (Lee 1985, 40-41).

The major agent of full-scale Confucianization was the group of retired or purged public officials and their descendants, who established and maintained their power base in the rural areas. As the vitality of the newly established loyal leadership waned, members of the excessively aggrandized ruling class began to compete as groups and individuals for limited resources in the form of land and power. In the absence of a clearly defined set of objective criteria for classifying ruling status, descendants of *yangban* had to struggle to maintain their dominant position in their own localities. This was accomplished by emphasizing their role as Confucian teachers and consolidating their power through alliances with other *yangban* lineages and local governors. Especially through marriage alliances and networks maintained by participants in Sowon (the memorial halls established to honor distinguished Confucian scholars), prominent *yangban* lineages formed major power blocks. However, such an alliance did not provide a secure and permanent basis for maintaining power and privilege. The social prestige of *yangban* lineages, from the well-established to those newly emerged, were constantly assessed and reassessed according to numerous criteria. The ranking of *yangban* became a relative and intersubjective matter largely determined by the following factors: the fame of their ancestors as nationally known scholars and statesmen, the purity of their bloodline, the ritual propriety of all their lineage members, and the socioeconomic resources the present lineage members had accumulated (Cho 1982). In this process, hereditary lineages became a more effective means of social control

than the direct imposition of state authority. Thus, *chokbo* (the written records of the family tree) were highly regarded. Compared with the Chinese examination system, the Korean system of state examinations was more restrictive, prohibiting sons of concubines from even applying to take the examination (Song 1981, 213–16). This indicates that familial origin became more critical in Korea than in China. In this context, the mother's family background began to exert greater importance, and women came to have distinct social identity and value.

As the society depended for its social control on Confucian ideology and lineage organization, filial piety was increasingly reinforced. An individual's conduct was judged in terms of this ultimate value, which in turn determined the status of the family and the lineage to which she or he belonged. Exerting filial piety literally became the ultimate life-goal for a person, regardless of sex or status. When a woman lived up to the ideal of the virtuous daughter and wife, she was rewarded by the state as *hyoyŏ* (filial daughter) or *yŏlyŏ* (faithful wife). A man was rewarded by the state as *hyoja* (filial son) and *chunsin* (faithful subject). By producing a *yŏlyŏ* or *hyoja*, the family could get tax exemptions or even raise their class status. We can easily guess that many accomplishment-minded women strived to be *yŏlyŏ* or at least worked to receive forms of respect by thoroughly conforming to the Confucian values and norms. A Confucian scholar in the eighteenth century proudly reported that Korean women's faithfulness to their husbands was so sincere that Chinese women could not compete with them (Lee 1985, 49–51).

It must be emphasized again that a woman's accomplishments served only her husband's family. Daughters were regarded as *chulga-woein* (out-group). As rivalry and competition among the lineage intensified, daughters were pushed further away from their natal families.

The following tale handed down by an aristocratic family tells why "married out" daughters had to be avoided. The family had produced a great scholar in the middle of the dynasty, and around the same period, one of their daughters also produced a famous scholar-official. She delivered the child at her natal house. A famous geomancer told the family that the house site was predetermined to produce three great men, which implied that there was only one more to come. In order to prevent a son of their daughter from taking away the *ki* (spirit) of the house site, the family established a rule prohibiting their daughters from delivering babies in this house. As the story reveals, the daughters were considered out-group members, if not enemies. Young women, sometimes facing inhuman treatment from their husbands' families, could hardly find any place to turn. As the society was tightly organized under the principle of patrilineality and people were anxious to protect the interests of their family and patrilineage, little protection was offered to women by their natal families. Under such conditions, women had only one choice: they had to endure and

survive within their husbands' families, and accomplish their objectives through and for their sons.

The following tale deals with the ambivalent position of women caught between two kin groups by presenting the case of a woman who was faithful to her husband's family by outsmarting her natal family. In the scheme of folk religion, women cater to ghosts and ancestors from their natal and affinal homes, and sometimes even from their mothers' natal homes. Akiba was so impressed by the number of powerful gods acquired through women that he mistakenly described the tradition as "matrilinal" (Kendall 1985). From women's perspective, women's emotional association with the *chinyŏng* in their natal homes, has been strong throughout history. A wife of a poor *sŏnbi* (a generic term for a scholar who was preparing for the state examination and who was expected to be concerned only with public virtue) attended her grandfathers' funeral. That night she happened to overhear her father and a geomancer discussing a burial site over a hill. The geomancer told her father that the site seemed to be in an excellent location that would surely guarantee the prosperity of the family. However, he added that an on-the-spot survey was required in order to make certain that the place was not too wet. The daughter, being covetous of the site, climbed the hill and walked back and forth pouring water on it all through the night. The next morning her father and the geomancer were disappointed to find that the spot was wet, and they had to find a new burial site. After the funeral, the daughter asked her father to give the deserted burial site to her, to which he readily agreed. Later, she buried her husband (or her father-in-law, depending on the version) there, and her husband's family became prosperous. She produced many sons who became high public officials, and her descendants were abundant. Widely known, this story served the function of indoctrinating women to be loyal to their husbands' families instead of to their natal families. As the story emphasizes, it is the position of mother with which a woman must identify. By focusing on their sons' and descendants' success, women can be effectively persuaded to direct themselves to their husbands' family and lineage.

Women, as wives of scholarly men or of men imitating the scholarly lifestyle who were supposed to be indifferent to such "minor" issues as daily life activities, had to take on the burden of managing what were often poor households as efficiently and resourcefully as possible. The old women of aristocratic families whom I interviewed recalled that they were prepared to marry poor *sŏnbi*. The life of a poor *sŏnbi*'s wife was described as being very much like that of a faithful *sŏnbi* in a declining state (Chong 1985, 67). On one tombstone inscription, a poor *sŏnbi*'s wife was praised because she could "suspend the decline and prevent the breakdown of the family, managing an impoverished household, making three meals a day, preparing the ancestral rites, and making family gatherings happy and comfortable." It ends with

"whose spirit will be nobler than hers!" Women also took great pride in being *chôngbu*, the daughters-in-law of the main family. A *chôngbu* whom I interviewed said that it was truly a challenging job. She learned in her childhood how to manage a poor household, never letting others notice that she was hungry. In order to be a successful and respectable *chôngbu*, she said that one had to be practical, hardworking, and skillful in managing economic and human resources. She must also be strong and firm just like a *yôjangbu*, a woman commander. In fact *yôjangbu* is a distinctive female image cherished by Korean women and portrayed by novelists even now (Choi 1983; Park 1979; Kim 1982). Most aristocratic lineages which I have studied (about ten in number) had one or two role models of this type. Typically, *yôjangbu* had several sons, all of whom passed the state examinations. They had the ability to forecast the future, and managed the family estate with great energy. The image was further elaborated with descriptions of physical characteristics, usually ugly faces, strongly built asexual bodies, and vigorous activities such as horseback riding.

Similar images were also cherished among commoners. A wise and hardworking daughter-in-law who revived the declining family is one of the most frequently recurring folk figures. Through her determination, intelligence, and diligence, a woman can make her inadequate husband a great manager, and accumulate wealth for her family. In both cases, the heroine shares the personality characteristics of independence and strong will power. Shinchong and Baridegi (or Pyong-gang-Kongju) are stories basically portraying the same personality traits: a daughter overcoming tremendous hardships by herself and finally bringing happiness to the whole family. It is important to note here that women's lives were basically similar regardless of their class. As supporters of their "noble" husbands, women had to lead lives of hard work. A folk song describes the reality as follows: "Will there be any difference in a woman's hardship, whether she is rich or poor? Our husbands know little of daily living, but are concerned only with their tasteful appearance."

In contrast to men, to whom power was assigned, women of the Yi dynasty had to achieve power and authority through their own efforts. Except for being state officials, men's status was more or less defined in a world circumscribed by kinship and community, leaving little room for them to accomplish on their own. But a woman basically had to strive throughout her entire life, not only for her own survival but also for her family's. Once a wife internalized Confucian patriarchal values, it was permissible, even desirable, for her to exhibit what Korean society considered as a legitimate form of self-interest because the end product was inextricably linked to her husband's family's well-being. This life pattern produced practical and aggressive women in contrast to idle and formalistic men. Korean women, who moved from being powerless daughters-in-law to becoming powerful mothers-in-law, and

who survived rough and troubled histories as the stronghold of the family, naturally developed a sense of power and fortune. This sense of power, as the major supporters of the family, made women even more aggressive about maximizing their own self-interest, which were, at least in appearance, predominantly familial.

### Mother Power, Familism, and Social Change

I have tried to show in the above discussion that these were two sides of Confucian patriarchy in the late Yi dynasty: extreme suppression of women on the one hand and extreme idealization of motherhood and the encouragement of the mother's accomplishment on the other hand. In Confucian texts, we find both fundamental sexism based on the principle of agnation and an emphasis on the complementary relationship of the sexes. At the organizational level, heavy emphasis on the family lineage functioned to exclude women, particularly daughters and wives, but at the same time accommodated them as daughters-in-law and mothers. The strict spatial and role division between the sexes had both positive and negative effects on women's lives. Women were empowered by their activities as economic producers and household managers as a counterbalance to their husbands, who ideally were like *sônbi*. However, it should not be overlooked here that economic power was relatively insignificant in comparison with political and ideological power at that time.

What does all this tell us ultimately about women's status? How can mother power be assessed in its function of maintaining and creating social change? In order to answer these questions, we need to probe further into two aspects: the nature of mother power and the social conditions under which mother power has been institutionalized. First of all, it is essential to remember that it was only mothers and legitimized wives who could exercise power and authority in the late Yi dynasty. The society guaranteed tremendous rewards for mothers' devotion, ignoring any other type of women's faithfulness, such as in their roles as sisters or wives. Daughters and concubines had no institutionalized power at all. Although daughter's noninstitutionalized power is acknowledged in folk tales such as *Shimchông* and *Baridegi*, it only actually occurs when she undertakes the nurturing role of a mother substitute.

As Wolf (1972, 3) pointed out in her studies of the Chinese family, it was through extreme emphasis on motherhood that a male ideology that excluded women made its accommodation with reality. Guisso (1982) presents a similar interpretation of this by saying that in traditional China, a women's liberation movement could not be brought into being because the age factor exceeded the gender factor; old mothers were free from the restrictions imposed upon young women and they received the highest respect and care at the final stage

of their lives. In fact, legitimizing mother power might be the way of accommodating women under the male-dominated social system. Compared with wife power, which can be found mostly in the Western countries, or sister power in Polynesian societies, mother power may be the most secure source of power for women under the patriarchal system. Mothers, whose ultimate concern lay in their sons' well-being, were made pillars of the establishment and this worked to reduce any feeling of what one might call class solidarity among women as the oppressed group.

Moreover, mother power basically stays at the personal level and has a conservative tendency. Mothers are able to defer their gratification so much longer than wives or sisters that they, although feeling discontented, tend to hold on and endure with a vague hope in the future for their children. Of course, women with institutionalized mother power can be much more independent psychologically from their husbands than those women equipped with wife power. However, they have much more difficulty in achieving independence from their sons and establishing their identity as autonomous individuals. This conservatism stemmed from the symbiotic nature of mother/son relationships, and the heavy emphasis on the identity of women as mothers is, in fact, the major stumbling block in the women's rights movement in Korea today. It is not motherly to feel oppressed; it is even less so to complain about one's own hardships and to protest for one's own rights. Young women hesitate to join the women's movement, feeling that they are not yet fully grown persons until they get married and become mothers.

An important aspect of matrifocality may be that the more central women become in maintaining their families, the more peripheral and alienated men become from their families. Men, insisting on the ideology of male supremacy and, following the image of *sonbi*, have consistently kept their distance from family members and pretended to be aloof from daily life activities. In this way Korean men seem to have relegated their power and authority to women. Most Korean men now are quite confused about their familial and social responsibilities. Although they still may be recognized and serve as the head of the family by their wives, in actuality they may not be the *de facto* family heads. Consistent with this argument, literary critics have recently begun to note that a distinctive characteristic of Korean novels is the absence of the father figure (Choi 1987). When Korean feminists search for proper ways to realize gender equality in Korea, they may have to seriously consider this psychocultural dimension of Korean society that has been sustained by powerful mothers and their dependent sons and husbands.

Here we may raise the question of the relationship between mother power and the nature of society: under what conditions does mother power become a socially important force? As described above, mother power has been fully activated and has influenced the social process in a direct and pervasive

way in Korea. Matrifocal tendencies seem to have been intensified through the modern period characterized by distorted modernization and foreign domination. During early modernization, inhuman legal practices, such as the prohibition of remarriage and concubinage, were banned and the education of women was urged by new elites. But familial ideology and cultural obsession with consanguinal ties remained largely the same. During the Japanese colonial era, many families were pulled apart. A great number of men left home due to emigration, the independence movements, and voluntary and involuntary labor, and women had to assume heavier responsibilities as family heads in the absence of male family members. Furthermore, the Korean War, again, separated many men from their homes, reinforcing matrifocalization. Under these social conditions where family survival itself was at stake, women quite naturally assumed the crucial male roles, and their aggressiveness was accepted, even encouraged. During the period of rapid industrialization, mothers had to be busy on behalf of the "status-reproduction" of the family (Papaneck 1985). Throughout a hundred years of modernization, the ideology of family continuity has waned, and the family has nuclearized, at least in form. But familism, which contains little possibility of transcending the biological circle, persists. The mother-son relationship still predominates over the conjugal one and the conflict between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law remains the major source of social conflict.

Now we can go back to the Rosaldo and Lamphere (1974) proposition that women's role and status are central where the family has important social functions, that is, where the domestic sphere itself is more powerful. As discussed above, family-centered production and Confucian ideology have characterized traditional Korea as a "family state." The long-lasting sociopolitical instability since the latter part of the Yi dynasty, and subsequent foreign domination, reinforced family-centeredness. In this historical process, exclusive familism has become the core value, leaving little room for a more general public organization and ideology.

It must be remembered here that familism has been one major way to organize societies. However, it was usually found in smaller and simpler societies. In those societies, the opposition between the domestic and public sphere was not clearly drawn, and even where it did exist the activities in the public domain were relatively insignificant when it came to social survival. Korean society can be classified definitely as a society that makes a very clear distinction between the public and domestic domains. We also know that industrialization is a social process marked by sudden expansion of the public domain. How can we then explain the existence of strong familism in a complex and industrialized society? We can easily guess that when a society is struggling for bare survival, offering little protection to its members, people try to survive on their own as tightly consolidated family units. The persistent existence of

extreme family-centered values and matrifocality throughout the modern history of Korea may then be interpreted as an indication of the relative weakness of the politics of the public sphere. The survival strategy of Korean society for the last several centuries, including during recent modernization, seems to have been based on the self-help principle of the blood-related kinship unit rather than expanding the public sphere.

The majority of Korean people still agree with the old expression, "There is nothing but family (blood) that a person can trust" (Lee 1984). People distrust any kind of social group or institutions such as the company, the school, the nation, or even the voluntary association. Nepotism is still a major social problem. This tendency of exclusive and egocentric familism seems to have been strengthened rather than weakened through the recent rapid industrialization. Women as "housewives," whose only concerns were confined to family welfare and who have not been exposed to the public "work" world of men, have guarded familial values most faithfully and transmitted them to their children. Unlike the middle-class housewives in Western societies or in Japan, Korean women have little interest in charitable roles or community welfare programs (Tinker 1980, 4). They invest their time solely in immediate familial interests, such as visiting schoolteachers to give "envelopes" of money to solicit the upgrading of their children's scores or engaging in informal businesses in the area of real estate or *kye* (rotating credit associations) to improve family finances. Children rely heavily on their mothers' effort in helping them pass school entrance examinations and in the selection of marriage partners.

Mother domination is reflected in the attitude of activists in recent student movements on campus. The effect of one's behavior on one's mother can be a source of severe psychological guilt for some activist students. As a result, some hesitated to join in the movement because of the anticipated reaction of their mothers. As soon as a student is arrested for organizing or participating in a demonstration, he is usually informed that his mother was shocked and fainted. An attempt is usually made by the prosecutor, or his teachers and relatives, to persuade him to swear that he will not involve himself in the movement any longer for his mother's sake. Potential or actual illness can be used as a mode of psychological control, as is true in Japan. On the other hand, there are some committed activist students who wish to believe that their mothers will join in the antigovernment movement once they find that their sons have been sentenced. This may be a dynamic part of mother power. However, the number of "converting" mothers does not seem to be significant.

What kind of mechanisms still enable exclusive familism to persist? I do not attempt here to offer an answer to the question. But I do want to intro-

duce another characteristic of Korean society, that is, the dual structure of formal and informal spheres. Informal manipulation in the public domain has a direct relationship with the persistence of familism and kin networks in the family domain. In fact, the behavioral distinction between the public and domestic domains is made only at the formal level; both men and women faithfully perform expected roles in public. At the informal level, however, it can be blurred; family considerations and the mother attitudes in particular can interfere with decisions and policies. I am not arguing that it is the personality of "aggressive" mothers who are ultimately responsible for backstage manipulation and for maintaining familistic values. The structure itself is responsible. What I am suggesting here is that any kind of fundamental social change cannot take place unless this dual structure, "public and domestic," is undermined. Mother power is in effect institutionalized in the Confucian heritage as practiced in Korea.

Mother power, familism, and the "overdependence" between men and women, which are largely the unintended product of Confucian patriarchy, have been contributing significantly to the continuation of an extremely conservative social system. Some studies (Kim 1983; Cho 1986) have shown how Korean familism and close kin ties came to be utilized successfully in early industrialization. Success was facilitated by psychosocial functions such as the pooling of the familial economic resources and energies and by providing emotional support for individual members during the period of crisis. They have also suggested that traditional values would soon be a liability rather than a strength in making the family more rational, human. Releasing the society from rigid familism would be one of the major tasks of modernization. Redefining the spousal roles of men and women would make the mother role less powerful. Women, both younger and older, should be encouraged to be more independent, less focused on their sons, and better integrated into activities within the public domain, while men need to be encouraged to take more responsibility at home, as well as at the workplace. When Korean women give up their "mother power," we may expect great changes in Korean society. In social theory, explicit studies of how Korean mother power works would focus attention on it and perhaps instigate momentum for change. Only after we discover the other "domestic" side of formal Confucianism will we be able to write a more holistic Korean social history.

### Note

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# MEIROKU ZASSHI

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## Abuses of Equal Rights for Men and Women

Katō Hiroyuki

As the true principles regarding married couples have been gradually clarified in public since the appearance of the discussion on equal rights for husbands and wives by Mori and Fukuzawa,<sup>1</sup> the ugly custom of keeping concubines promiscuously and the bad practice by which the husband holds his wife in contempt will gradually be destroyed, and we shall consequently reach the point where equality between husband and wife is truly observed. Are not the achievements of these two gentlemen indeed wonderful?

It is my opinion, however, that, even though the system of near equality between husband and wife in modern Europe conforms with Heaven's Reason, the rights of the wife seem rather to surpass those of the husband in present-day society. This evil, after all, arises from a misunderstanding of the principle of equal rights. There is not time to enumerate all the abuses, but the following are a few examples.

When husband and wife pass through a door, the wife goes first and the husband follows. When they are seated, the wife occupies the highest seat; the husband, the next best seat. When others call on the couple, they greet the wife before the husband. When they address the couple, they place the wife's name first, the husband's later. If men are seated with ladies, they are especially discreet in speech, and they do not smoke without first securing permission from the ladies. The extent of women's rights is really surprising. Although it appears that Westerners cannot actually understand the impropriety of their ways since they have been soaked in them for a long time, I must say that the customs are indeed strange from the point of view of East Asians. How can they be called equal rights of husband and wife? The other day, when I was smoking as I pleased among a large number of women in a certain person's house, a foreign guest said to me, "Since many of the ladies present do not enjoy smoking, I beg you to

stop." Even though I of course knew the custom that forbids smoking in the presence of Western ladies, I dared not to follow it since it is completely unreasonable. Frankly speaking, I must say that the foreigner's words were indeed uncivil. The prohibition against smoking may indeed have arisen from their dislike of the custom, but it is my free right to smoke since I enjoy tobacco. If ladies do not like smoking, they may themselves leave their seats. It can never be right for them to obstruct a man's freedom for the reason that they themselves disapprove. Moreover, why should dislike of smoking be limited only to women? There are also men who dislike smoking. I must say that I really cannot understand why women alone forbid smoking while we smoke without asking men whether they like it or not. Furthermore, if the habit violated morals or if it injured another's health, then I too, naturally, would not smoke. Since it does not in the least injure another's health or violate human morality, what reason is there for discriminating between men and women when determining whether one smokes?

Although such a question is really a small matter, it clearly misrepresents the principle of equality between men and women, and it is also clearly an evil that has arisen from the infatuation with which men court the favor of women with flattery. It is an unbearable but natural outcome that in Europe one often hears of adulterous scandals even about women reputed to be noble ladies. How dreadful this is! At present, when we are putting into practice in our country the principle of equal rights for men and women, we shall finally reach the point at which we are unable to control the injury of excessive women's rights if men of intelligence, fully recognizing this danger, do not prevent it in advance. What do my friends make of this?

## Abuses of Equal Rights for Men and Women

Part Two, March 1, 1875

Katō Hiroyuki

Some gentlemen have said: "We found extremely mistaken your discussion of the abuses of equal rights for men and women. You

said that Westerners, misunderstanding the principle of equal rights, have come to venerate women and finally to allow them excessively great power. After all, however, what you take for veneration by Westerners of women is never veneration. It is helping women. These practices arise from the fact that women can never be secure without the help of men since women in general, in addition to being weak in body, are by nature reserved. We beg you, therefore, seriously to consider how inappropriate it was for you recklessly to criticize Western customs without recognizing this principle."

Looked at from my point of view, the wisdom of my critics notwithstanding, they have so long soaked in Western customs that they no longer recognize the bad customs of the West, having accepted the evil together with the good. Let us consider, for example, the view of my critics that what appears to be veneration of women by men is not venerating women but helping them. After all, the distinction between helping and venerating is self-evident. How can they interpret as helping the practices of forbidding smoking before ladies, of calling the wife's name before the husband's, of seating the wife above the husband, and of greeting the wife before the husband? I must say, to regard the above practices as helping women really represents extreme inability to understand. If it is the opinion of my critics that in order for men to help women, men must follow even the above-described conduct that is practically the same as veneration, however, I have a further point to make.

Why is helping the weak wholly confined only to man's relations to woman? The government's relations to the people and the relations of parents to children all involve helping persons because of their weakness. (Even though the principles in the relations of government to people and parents to children are, of course, not the same, they are essentially similar in the sense that government and parents, respectively, protect their people and children for the reason that the recipients of their protection are unable to protect themselves.) If it is necessary to adopt such practices resembling veneration when helping the weak, the government must take a humble place while elevating the people to the highest level, and the parents must place their children in seats of honor while they themselves occupy lesser seats. Since such is never the case even in

the West, however, why do these bad customs of veneration exist only in relations between men and women? (Since government exists for the people who are its masters, it seems that, as a fundamental principle, the people should take the upper place, and the government the lower place. Nevertheless, it is important that the government invariably occupy the upper position since it must grasp the power to protect the people. Governments, therefore, always rank above the people even in republican countries.) This is why I shall never concede to my critics' theory. How can it not be said that the [theory] is an abuse arising from amorous passion in which men court the favor of women with flattery? What do my critics have to say?

### Government and Ethics Are Not Separate Paths<sup>2</sup>

Speech on March 1, 1875<sup>2</sup>

Nishimura Shigeki

Confucian scholars of China mourned the separation of scholarship and governing into two paths. I think it unnecessary to regret deeply the separation of scholarship and governing. What is to be regretted is the separation of ethics and governing into two paths. In the *Great Learning*<sup>3</sup> is explained the logical sequence of disciplining the individual person, managing the household, ruling the country, and keeping peace in the world, and Mencius also observed that the family is the foundation of the nation and that the individual person is the foundation of the family.<sup>4</sup>

There is not time to enumerate the other instances in which ethics have been regarded as the foundation of the country. When men in our country honored the ways of Confucius and Mencius, those who upheld these teachings and undertook to rule the country invariably thought that they should cultivate ethics. (Although, actually, there were exceptions.) Since the Restoration, scholarly styles have already changed. Just as when the sun has already set but the moon has not yet arisen, the Way of Confucius and Mencius has already declined, but the philosophy of the West