

CHAPTER ONE

Women in Chosŏn Korea

If the family of a scholar's wife lives in poverty and destitution, there is no reason why she should not work a little if it serves as a means of survival. . . . In so far as raising chicken and ducks, buying and selling soy sauce, vinegar, wine, and oil . . . securing [her] family's livelihood should not be her only reason; after all it is one of [her] many *sugong* [tasks for women].

Yi Tŏng-mu, *Sasojŏl* (A scholar's minor matter of etiquette), 1775

Inmaech'ŏn; sa-in yŏch'ŏn

Every human being is an embodiment of heaven; serve every human being as you would serve heaven.

Ch'oe Che-u, *Yongdam yusa*
(Hymns from Dragon Pool), 1860

In his 1895 memoir, Henry Savage-Landor describes his first encounters with Korean women upon his arrival in the capital: "I remember how astonished I was during the first few days that I was in Seoul, at the fact that every woman I came across in the streets was just on the point of opening a door and entering a house. . . . The idea suddenly dawned upon me that it was only a trick on their part to evade being seen."¹

Under the leadership of Yi Sŏng-gye (1335–1408), the founders of the Chosŏn dynasty (1392–1910) had launched a series of social, economic,

and political reforms designed to transform the kingdom into a male-dominated neo-Confucian society. Yet while the image of the secluded woman popularized by Savage-Landor symbolizes the conservative character of the dynasty, the Confucianizing of Korea was a gradual, ever-evolving process that met with resistance, especially from women who stood to lose power with the reorganization of society. Though the penetration of Confucian ideals into Korean society was most visible at the level of discourse and ceremonies, the reform of social habits and kinship structures generated intense conflict, as individuals employed diverse resources and strategies to counter the state's quest to create a uniform neo-Confucian order. By the mid-eighteenth century, a new culture of dissent had emerged in Korean society that fostered new mentalités and demands for reform.

This chapter provides a broad overview of the transformation of Korean society—the processes of reform, accommodation, and dissent—during the long Chosŏn period. First, I examine the social structures that defined class hierarchies, gender relations, and customs.² The emergence of a strict patriarchy during the Chosŏn dynasty, which differed significantly in organization from the preceding Koryŏ society (918–1392), was shaped largely by social elites. Despite its oppressive character, this new patriarchal structure was not immune to demands for negotiations and concessions. By analyzing the gendered nature of tensions rather than conflicts between social entities, this study seeks to emphasize the diverse, even competing, interests of women within a single family or social class.

To contextualize these changes, I then explore the development of a broader “culture of dissent” and the rise of new historical players in Chosŏn society at large. In particular, it examines two distinct moments—the first coalescing after the *Imjin* wars (1592, 1598) and the second emerging after the Manchu invasions (1626, 1636). These upheavals triggered intense reactions from a wide spectrum of society, prompting the elites to defend their claim to power against disenfranchised groups that insisted on a complete overhaul of the existing order. These two

historical moments spawned new intellectual and religious movements, as well as a series of peasant uprisings that generated major socio-economic upheavals. This powerful culture of dissent—which included new mentalités, language, symbols, political activism, and even violence—bequeathed a complex repertoire for resistance against the Japanese colonial state.

Finally, this chapter examines a new space for women created during this period—the field of modern education—and its impact on the culture of dissent. From 1885 to 1910 a generation of Korean women received a Western-style education at American missionary schools and emerged in the 1920s as leaders, challenging tradition and crafting new gender roles and identities. Although the missionaries claimed that they would prevent Westernization of their wards, their teachings and curriculum invariably instilled American cultural and religious mores that deeply influenced Korean women. With the onset of colonization, female students often utilized Western ideas, adapted and reconfigured to suit the Korean context, to counter a colonial state that vigorously reasserted traditional roles and values, as well as a nationalist agenda that promoted a new cult of domesticity. As a result, women's education became intimately linked to broader issues about cultural authenticity and national identity.

SOCIETY, FAMILY, AND THE STATE

Families, themselves hierarchical, operated within the larger framework of social classes that defined Chosŏn society. In 1868, Ernest Oppert (1832–1903) of Prussia headed a tomb-digging expedition to Korea. His mission was to blackmail the Chosŏn court into accepting Christianity and opening its ports to trade. He observed in Korea a “strict and rigid division of the castes, which part[s] the various ranks of the population of the peninsula from each other, showing on one hand some analogy to the caste institution prevailing amongst the Hindus in India.”³ Though the hierarchical relations in Korean society appeared “rigid” to an out-

sider, they were governed by complex social and gender conventions. Relations in the Chosŏn period were defined by “degrees of dignity” among classes, age, male and female, and even between the sexes in the Dumontian sense.⁴ The tenets of neo-Confucianism placed great emphasis on moral imperatives. As Martina Deuchler explains, “These were the relationship between sovereign and subject guided by *ŭi* (righteousness), *ch’in* (the relationship between father and son guided by parental authority), *pyŏl* (the relationship between husband and wife guided by the separation of the functions), *sŏ* (the relationship between elder and young brothers guided by the sequence of birth), and *sin* (the relationship between senior and junior guided by faithfulness).”⁵

At a domestic level, the moral imperative of duty dominated Confucian family ethics. Duty meant an understanding of where every individual stood in relation to the whole. Acceptance of personal rank signified awareness of one’s place in the world. As a result, these values promoted “hierarchy without shame, a hierarchy that is self-conscious but without conscious abuse, without necessarily infringing on what it means to be human.”⁶

Within the larger Chosŏn hierarchy, there were four distinct social classes: scholar-officials, collectively known as *yangban* (“civil and military branches”); *chungin*, administrators and yamen who literally lived in the middle of the cities; *sangmin* or *yangmin* (commoners), namely farmers, merchants, and craftsmen; and *ch’ŏnmin* (“base people”), who occupied the lowest rungs of the social ladder. The *yangban* were members of a hereditary class who occupied important positions in state service based on their status and the civil service examinations. Although commoners could not take the examinations, talent, which had once been a prerequisite for attaining these coveted posts, became less meaningful by the mid-seventeenth century, as powerful clans used their influence to ensure that they dominated the examination system.

The *chungin* formed the backbone of the bureaucracy as lower administrators and technical specialists in the government. To qualify for one of the eight professional occupations, the *chungin* were required to

pass an examination on specified subjects, known as *chapkwa*.⁷ The majority of the population was in the *sangmin* class. They assumed a disproportionate burden of taxation, performed heavy corvée labor, and supplied young men for the military. Finally, the *ch'ŏnmin* class, despite being at the bottom of the social ladder, included some important positions. Their rank and file included a variety of groups, ranging from slaves through professional mourners, shamans, servants, and *kisaeng* (female entertainers).⁸ The *paekchŏng*, comprising mainly butchers, lived in segregated villages and were exempt from government conscription.

Accompanying this complex and evolving class structure, with its many implications for the prospects and activities of men, was a transformation of the family from the Koryŏ to the Chosŏn dynasty that resulted in a gradual decline in women's status and visibility in the public sphere. During the Koryŏ period, the state's endorsement of Buddhism as the state religion offered a wide range of opportunities for female activities outside the domestic sphere. Women not only joined temples and learned to read sutras but contributed to the faith as nuns. People also revered the female bodhisattvas: the *Kwanŏm Posal* or the *Avalokitesvara* (female bodhisattvas of compassion), for example, had the power to grant the petitions of couples who desired children. In addition, Korean women enjoyed many familial privileges, because Buddhism recognized the right of women to remarry and inherit property. Marriage was neither universal nor a duty imposed upon women; rather, women could choose to live alone, marry, or even have multiple husbands (although this was not common). It was customary for parents to reside with their daughters rather than their sons, as a matter of preference or convenience.⁹

The neo-Confucian vision of a rational, well-ordered society provided the Chosŏn leaders with a blueprint for reorganizing and tightening control over the family. An orderly family became synonymous with the stability of the kingdom. The stricter family hierarchy granted greater prerogatives to the male patriarch and ensured women's subservience through the *samjong chido* (three obediences): to be obedient

to their fathers, husbands, and sons. The introduction of primogeniture transferred all rights of property to men, which resulted in a radical deterioration of women's social position and legal rights. As inheritance became the exclusive right of the eldest son, it was incumbent on *yangban* households to compile a *chokpo* (genealogy), which excluded women. As we will see, although the new dynasty sought to define the boundaries of family lineage and class lines, ideals often did not translate into practice. In fact, those who stood to lose power, especially women, resisted attempts to encroach on their prerogatives and rights.

THE ELITE FAMILY

As neo-Confucian scholars of the early Chosŏn dynasty embarked on their reform agenda, they castigated the “unordered” family as the root of all social chaos in Korean society. Monumental compendiums like the *Kyŏngguk taejŏn* (Grand code of the nation), Zhu Xi's *Jia Li* (House rules of Master Zhu Xi) and the *Li Ji* (Book of rites) discussed the important four rites (*sarye*) of Korean family life—capping, wedding, funeral, and ancestor veneration—as the central pillars of stability. They also described how to maintain and strengthen “class privilege in general and for the descendants in particular.”¹⁰ If properly observed, the four rites determined the relationships within the domestic sphere and stabilized the social foundation of the public realm. In other words, the peace and prosperity of a state could only be guaranteed in proportion to the purity of family ritual life.

As a result, the emergent neo-Confucian Chosŏn state sought a radical redefinition of the family through restrictive legislation intended to ensure harmony in both the domestic and political realms. One significant change was a shift from a matrilineal to a patrilineal structure of kinship and identity. In Koryŏ, it was customary for the newlywed couple to live with the bride's family. This uxori-local arrangement offered numerous advantages for women, not the least of which was economic: they could safeguard their portion of the inheritance, which they shared equally with

their male siblings. Even if the wife moved to the husband's residence, she retained inheritance rights. If the husband had multiple wives (a custom of the royal house that was emulated by aristocrats and some commoners), they usually resided with their natal families, which impacted marital power relations in favor of the woman. In such "plural marriages," all wives and their children enjoyed equal status, perhaps with the exception of the *ch'ŏp*—a servant who served primarily as a sexual partner but lacked the status of wife.¹¹

The triumph of the patrilineal line naturally eroded rights and privileges that women had enjoyed during the Koryŏ period. Whereas a woman's inheritance, which she received as a dowry upon her marriage or upon the death of her parents, had been independent of her marriage, now it became part of "an inalienable conjugal fund" and reverted to her husband and his descent group. This deprivation of economic assets no doubt had an impact on power relations within the marriage, precluding the dissolution of the union without financial ruin. In fact, it became nearly impossible for a married woman to sue for divorce or remarry, because after she entered a new descent group she had no way of separating herself from it.¹²

The power of the patrilineal line was nowhere as apparent as in the changing residential arrangements. Zhu Xi's *Jia Li*, a detailed description of a Confucian wedding ceremony, introduced new elements to the rituals, including the *ch'in-yŏng*, in which the bridegroom brought the bride into his home. But as complaints from Korean officials reveal, the attempt to impose new residential patterns on married couples met with stiff resistance. In a harsh critique of the tenacious hold of uxori-local marriages on Korean society, one key reformer, Chŏng To-jŏn (1337–98), argued: "Since the groom moves into the bride's home, the wife unknowingly depends on her parents' love and cannot but hold her husband in light regard. Her arrogance thus grows with each day; in the end there will be quarreling between husband and wife, whereby the rights of the family decline."¹³ In other words, it was difficult to impose the "proper" power relations in a family that catered to the wife's whims and

desires. Only when the “natural” hierarchy of marriage became the norm could there be order in state and society. To ensure the subordination of women, the Confucian legislators emphasized the final act of the wedding ceremony—the *sinbaeng* or *ugwi*, when the bride officially entered her husband’s household and took her place in the inner quarters (*anch’ae*). Her husband’s family now took precedence over her own.

According to the *Jia Li*, the appropriate marriage age for a *yangban* male was between sixteen and thirty, while girls were to be between fourteen and twenty.¹⁴ To preserve some aspects of Koryŏ dynasty custom, the bridegroom went to the bride’s home for the marriage ceremony (*pan ch’in-yŏng*) and stayed there the first night.¹⁵ People with the same family name and ancestral home (i.e., geographical origin) could not marry, and those who disobeyed received sixty strokes and were forced to divorce.¹⁶

Though marriage was an important institution for forging alliances between two families and an important rite of passage for an individual man or woman, the stated purpose of marriage was to “bring forth male offspring.” Because the lineage was rooted in patrilineal descent, this was “society’s means of survival.”¹⁷ The *Jia Li* states that “the ceremony of marriage is intended to be a bond of love between two surnames, with a view, in its retrospective character, to secure the continuance of the family line.”¹⁸ In other words, “Marriage was to guarantee uninterrupted continuation of the descent group in two directions, taking the living as the starting point—toward the dead and toward the unborn.”¹⁹

Since the arduous burden of sustaining the prestige and honor of a household by safeguarding the lineage fell primarily on the shoulders of the eldest son, producing a son was paramount for sustaining the lineage. Thus, “when a boy was born, they would lay him on a bed, clothe him with good garments, and give him a precious stone to play with, while [when] a girl-child was born, they would lay her on the floor, clothe her with a diaper only, and let her play with pieces of tiles.”²⁰

If a householder did not produce an heir, the family had several op-

tions. They could bring in a concubine, seek a divorce, engage a *ssibaji* (surrogate mother), marry in a son-in-law, or adopt a son.²¹ Children were classified according to their mother's social status if their parents were from different social classes. This had a detrimental impact on illegitimate sons born of women other than legal wives. Furthermore, a man of a higher class could marry a woman from a lower class but not vice versa. If a commoner woman, for example, married a slave, she lost her commoner status. While some commoners continued to practice marrying in a son-in-law, by the late Chosŏn period the *yangban* household had taken up agnatic adoption. This practice sought to eliminate women as heirs by placing a premium on primogeniture. Adoption, however, differed from many other societies in that the average age of the adopted son was between twenty and thirty years; infants were rarely adopted. All adoptions had to be approved by the proper authorities, and by 1555 an illegal adoption could lead to arrest.²²

In contrast to the Koryŏ period, women's freedom of movement became severely restricted as Confucian moralists imposed a strict division of the sexes, allegedly to prevent adultery and other sexual improprieties. Starting in the early fifteenth century, the state forbade women from visiting Buddhist temples (except to perform ritual ceremonies for deceased parents), shaman houses, and even the mountains with a women's temple group. Depriving women of such expressions of solidarity through popular religion and ritual may have served as a way to deprive women of any semblance of spiritual power. Unmarried daughters of *yangban* families were to remain confined to the domestic sphere as they prepared for their future roles as wives and mothers. While these restrictions were gradually extended to commoner women, these women still had greater access to the outside world because of their work in the fields and marketplace. Their ability to move beyond the inner rooms facilitated their transition to the new economic changes in colonial Korea but also put them at odds with reformers who sought to modernize them according to their own visions of womanhood.

MARRIAGE PRACTICES AMONG COMMONER FAMILIES

Despite the paucity of documents on commoners, available sources suggest that during the first half of the Chosŏn dynasty, the lower strata of society adhered to marriage practices of the Koryŏ dynasty. Interclass marriages were frequent among commoners. For example, a slave woman could marry a commoner, or a commoner man could marry a servant. In either case, the children from the union would inherit commoner status. However, as the Chosŏn state sought to enforce its rigid social hierarchy, new legal codes mandated that bride and groom hail from the same social group. In families of mixed descent, children inherited the social status of the mother regardless of the higher status of the father.²³

During the Chosŏn period, a matrilocal arrangement was prevalent, in which the commoner man lived with the wife's parents. In part, this arrangement resulted from the inability of single men to afford the *kyŏlnap* (betrothal price) at the time of wedding. According to a study by Chŏng Sŏng-hŭi, the average *kyŏlnap* was equivalent to the market price of a cow. The groom could pay this sum in cash to the bride's family. If he could not afford to pay the whole sum, the bride's family sometimes accepted payment equivalent to the cost of a pig, but this arrangement did not come without a price for the groom, who faced social ostracism and derision for the rest of his life.

Rather than delay marriage and suffer the social stigma of bachelorhood—a single man was described as living “like a beast”—most commoner men preferred to pay the *kyŏlnap* through the institution of *pongsabon*, service to the bride's family as a hired hand for a designated period of time. One option was going to work at the bride's home as a *mŏsŭm sŏbang* (farmhand husband). In most cases, the man would have to work for approximately three years. More often than not, the *mŏsŭm* was allowed to begin a family while rendering his services to the bride's family. For poor families with several daughters, the labor of a groom (*taeril sawi*) for three years proved economically beneficial. In addition to the

matrilocal arrangement, commoners also adhered to *ilbu ilch'ŏ* (one husband, one wife), or monogamous relationships.

For the indigent, marriage was not even an option. Poor tenant farmers who barely eked out a living, for instance, often resorted to selling their daughters to *yangban* households as concubines or *kogong* (hired farmhands). *Sirhak* scholar Chŏng Yag-yong's (1762–1836) epic poem “Sogyŏng ege sijip kan yŏja” [The girl married off to a blind man] was inspired by the sale of a young girl to a forty-eight-year-old blind fortune-teller.²⁴

One option for poor commoner men was to marry a female slave (*yangch'ŏn kyŏlbon*) owned by a member of the *yangban* class—unions that the elites encouraged for the sake of increasing their property. Chosŏn law unequivocally gave masters sole ownership rights over the children of female slaves. Slaves, who occupied the lowest position in this rigid social hierarchy as *ch'ŏnmin*, were divided into two categories: *kongnobi* (state-owned) and *sanobi* (privately owned). The latter were subdivided into *solgŏ nobi* (service slaves) and *oegŏ nobi* (outside resident slaves). Han Yŏng-guk's study of household records in the Ulsan area during the seventeenth century shows that marriage rates among *oegŏ nobi* were three or four times higher than those of *solgŏ nobi*. Han notes that roughly half of the male *oegŏ nobi* were married to the master's adopted daughters and a third were married to private slaves; the rest were married to maidservants and government servants. However, for female slaves the choices were broader: approximately a third married private male slaves, and the rest chose servants, soldiers, marines, and commoners. Among the *solgŏ nobi*, the fate of many young girls depended on the whims of the owner. Because of the frequency of rape, a large number of female *solgŏ nobi* bore illegitimate children and were forced to raise them.

Marital rates among slaves differed considerably by gender. According to Han Yŏng-guk's 1609 survey of 136 households in the Ulsan area, out of a total of 572 slaves (314 female, 258 male), 144 slaves (94 female and 50 male) were registered as married.²⁵ The disproportionate number of female slave marriages can be explained largely by their broader options

for marital partners. Male slaves were limited to marrying women in the same household. This was naturally to the master's advantage; for example, when a *no* (male slave) married a *bi* (female slave) from the same household, their child legally belonged to the master. If a male slave married a female slave from a different household, however, there were harsh consequences; in the most extreme case, the master punished him by death. To prevent these kinds of relationships, owners allowed their male slaves to marry adopted women from their own household.

Yi Yŏng-hun's survey of slave families in the Kyŏngbuk area during the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries shows that the average slave family included three or four members. After giving birth to her own child, a married female slave often rendered services to the master as a wet nurse. In return, she received preferential treatment over other slaves, especially if she also raised her master's children. It was not unusual for a married slave to bear the illegitimate child of her master or his son. The social stigma attached to these offspring was severe, and their very existence raised thorny moral and legal questions during the latter decades of the Chosŏn period.²⁶

Even as cultural ideals of the family (*kajok*) propagated by Confucian ideologues gained widespread acceptance, they did not necessarily translate into practice, especially when economic realities made that impossible. By the latter half of the Chosŏn period, moreover, the contradictions between social status, wealth, and cultural ideals were becoming apparent. For instance, a wealthy peasant family (who did not have elite social standing) might celebrate an elaborate wedding according to Confucian norms, while a poor *yangban* family with limited economic resources could not provide a proper dowry for their daughter. In fact, during the mid-nineteenth century, prosperous peasants began to emulate elite practices such as *pan ch'in-yŏng* (the bride moving in with the bridegroom's family) and mourning. Quite apart from issues of wealth, Confucian cultural ideals would also collide with traditional gender norms and ideas about women that were firmly rooted in popular culture and social practices.

CONFUCIANISM AND ITS DISSENTERS

In spite of the new dynasty's efforts to restrict their activities, Korean women retained residual forms of power, often through subversive means. At the heart of the Confucian image of woman were contradictions that could be exploited: a woman was to be submissive yet strong, modest yet responsible.²⁷ Though female power could not fully dislodge the Confucian patriarchal system, women were not entirely without recourse. As Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo observes about women in oppressive conditions, they could "exert important pressures on the social life of the group" regardless of whether their "influence [was] acknowledged or not."²⁸

To an outsider's eye, Korean women suffered from strict regulations and surveillance over their physical mobility, dress, and social interactions. As one Western observer wrote: "Women of the Far East are kept so secluded and are not allowed that free intercourse with their fellowmen that is accorded to women in the West"; the higher her social status, "the more complete is her seclusion."²⁹ And as one descended down the social ladder, "all restrictive laws and all inequalities between the sexes are toned down, so that when we reach the lowest classes, we find that the relations are much the same as in our land."³⁰

In contrast to *yangban* women, lower-class women could cross gender boundaries into the public sphere (the fields, marketplace, and so forth) more easily as a result of their work, which facilitated interaction with men and with other women. They could converse with men at their leisure, and even go out unveiled, whereas *yangban* women were "very punctilious as to the observances of their severe rules."³¹ The American educator William Griffis contrasted the social isolation of *yangban* women with the greater freedom of peasant women, who performed manual labor in the fields rather than hiding behind their veils after dusk. However, he conceded that this freedom from seclusion was hardly a privilege, for in "going to the market, the [peasant] women carry the heavier load."³²

[FIGURE](Place Figure 1 near here)



1. A *yangban* woman in her *chang-ot* (hood).

Observers also commented on the relaxed, even immodest, style of commoner women's dress as a sign of greater personal freedom. Following a trip to Korea, the Prussian evangelist Charles Gutzlaff (1803–51) remarked that village women wore less restrictive, modest attire and plaited hair, which distinguished them from the nobility.³³ Homer Hulbert observed that women of the lower classes, to his shock and dismay, even “exposed their breasts.”³⁴ He went so far as to declare that slave women were “the freest women in the country since they are not bound by the laws of the custom which holds the women of the upper class with a never-ending grip. They go where they please without regard to being seen by men, wearing no cover over their faces as do the other women.”³⁵

Though women of various social classes clearly enjoyed different de-

grees of personal freedom, they all suffered from the cultural taboo and restrictions on widow remarriage, as well as the common practice of child marriage, especially prevalent among commoners, which posed serious problems for family reformers during the colonial period.

Yet a *yangban* woman was not wholly unable to escape the restrictions of Confucianism, as Western observers believed. There were some concessions that provided a venue for socialization with other women and protection from the arbitrary and unilateral power of a husband. There were designated times during the evening when women were permitted to leave their homes. Louise Miln reported in the nineteenth century that “after the curfew rings, it is illegal for a Korean man to leave his own house; then it becomes legal for Korean women to slip out and take the air and gossip freely.”³⁶ Henry Savage-Landor also noted those times when women could leave their domestic sphere for an outside realm of female sociability: “Men are confined to the house from about an hour after sunset and until lately were severely punished both with imprisonment and flogging if found walking about the streets during ‘women’s hours.’ The gentler sex was and is therefore allowed to parade the streets, and go and pay calls on their parents and lady friends, until a very late hour of the night, without fear of being disturbed by the male portion of the community.”³⁷ Laws banning their social mobility during the day, spelled out in the *Kyŏngguk taejŏn*, punished women who visited temples and mountains with one hundred lashes but could be breached during these “women’s hours.” Laws establishing norms of social conduct for women also were not as rigid as they appeared. This was true even for the *ch’ilgŏ chiak* (the “seven evils” rules), which could serve as a pretext for their husbands to divorce them. These seven evils were inability to bear a son, disobedience to parents-in-law, adultery, displays of jealousy, chronic illness, theft, and garrulity.

The severity of the seven evils rules was attenuated by a high bar of corroboration and verification; it was far easier for a man to accuse his wife of violating a rule than it was to prove that she had done so. Furthermore, there were protective clauses, such as the *sambulgŏ* (three rea-

sions not to be let go), that could be employed by a wife to annul a divorce filed by a husband. A wife could either claim that she had no place to go, prove that she had served the three-year mourning period after the death of her husband's parents, or demonstrate to the court that she was the source of the household's wealth. A wife could also divorce her husband on the grounds that he had forced her to commit adultery, sold her to another man to become his wife, committed incestuous acts with his mother-in-law, or struck her parents or grandparents.³⁸

Among commoners, there was far greater license and divorce was exceedingly easy and common, because there were no laws that punished women for promiscuity or infidelity.³⁹ The *kisaeng* (female entertainers), for example, were literate in various arts, music, literature, dancing, and even calligraphy, and had the most freedom of access to public events. As Louise Miln observed, "There are one or two advantages in being a woman in Korea. There are very few crimes for which a Korean woman can be punished. Her husband is answerable for her conduct, and must suffer in her stead if she breaks any ordinary law." Another advantage of being a woman in Korea was that she "has very largely the selection of her own daughters-in-law, and if the daughter-in-law proves unsatisfactory, she has only herself to blame."⁴⁰

Despite the outward rigidity of Korean patriarchy, the otherwise unbending *samjong-chido* (three rules for women)—that is, to cultivate obedience to one's father before marriage, to one's husband during marriage, and to one's son after the death of a husband—were softened by the intimate mother-son relationship, which became a unique feature of Korean family life. In fact, Cho Haejoang suggests, "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 an overwhelming mother power."⁴¹

This power was not merely affective but practical as well, especially after the death of a husband or father-in-law, when an energetic mother could assume control over matters related to marriage and inheritance.

No husband was permitted to meddle in the household affairs of his wife, whose responsibilities included the management of the family, the preparation for regular ancestral rites, and the education of her children.

Women from both the elite and commoner classes took very seriously their responsibility to prepare children for the complex world of Confucian adulthood. In Chosŏn society, self-improvement began at home under the care of the mother, who provided a moral foundation through proper child rearing and character building. At a more practical level, elite women who successfully reared their sons (to pass the national exam) and daughters (to marry them off to a wealthy family) could legitimize an elevation in status and power as they aged.

Foreign contemporaries could not help admiring the power wielded by Korean wives in everyday life. In the words of Horace Underwood, one of the first American missionaries in Korea, "I beheld a justly irate wife dragging home her drunken husband from the salon; and firmly grasping this, I have seen more than one indignant female administering that corporal punishment which her lord and master no doubt richly deserved." If the Korean wife "stands and serves her husband while he eats, labors while he smokes," when it comes to family affairs, "she take[s] the helm (that is to say, the top-knot) in hand, and puts the ship about."⁴² Angus Hamilton (a fellow missionary) concurred that "it is impossible not [to] admire the activity and energy of the Korean woman. Despite the contempt with which she is treated, she is the great economic factor in the household and in the life of the nation."⁴³ Another missionary added: "Many a time while passing along the street, we have been amused to note that while a husband was calling his wife all the names he could think of, he actually ended up attaching to the verb an ending indicative of his unbounded respect for the partner of his bosom. There is still one more fact indicating the position of women: While foreigners are expected to talk 'low' or 'impolite' talk to their male servants, the women, seamstresses and nurses who are in their employ expect to be addressed in polite terms, and object if spoken to in any other way."⁴⁴

Little wonder that the idealized images of the *hyŏnmo yangch'ŏ* (wise mother and good wife) became an integral aspect of Korean culture, “softening the edges of an otherwise strict patriarchy.”⁴⁵

Another powerful female figure who maintained a strong influence over Korean daily life was the shaman or *mudang*. In the earlier Koryŏ period, shamanism had coexisted, without any significant conflict, with Buddhism and Confucianism. However, the new gendered priorities of the neo-Confucian state clashed head-on with the philosophy of shamanism. First, the “superstitious” elements of shamanism—the notion that all objects, animate and inanimate, possessed spirits that needed to be appeased—were incongruous with the “rational” ideas of neo-Confucianism. For instance, instead of shamanism’s constant interaction with the spirits of the dead (whether as communion or appeasement), death was final, inevitable, and natural in the neo-Confucian belief. To be sure, the custom of venerating ancestors was still upheld, but this practice did not entail contact with dead spirits.

Perhaps more important, the power of the female *mudang* as the mediator of the spirit world or as a healer posed a threat to the neo-Confucian gender hierarchy, in which women were deprived of key leadership roles. Despite efforts by Confucian reformers to destroy the influence of these female leaders, they could not prevent Koreans, even the kings who were “exemplar Confucian monarchs,” from seeking the women’s intervention. For example, during the *kiuje* (ceremony to pray for rain), Kings T’aejong, Sejong, and Sŏngjong all, in their time, called on shamans to offer prayers during droughts. In many respects, shamanism represented the feminine in the world of religion, in contrast to Confucianism, which stressed male prerogatives. Even Buddhism, which in earlier periods had allowed women access to rituals, did not allow them to serve as high priests in the same capacity as the *mudang*. Not only did the *mudang* have the power to “report from out there” by manifesting spirits in their bodies, but they occupied a female space that was alien to the spirit of neo-Confucianism.⁴⁶

Korean women retained residual forms of power during the Chosŏn

period, even as state and society sought to negate their influence. In particular, the “wise mother, good wife” and shaman came to represent archetypal figures of dissent who manipulated social relationships (i.e., mother-son or spiritual leader-follower) to exert their authority in both conventional and subversive ways. Confucian ideals did not prevent them from reinforcing their prerogatives; these strong women represented the contradictions between the “powerlessness” of their subordinate status in neo-Confucian society and the real power they wielded in everyday life. As Korea underwent significant economic transformation during the Chosŏn period, women of different classes found that the contradictions between Confucian ideals and realities grew more pronounced in the context of a changing economic and intellectual landscape.

ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATIONS AND NEW MOVEMENTS OF DISSENT

Toyotomi Hideyoshi’s invasion of Korea in 1592 and 1597, which wreaked havoc and devastation in the land, generated significant socioeconomic transformations that eventually gave rise to new movements of dissent. Hard-pressed for revenues and needing to rejuvenate the ruined rural economy, Chief State Councilor Yi Wŏn-ik urged the king to consider replacing the old tribute tax system with a uniform land tax law (*taedong-pŏp*) that would levy on each household roughly one percent of its harvest (twelve *tu* of rice) for every arable *kyŏl* of land.⁴⁷ Unlike the previous tax system, which accepted only rice payments, taxes could now be paid in cotton cloth (*taedongp’o*) or coins (*taedongjŏn*), alleviating the burden on peasants. The minting of coins not only increased revenues for the state but transformed rural life, as markets and fairs appeared throughout the provinces.

As inland and coastal trade brokers (*kaekchu* and *yŏgak*) took full advantage of this new commercial economy, permanent trading towns like Kaesŏng, Miryang, and Anju appeared. Commoners could now seek new vocations in these towns, as peddlers, innkeepers, restaurateurs, money-

lenders, and even small shopkeepers. Merchants who engaged in wholesale distribution of prized commodities like cotton, ginseng, or paper became extremely wealthy. Unregulated commercial activities also affected the agrarian economy, as opportunities prompted many peasants to diversify and invest in commercial farming. The social impact of these economic changes was significant, leading to the rise of a new dissent movement that exposed the cruel realities of Korean society and demanded greater social and gender equality.

The Emergence of the Sirbak Movement

Economic growth led to the emergence of a class of nouveau-riche peasants and merchants, which disrupted the rigid traditional class system and its mores, triggering a moral and epistemological crisis. Many rural literati were appalled to find themselves no better off than the average commoner. To remedy their social decline, a coterie of disaffected intellectuals—many of whom were from the *namin* (southern) faction—sought concrete solutions to the socioeconomic ills plaguing the dynasty, which was crippled by partisan fighting in the court. This broad and varied socioeconomic movement, better known as the *sirbak* (practical studies) movement, became an important social force and a key challenge to the existing order. Though their concerns ranged from social issues such as abolishing class distinctions to the development of a sound agricultural economy run by independent farmers, *sirbak* scholars concurred on one thing: change was inevitable.

The agenda was as diverse as the group's activists. Some scholars who had sojourned in Qing China, like Pak Chi-wŏn (1737–1805) and Pak Che-ga (b. 1750), believed that solutions to Korea's domestic problems were to be found outside the country, and they looked toward Chinese models of the well-ordered society. Others, however, were more inward-looking and resorted to satirical writings in the vernacular *han'gŭl* to expose the hypocrisies of the ruling elite and address other inequalities in society, such as the evils of slavery.⁴⁸ Similarly, in his treatise *Oju yŏnmun*

changjön san'go (Random expatiations of Oju), Yi Kyu-gyŏng (1788–1865) sought to abolish restrictions on the remarriage of widows, which he redefined as a serious societal problem rather than a personal dilemma that could be resolved through moral training.⁴⁹

One dominant theme in *sirhak* writings was the underutilization of female labor skills and power, which the scholars argued had damaged both Korean women and society in general.⁵⁰ For example, Yi Tŏng-mu (1741–93) argued that *yangban* women needed to work in the changing commercial economy, not because the households were in dire need of cash but because of their business acumen, ability, and resourcefulness; he also pointed out the growing number of talented and literate women in the population.⁵¹

The need to highlight women's achievements led Pinghŏgak Yi (1759–1824), the wife of the *sirhak* scholar Sŏ Yu-bon (1762–1822), to compile the *Kyuhap ch'ongsŏ*, an encyclopedic tome that was intended to guide the lives of her daughters.⁵² The entries are most notable for the strong presence of women in various commercial enterprises. Not only did Yi provide information about pioneers in these areas, but she also offered concrete recommendations on how to cultivate and sell rice, barley, tobacco, cotton, medicine, and other special products. Her description of “women's chores”—including meal preparation, liquor distillation, sewing, weaving, raising silkworms and domestic livestock, fieldwork, flower gardening, and child rearing—reflected the ever-expanding field of Korean women's work. Moreover, Yi's compilation of *yŏllyŏrok* (records of virtuous women)—role models she wanted her daughters to emulate—included not only well-known “virtuous and chaste” wives and daughters-in-law but a diverse group of talented and learned women from Korea and China ranging from female warriors to Taoist hermits.⁵³ For Yi, the solution to Korea's social ills was an expansion of female roles in the economic and literary spheres, accompanied by social acceptance and respect for their achievements.⁵⁴

Another group of *sirhak* scholars looked to Christianity as a panacea for Korea's social inequalities. Treatises like *Ch'ŏnbak ch'obam* (First steps

in Catholic doctrine), which filtered into Korea from China, promised that the egalitarian message of Christianity would provide an alternative to rigid neo-Confucian orthodoxy. According to Ch'oe Yŏng-kyu's study of early converts, from 1784 to 1801, 602 Koreans (480 men and 122 women) converted to Catholicism. The number of male converts decreased during the height of government persecution, between 1802 and 1846, while the number of female converts increased to 159.⁵⁵ Notably, not all female converts were from the *yangban* class; many came from the commoner or *ch'ŏnmin* (base) class. The occupations of female converts included weavers, needle workers, court ladies, day workers, attendants, and *kimch'i* peddlers. According to government records, female converts were arrested because they left their homes to go to Seoul; went out in the streets, moving from house to house; remained single; assumed the identity of a widow when they were single; congregated in worship with the opposite sex; met men in the inner room; or were baptized by foreigners.⁵⁶

The Emergence of Ch'oe Che-u's Tonghak Movement

As harsh persecution drove Catholic converts underground, a growing number of disaffected *yangban* in the countryside started to mingle with the impoverished masses, which fueled popular discontent. Desperate to alleviate their suffering, many peasants resorted to slash-and-burn agriculture in the mountains (*hwajŏn*) but confronted a succession of natural calamities and poor harvests. This agrarian crisis culminated in a series of peasant outbursts, starting with the Hong Kyŏng-nae rebellion in P'yŏngan Province in 1811.

In response to the crisis in the countryside, a humanistic millenarian movement emerged under the leadership of the charismatic Ch'oe Che-u (1824–64), who promised to rescue farmers from poverty and transform the existing social order. In stark contrast to the male-dominated Confucian order, Ch'oe envisioned an alternative social order organized around the concept of *innaech'ŏn* (every human being is an embodiment of heaven), in which the world would be free of discrimination and suffer-

ing. Drawing on eclectic indigenous and foreign traditions, Ch'oe's egalitarian social message was aimed at two disadvantaged groups: peasants and women.⁵⁷ An illegitimate child, Ch'oe had experienced stigma and pain firsthand, sensitizing him to the plight of the downtrodden and fostering political consciousness. In his writings, he vociferously criticized such oppressive *yangban* practices as restrictions on widow remarriage and concubinage.⁵⁸

Ch'oe's vision of a new Korean womanhood developed from his humanistic ideals. Contrary to the famous Confucian adage that blamed the intelligent and skilled woman for bringing misfortune to the household, Ch'oe deplored her subordinate and dependent status. He argued that the wife should exercise her power to be the "master of the home." Instead of taking their important work for granted, men should value women's role in the family. Likewise, he condemned ethical codes such as the *samgang oryun* (three cardinal virtues and five ethics) as barriers to women's mobility and development.⁵⁹ He was dedicated to eradicating the rigid status system and set a personal example by adopting two female slaves (one as his daughter-in-law and the other as his daughter). He even taught his daughters how to read and write.⁶⁰ Ch'oe's execution in 1864 did not put an end to the movement. Despite the state's aggressive campaign to persecute all his followers, disciples such as Ch'oe Si-hyŏng (1829–98) sought to preserve their master's teaching and started an underground network of Tonghak churches. Like his mentor, Ch'oe Si-hyŏng sought to rid the world of inequality and attached great significance to the elevation of women. In the *Tonggyŏng taejŏn* (Great compendium of Eastern scripture), Ch'oe stressed the need to cultivate human affections and equality among family members. Reforming the broader structures of society meant change within individual families as women were given status equal to male family members.⁶¹

The desire to ameliorate the status of Korean women in Chosŏn society would find expression not only in these social movements of dissent but also in the field of education. In fact, the reform of women's education left one of the most enduring legacies of the Chosŏn period; not only

were women given the opportunity to study and engage in new professions, but they also gained a new consciousness and identity as modern Korean women.

EDUCATIONAL CHANGE AND NEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN

During the Chosŏn dynasty, the general Korean population had little access to formal education. Only elite men in the upper echelons of society (the *yangban* class) had the privilege of attending a *sŏwŏn*, or private academy. Each county had a *hyanggyo* (provincial school) and almost every town had a *sŏdang* (private village school) run by some learned man. When a boy completed his training at a *sŏdang*, he transferred to the *hyanggyo*. Those who completed the *hyanggyo* proceeded to the *Sŏnggyun'gwan* (National Confucian Academy) in Seoul, the highest institution of learning in the country. The curriculum at all levels was limited to the Chinese classics, and the method of teaching was formal. In the village schools, the primary goal was to prepare young literati men for the civil service examinations (*kwagŏ*). Among the *yangban* class, education meant learning in the Confucian sense of the word—the gradual development of character—rather than a systematic acquisition of scientific knowledge.

For the vast majority of Korean women during the Chosŏn dynasty, *kyoyuk* (education) meant informal training in the basics of domesticity. As Reverend George Gilmore (1868–1923) observed, “They [had] no part in the educational system. While we hear now and again of educated females and such figures in fictions and tales of the peninsula, it is said in such a way as clearly to show that they are the exceptions, and are the wonder of their connections.”⁶² Lulu Frey (1868–1921), a missionary teacher, once suggested that Korean society kept women in ignorance because it feared their full potential:

It is discovered later that the Korean woman's mind is quicker and more active than that of the Korean man and she is able to plan and

plot with great skill. It may be that to keep her from eclipsing man, customs arose which crushed within her the ambition to study. . . . Thus it came about that the women of this land became adept at many kinds of manual work, but confined within the stove and mud walls of the home their minds became so dull and inert and their vision as narrow as those walls.⁶³

Indeed, the neo-Confucian ideology of *nambak yŏmaeng* (learned men, ignorant women), which became prevalent during the Chosŏn dynasty, held learned women in contempt. As Yi Ik (1681–1763), a scholar of *sirhak* (practical studies) and a progressive intellectual during his time, wrote: “Reading and learning are the domain [of] men. For a woman it is enough if she knows the Confucian virtues; she will bring disgrace to the family [if she knows more].”⁶⁴ Women must be limited to *samgang haengsilto* (the three principles of virtuous conduct): loyalty, filial piety, and chastity.

Manuals like the *Naehun* (Instruction for women), a text written by Queen Sohye in 1475, provided elite women with guidelines for decorum in the household. Seven chapters covered topics such as a woman’s manner of speech, her conduct, filial piety, matrimony, marital relations, motherhood, family relations, and thrift. For example, it taught that “wives should stay inside and prepare every meal. They should devote themselves to wine brewing, cooking and cloth making and not to political affairs. No matter how talented and wise she may be, a wife should not interfere in such affairs, though she may just offer a piece of advice to the master. Always remember that a hen that crows in the early morning brings misfortune.”⁶⁵ Under these strict codes, women had to abide by the *samjong chido*, or “three obediences.” As discussed above, these included subservience to her parents before marriage, to her husband after marriage, and to her son after his birth. For those exceptional women who learned to read Chinese, other manuals were available, such as the *Sobak* (Little learning), *Yŏllyŏ-jŏn* (Five biographies of faithful women), *Yŏsasŏ* (Four books for women), *Sŏnsebokye* (Common sense), *Tongmyŏng sŏnsup* (First training for the young and ignorant), *Yŏgye* (Moral teaching for women), and *Yŏch’ik* (Rules of conduct for women).⁶⁶ Although

novels like *Ch'unbyang-jŏn* (The tale of Ch'un-hyang), *Sim Ch'ŏng-jŏn* (The tale of Sim Ch'ŏng), or *Kuunmong* (The nine cloud dream) were available, only a handful of women could read them.

As new knowledge and technology slowly penetrated the peninsula following the Kanghwa Treaty of 1876,⁶⁷ the court sought to formulate a policy to address the foreign demand for more economic openness and the infiltration of Western ideas. The court risked losing its legitimacy if it yielded to foreign pressure; more important, it feared that any concessions to foreign infiltration could lead to the colonization of the peninsula.

The retirement of the Taewŏn'gun (1829–98) and the ascension of the Kaehwa (progressive) faction marked a change from isolationism to an open-door policy. This coterie of young, liberal-minded intellectuals held a more conciliatory attitude toward modernization and sought to discredit the Taewŏn'gun's xenophobic policies. Their position was supported by King Kojong (r. 1863–1907), who convinced the court that it was imperative for Korea to break out of its isolation and embark on a course of “self-strengthening” and “enlightenment,” despite vigorous resistance by conservative leaders of the government. New attitudes at the top led to several important decisions that would influence the decision to import Western education.

First, the court organized several missions to Japan and China. Kim Hong-jip (1842–96), the vice-minister of rites, led the first goodwill mission to Japan in 1880. Accompanied by fifty-eight ministers, the primary goal was to revise the Kanghwa Treaty, postpone the opening of Chemulp'o (Inch'ŏn), and visit universities, regular schools, girls' schools, vocational schools, and military academies. In 1881, the state dispatched sixty-nine officials, students, and artisans to Tientsin to observe Qing military drills and methods of weapons manufacturing. But perhaps the most useful exploratory trips, in the view of Korean reformers, were to neighboring Japan. In October 1881, King Kojong dispatched twelve younger officials on a three-month mission under the guise of a *sinsa yuram-dan* (gentlemen's sightseeing group) to visit Japanese government offices,

shipyards, regular schools, girls' schools, industries, hospitals, and prisons. Not only did the Korean delegates observe the operation of Japan's industrial and administrative infrastructure, but they also saw the social and cultural developments that had accompanied industrialization and modernization.

Delegates were particularly struck by the number of schools for both sexes. Some delegates concluded that to become a truly modern nation, Korea not only needed to consider fundamental economic reforms, but also should reassess women's roles in the family and general society. Most important, they acknowledged the social value and political utility of women's education. In their view, educated mothers would raise accomplished and learned men who would strengthen the moral and intellectual fiber of the nation.

Yi Su-jŏng, better known to his Japanese counterparts as Ri Jutei, was one of the first reformers to recognize the urgent need to create girls' schools in Korea. In September 1882, as part of the second Korean diplomatic mission to Japan, Yi went to study with Tsuda Sen, a renowned authority on agriculture and leader of the Christian movement. During his stay in Japan, he sent a letter to the American missions through Henry Loomis of the American Bible Society, urging them to consider dispatching female missionaries to Korea. "In my opinion," Yi wrote, "women missionaries would be of the first importance. The Corean [*sic*] customs are quite unlike either the Chinese or Japanese, the power of the sexes being about equal." He concluded that the task of these foreign missionaries "would be to elevate, reform, and educate the Koreans, in particular the children." He continued, "On this account, I think a girls' school is very important. Wherefore I desire that a lady missionary be sent to my country, and I, although an ignorant man, will do everything in my power to introduce and aid her in my work."⁶⁸

Yun Ch'i-ho (1865-1945), a participant in the 1881 *sinsa yuram-dan* mission (and a member of the Independence Club in 1896), also remarked extensively on the development of schools for girls in the United States.

He observed in his journal in January 1891, during a trip to Nashville, that five in seven members of the reading population of the city were women. Moreover, at Nashville University, there were eleven males to forty-two females in the graduating class.⁶⁹ Another visit included Wythville, the “prettiest and healthiest town on the road,” which boasted ten churches, two weekly and semiweekly newspapers, and the most important attraction—three or four female schools.⁷⁰ The lesson that Yi drew from his tour was that to become a truly modern nation, it was imperative for Korea to educate its girls.

How—and whether—Korea should become modern was itself unclear. Should Korea maintain its ties with China by adhering to its centuries-old institutions, customs, and educational system or should it enter into the world of nation-states and forge new political alliances and modern institutions?

With the aim of conveying their opinions, a coterie of reformers created the Independence Club under the direction of Sŏ Chae-p’il (Philip Jaisohn).⁷¹ He obtained a generous grant of money from Yu Kil-chun, the home minister, to launch the *Tongnip sinmun* (The independent), a thrice-weekly newspaper, on 7 April 1896. In this bilingual paper (in *han’gul* and English), editorials stressed the need to safeguard the nation’s sovereignty from foreign encroachment. However, writers also advocated promoting civil rights and expanding education for the masses, especially women. Editorials in other fledging newspapers, like the *Hwangsŏng sinmun* and the *Cheguk sinmun*, echoed similar concerns.

Sŏ Chae-p’il, who promoted women’s education, explained that the debate would be fierce because traditional power hierarchies and gender relations were at stake: “The life of a woman is not that inferior to men,” because “men are not enlightened” and only seek to use their physical strength to oppress women. As a result, he cautioned, “Be aware, women.” Through the gradual acquisition of knowledge, women would eventually gain equal rights and be able to confront these “irrational” men.⁷² To begin the process of reform, Sŏ proposed that the state make education accessible to both boys and girls:

—This *han’gul* has no hacek in the original ms., okay?
EH/ICS

There should be no distinction between the sexes when teaching the children of our people. It is proper to establish one school for girls whenever one school for boys is established. However, the government does not educate girls, which means that half of our national population is abandoned in the state [of ignorance] and left uneducated. How regretful this is! We grow sad seeing Korean women treated so scornfully. We are determined to fight men for [the rights of] women at the same time.⁷³

Sŏ's writings echoed the ideals of the *in'naech'ŏn* philosophy of universal equality advocated by Ch'oe Che-u.⁷⁴ Some argued that the concept of universal equality in education would gradually ameliorate sexual inequality in the home. As one reformer put it:

Wives are called helpers at home. This means that wives help their husbands at home. Unfortunately, however, women are looked down upon. While fathers are treated with respect, mothers are regarded as inferior. Wives are treated as bondswomen who cook rice, wash clothes, or go on errands. How can wives be called helpers of the home?⁷⁵

There were, of course, daunting obstacles to overcome if the king was to extend educational opportunities to all regardless of social background or gender and hence create a "civilized and enlightened" society. First, it would be necessary to convince 20 million people to discard old customs and embrace new ones. Second, the country lacked an educational infrastructure; although missionaries had established private girls' schools in the late nineteenth century, the state so far had opened only the Hansŏng Normal School to train teachers, five primary schools for boys, and a foreign language school. There were no public schools for girls. Despite its rhetoric, in reality the state gave priority to the creation of boys' schools, much to the chagrin of reformers, who complained: "The government has just started to teach children, yet girls are still neglected. How could they discriminate against girls? It is proper [to create] a school for girls whenever they establish a school for boys."⁷⁶ Likewise,

Tongnip sinmun (1896) pointed out that only one hundred out of 6 million girls attended school, which was “simply a drop in the ocean.” The writer also pointed out that “the thoughtlessness and negligence” of the female population was a defining “Oriental” trait. Korea would have to emulate those countries in Europe and America where “mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters” received the same opportunities as their brothers and sons. Only then would Korea be able to overcome its backwardness.⁷⁷ In 1894, the government enacted the Kabo Reforms, which abolished the Confucian examination system and created a new Ministry of Education (Hakpu). However, in the final analysis, these reforms had little impact on women’s education.⁷⁸

The peninsula’s neighbor, Japan, openly derided Korea’s ill-fated attempts to modernize through public education: “No serious attempt was made to put [it] in force” because “the law has been a dead letter from the moment of its birth.”⁷⁹ It was the Japanese view that without the assistance of Japan, Korea would struggle to establish a public education system for both sexes. Many writers for *Tongnip sinmun* who had spent time in Japan and the United States acknowledged this criticism and lamented the dismal state of Korean women compared to women in the West or even Japan. As one writer wrote in 1896:

Europe [was] the pioneer of modern civilization . . . a fountain-head of reasoning power and human knowledge. Behold the woman of a civilized nation. She enjoys equal rights with man. She studies all branches of learning in schools. When she grows into womanhood marriage does not mean bondage to her. Nay, she is honored because she is not inferior to her husband in education and accomplishment.⁸⁰

Given Korea’s limited resources, one reformer argued, it must prioritize its needs, and “not a cent should be spent by the government on high schools and colleges until the people of the entire peninsula have been provided with rudimentary schools.”⁸¹ Even an uneducated mother

could benefit from her child's school experiences—the first step toward the transformation of women.⁸² Hence, during the 1880s and 1890s, reformers employed the notion of women's education and equal rights for every citizen (manmin p'yŏngdŭng) as a means of spreading enlightenment; education became the means of constructing modern nationhood.⁸³

THE ADVENT OF MISSIONARIES

Protestant missionaries were keenly aware of the dismal results of Western nations' efforts to penetrate Korea's closed doors. They also had been discouraged by the 1866 execution of nine French missionaries and eight thousand Catholic converts for their attempts to enact religious change. Horace Newton Allen's (1852–1932) arrival in Seoul in 1884 to serve as the American Legation's physician proved critical in gaining the king's trust. As Allen recalled, "We arrived in Seoul, a few months before the outbreak of a bloody *emeute* wherein Western medical and surgical methods were favourably tested."⁸⁴ He saved the life of Prince Min Yŏng-ik, the queen's nephew, who was severely wounded during the bloody coup d'état staged by Kim Ok-kyun and a group of progressive leaders. Allen gained the king's confidence and was granted the right to bring other missionaries to serve as advisors to the king.

Allen received permission to open the *Kwanghyewŏn*, the first royal hospital, in February 1885. In his memoirs, he recalled: "The medical successes in this instance prepared the way for the opening of missionary work proper."⁸⁵ Shortly thereafter, Mary F. Scranton and Henry Appenzeller and his wife came to Korea to work at the hospital. Miss Louisa Rothweiler and Miss Annie J. Ellers joined the staff in 1887, opening the first department of gynecology at the hospital. In 1896, the North American Presbyterian Mission dispatched an additional nineteen female missionaries to work at *Kwanghyewŏn* hospital and *Pogu yŏgwan*, the first women's clinic.⁸⁶

One missionary described the success of the Presbyterian missionar-

ies: “The seventeen months that have elapsed have proven the greatest need of this hospital in its present form. Sixteen thousand patients have been treated in the daily dispensary clinic and 490 have been admitted to the wards, while a large number of visits to homes have been made by the physicians and their assistants.”⁸⁷ Dr. Mary M. Cutler, the physician in charge of *Po ku Nyo Koan* (*Pogu yŏgwan*), was pleased at the growing number of female patients. The largest number of patients treated in one day was forty-five women, and the clinic averaged eighteen patients a day.⁸⁸ The opening of “milk stations” lured many mothers concerned about lactation to the clinics.⁸⁹ Through these kinds of philanthropic activities, missionaries began to make inroads into Korea.⁹⁰

Missionaries nonetheless found it difficult to gain the trust of Korean women. Mary F. Scranton, the founder of the first girls’ school in Korea, reflected on her experience:

You who have come more recently can, I think, scarcely realize the difference between Korea of today and the country to which we came more than ten years ago. . . . Nothing remained, therefore, for us to do but to win hearts, if such a thing lay within the range of possibilities, and acquire the language. Both of these under the circumstances proved difficult. Our presence on the street in too close proximity to the women’s apartments was often times the signal for the rapid closing of doors and speedy retreat behind screens, while children ran screaming with as much lung power as they could bring to bear on the occasion.⁹¹

The seclusion of elite women posed difficulties. Horace Allen expressed his frustration at the extreme modesty of one patient: “As illustrating this faith and the close seclusion in which women are kept, a Korean lady actually died rather than see me, though I had been called to the house and she seemed to think that if I simply looked at her she would recover. She could not bring herself to permit a strange man to look upon her and actually died rather than violate the inbred custom of her country.”⁹²

Experience like Allen’s prompted missionaries to show more respect

for Korean cultural and gender practices by segregating their Sunday schools. Services for women were scheduled during the evenings, when the minister would hang a curtain to separate himself from his female audience. In 1890, churches were built in an L-shape, allowing men and women to sit in separate wings while facing the pulpit, which was located at the apex.⁹³

Confronting patriarchal family relations and such rituals as ancestor worship (which was idolatry in the eyes of the missionaries) proved to be a Herculean task. Instead of direct confrontation with these local practices, missionaries sought to “extend God’s love and grace” through philanthropy. As L. George Paik observed, “Hospitals and schools [were] termed indirect missionary work, as distinguished from direct proselytizing efforts through open preaching and religious observations.”⁹⁴

Missionaries in Korea engaged in what Jean and John Comaroff have called “didactic philanthropism.” A school, for example, was not only the “door to the church”; rather, “schooling provided the model for conversion; conversion the model for schooling.”⁹⁵ As one missionary reported: “One of the most powerful agencies at work in this direction is the work of Christian missions, especially Protestant Missions. Christian evangelization has always claimed general education as her handmaiden and all over the country schools have been and are being opened by Christian missionaries.”⁹⁶

Yet, although the missionaries’ primary goal was proselytizing, they undeniably were successful educators as well, especially where women were concerned. As Yun Ch’i-ho wrote in 1935, “If the Christian missionaries had accomplished nothing in Korea, the introduction of female education deserves our lasting gratitude.”⁹⁷

The intended beneficiaries of the missionary efforts could not see this far into the future, of course. The most important goal for Mary Scanton was to create a desire to learn. She recalled: “It seems I must get to the mothers before I can reach the daughters.”⁹⁸ By January 1887, the number of students had grown to a lucky seven. “They, the girls,” Scanton recollected, were not “made over again after our foreign ways of liv-

ing, dress, and surroundings, because it occasionally appears from home and even in the field that we thought to make a change in all ways.” More importantly, she felt that it was their role to make “Koreans better Koreans only”; her wards needed to be “proud of Korean things” in order to recreate a “perfect Korea through Christ and his teachings.”⁹⁹

The missionaries’ desire to maintain Korean culture even as they sought to change native mores and values made them intolerant of any attempt to emulate Western ways. In 1906, one missionary woman described in the *Korean Review* her first association meeting with a group of upper-class Korean women. These women had asked her to instruct them about the Bible every Sabbath evening and, during regular school days, to provide lessons in “secular studies.” They also wanted the American to review their prospectus, which outlined the guidelines of their club, in order to garner her personal approval. The missionary could hardly contain her disgust at the Korean women’s crude imitation of Western culture and ideals. She described the woman who had escorted her to the meeting as someone who was “evidently not one from the usual order of Korean women.” Her scanty foreign clothes, “which were terribly mismatched,” were absolutely unsuited for winter. The feather fan she held, a large pair of round glasses that resembled goggles (an essential trademark of the future “new woman” in the 1920s), and poorly selected jewelry—all made her look ridiculous in the eyes of her Western observer.¹⁰⁰

The appalled missionary regretted her assumption that only Korean men attempted to emulate foreigners. It was a cold day when she met the members of this fledgling club. The women donned two-piece purplish Western outfits made of cotton cloth. She learned later that these women had encouraged schoolgirls “to go back and forth from school in broad daylight with no shelter apron over their heads” just to show their escape from the clutches of “Eastern superstition” and their commencement on the “road of progress.” “To anyone familiar with Korean custom, such a change is appalling given the extreme care with which the daughters of even the poorest [classes] are sheltered.”¹⁰¹ Missionaries

believed they could introduce enlightenment through new ideas, language (English), and religion without generating changes in Korean life—an erroneous assumption, as we will see.

The desire of Korean women to gain knowledge secured imperial sanction in 1885, when Queen Min (1851–95) visited Scranton’s school, which she renamed the *Ewha haktang* (Pear blossom school).¹⁰² This visit not only raised the public image of the school but validated female education as a worthwhile endeavor. Within a couple of years, the public agreed that the school had done “no harm” to the girls, and “the scowls changed and pleasant faces and smiles greeted us.”¹⁰³

Scranton eventually could cite many successes. In 1886, she had but one student; thirteen years later, the number of students at *Ewha haktang* had increased to forty-seven. She proudly reported: “[Their] average age is twelve years, with ages ranging between eight and seventeen years. English and *ŏnmun* (*han’gŭl*) are the media through which knowledge is imparted. Elementary Western branches are taught in English; certain Western studies and religious literature are studied in *ŏnmun*. English is optional and taught to perhaps one-third of the girls.”¹⁰⁴

The growth of *Ewha haktang* and the interest in female education were important for missionaries. According to the Council for Mission of Presbyterian Churches’ recommendation in 1893, the conversion of women and the training of Christian girls through education were imperative because “mothers exercise so important an influence over future generations.”¹⁰⁵ The board of the *Ewha haktang* even placed a full-page ad in the *Hwangsŏng sinmun* to advertise their “modern” curriculum and urge parents to send their daughters to this institution:

- Primary: National language, Chinese language, composition, arithmetic, drawing, geography, elementary gymnastics, English
- Middle: Bible, Chinese language, moral training, geography, Korean history, arithmetic, English, physiology, hygiene, zoology, botany, drawing, cooking, bookkeeping, elementary gymnastics
- High: Bible, Chinese language, algebra, geometry, trigonometry,

astronomy, physiology, psychology, educational studies, biology, chemistry, English, world geography, advanced physiology, economy, world history (modern, medieval, England, America)

Elective: Optional music¹⁰⁶

Despite the goal to make “Koreans better Koreans only”—to avoid Westernizing the students—this advertisement reveals that the school exposed the girls to a new Western language (English), a history of the world that included English and American experiences, and a new moral code through the Bible. For all the missionaries’ complaints about the Koreans’ desire to emulate their culture, their own teachings promoted Western thought and culture.

That Koreans embraced these new schools with enthusiasm greatly encouraged missionaries like the Canadian James S. Gale (1863–1937), who had come to Korea in 1888: “A great fever for education has taken possession of the people of the peninsula. At every public gathering where education is mentioned, it touches a thousand electric buttons, and men are on their feet, wide awake, and excitement runs high. All eyes are bright when education speaks. Schools are cropping out of the soil like mushrooms.”¹⁰⁷

Many of these fledgling schools received patronage from donors in the United States. For example, the girls’ school in Kunsan received support from “the ladies of Lexington (Virginia) Presbyterian, who became interested in the school through their missionary, Mrs. Bull.”¹⁰⁸ Patrons from various churches provided donations to cover many of the expenses for starting up a school. In other instances, local citizens pledged to provide the salary of the teacher at the An-pyŏn school in Wŏnsan.¹⁰⁹

Although the earlier missionaries established Christian girls’ schools in areas with a Christian constituency, by 1900 missionaries sought to expand their influence into “heathen” areas.¹¹⁰ In Seoul alone, there were twenty-two day schools in 1911, “all under the control of one superintendent.” Many of these schools did not have their own buildings. For example, the school in the East Gate used the basement of a church, where

a graduate of *Ewha haktang* offered courses to seventy-eight students.¹¹¹ Although three girls graduated from the highest grade at the *Sa-kang* school, none of them was able to continue their education at a formal institution because of the lack of government-sponsored public girls' schools or because their parents were too poor to send them to *Ewha haktang*.¹¹²

Still, even an education cut short could be transforming. Missionary schools not only stimulated the desire to read and write; equally important, the message of Christianity, especially its fundamental ideals of equality and liberating women from oppression, hit a responsive chord among the lower classes. In an interview, Gill, "a farmer of small means and humble station" from P'yŏngyang province, praised the good schools for children and the hospitality of the missionaries toward the lower class: "I found their hospitals different from the others. These foreign doctors treated rich and poor, high and low, with equal willingness and kindness." "Among other things these missionaries preached," he observed, "they said that in the sight of God, all men are equal."¹¹³ Missionaries often encouraged native converts to participate in programs like their Sunday schools and vacation Bible schools and to spread the gospel. In 1906, for example, 154 men and women teachers taught 3,013 students and opened forty-six schools in eleven cities and towns.¹¹⁴

Although these were not formal schools, "the new ones who [came] to church, especially the young women if they are not able to read, [were] taught the native characters."¹¹⁵ More importantly, Bible schools offered a rare opportunity for women to voice their opinions about social issues. For example, after a devotional service, one Bible school debated whether women should be consulted on matters pertaining to the welfare of the household. As Myrtle Elliott Cable observed, "Both men and women took part of the debate, and the pros and cons were fully discussed. This is surely a step in the advance for womanhood in Korea."¹¹⁶ Miss Lulu Frey, the fourth principal of *Ewha haktang*, remarked on the importance of Sunday schools for women: "[It] has grown so on the women's side that all who attend cannot get into the classroom and it is quite impossible to make my voice reach the number which now fill the main part of the

—(Place
Figure 2
near here)



2. Students from *Ewha haktang* going on a field trip (1900).

church. The time has come when they must be divided into classes and given into the hands of native teachers. I have not done this before because I wanted to teach the women myself as long as I possibly could.”¹¹⁷

Although these weekly informal Sunday schools did not offer any academic courses, they did allow many rural women to learn to read and write. In her 1911 assessment of Bible schools, Millie M. Albertson expressed amazement at the enthusiasm with which Korean women read the Bible, a practice that helped promote literacy: “No American school girl ever looked forward to the periodicals that would give the next chapter of a continued story with more eagerness than these women looked forward to the time when the entire Bible should be translated into the Korean language.”¹¹⁸

GOING BEYOND MISSIONARY GOALS: SECULAR INSTITUTIONS FOR GIRLS

The rapid growth in the number of Christian schools stimulated interest in the development of secular private schools for girls. A number of women’s organizations, such as the *Yŏja kyoyuk-hoe* (The society for

women's education) and the *Chinmyŏng puin-boe* (Chinmyŏng women's society), emerged during this period. Many of these fledgling women's organizations sought to elevate the status of women as well as establish schools.¹¹⁹

One such organization, the *Ch'anyang-boe* (The promotion society),¹²⁰ had a membership of roughly four hundred women from the upper classes. It established the Sunŏng Girls' School, the first secular girls' school in December 1898. Members of the *Ch'anyang-boe* sought government recognition and funding. In a memorial to the king on 11 October 1898, the leaders of the organization expressed their desire to emulate enlightened countries in Europe and America, where "competent persons receive education and knowledge is disseminated." They lamented the fact that there was not a single school in Korea for women. If Korea showed equal treatment to their women and educated their girls, they declared, it would surely become a civilized and enlightened country.¹²¹ Despite the efforts by the *Ch'anyang-boe* to pressure the Ministry of Education through an imperial ordinance, conservative minister Sin Ki-sŏn and other cabinet members urged the king to reverse his decision, citing the need to focus on more important financial matters. Though the founders went ahead and established a private school, hoping for government support in the future, the school failed in 1901, and the buildings were ultimately mortgaged to a Japanese businessman.¹²²

As the first attempt by a group of women to create a girls' school, the organization received its share of criticism from the press. One newspaper provided a class analysis: "The members of the *Ch'anyang-boe* wear silk coats and they favor the rich by giving out membership cards to them." It accused the organization of only thinking about promoting the welfare of elite girls and declining to give cards "to members who are poor unless they pay the fees beforehand."¹²³ The women of the *Ch'anyang-boe* put up a feisty defense:

Are there perhaps any differences between men and women in their bodies, arms and legs, or ears and eyes? Why should our women live

on what their husbands [earn] as though they were fools, confining themselves to their deep chambers for [their] entire lives and subject[ing] themselves to regulations imposed by their husbands? Upon [observation of other] enlightened countries, we know that men and women are equal there and boys and girls go to school early in their childhood, learning various skills and principles and broadening their vision. [When they are grown up], women [get] married to men. As long as wives reside with their husbands all their [lives], the former are not a bit regulated by the latter but are [extremely respected]. Their skills and principles are equal to those possessed by their husbands. How beautiful is this! We should establish girls' schools as in other countries by abolishing our old custom and following the new style so that our girls can learn various skills and principles and methods of [creating] a success in life. We are going to establish girls' schools with the aim of making women equal to men in the future. Interested women and men among our compatriots are asked to register their names in our school membership.¹²⁴

Interestingly, the excessive optimism of Korean women about gender equality touched a few raw nerves among missionary women, who were more realistic about the true nature of gender relations in the West. The woman who had been appalled at the gaudy “Western” appearance of the new upper-class women’s association expressed her dismay in the *Korean Review* by highlighting two misconceptions on which these women had built their aspirations and goals.¹²⁵ First, she argued that they had an “exaggerated and mistaken” idea of the “woman’s sphere and her ideals” in the West. The “free and independent” Western woman whom they sought to emulate could only be found “in novels, the plays, the police gazettes, and on the world’s great globe trotting highways.” Other despicable “new women” were those who “talk back, who govern, make noise, and parade on platforms.”¹²⁶ She asserted that the second misconception was their view of progress, liberty, and civilization. The idea of doing anything or whatever one pleased was a notion held only by “an-

archists, socialists, and other revolutionary societies.” She compared the woman’s association to a “great fete in an Eastern city built upon boards and canvasses which represented a grand old forest monarch—skillfully painted and covered with paper leaves and blossoms.” Inevitably, rain and floods would destroy these superficial imitations and illusions.¹²⁷

Such sobering warnings did little to dampen the enthusiasm for Korean women’s education. Between 1906 and 1909, the Ministry of Education (*Hakpu*) set up sixty new elementary schools and nineteen new secondary schools. Although the Ministry of Education decided in 1899 on three years of common school and two years of higher education for girls, it was only in 1908 that the government opened the Hansŏng Girls’ High School, the first public institution of higher learning for girls.¹²⁸ Although there were only a handful of girls who qualified for high school, some reformers pushed for opening more government schools.

Reformers like Yun Hyo-chŏng contended that it was imperative for the state to continue to open schools of higher learning for women in order to create more compatible wives for educated husbands: “If a man who is brilliant and grounded in learning of the new marries a traditional woman skilled in washing, fetching water, cooking, and sewing, and knows nothing about managing the household or social affairs, he would lose his desire for her and seek another woman.”¹²⁹ If the state invested in men’s education, it should expend equal resources on women’s education; an unequal state of affairs would lead to intellectual disparities and the ultimate breakdown of many marriages.

Although some conceded that women’s education was important, they wanted to create a curriculum “more suitable” to women, which would teach them practical things like how to deal with “household matters, hygiene, household economy, how to raise their children and how to use the abacus.”¹³⁰ But not all reformers agreed; those who were critical of the traditional *hyŏnmo yangch’o* (wise mother and good wife) ideology argued that instead of “making women into machines” they should cultivate their *ch’ŏnp’um* (natural talents) and *ingyŏk* (personalities) in order

to become “independent individuals.” One writer, Chŏng Yŏng-t’aek, noted that educating women would only enhance the status of the family and society, as well as the nation.¹³¹

By the end of the Chosŏn period, it became clear that Korean women were not satisfied with the limited goals the missionaries had set out for them. While the missionaries focused establishing primary schools, Koreans recognized the importance of creating institutions of higher education so that women could continue their learning.

Literacy and education were arenas in which gender inequality was particularly evident prior to the arrival of Protestant missionaries. Aside from a handful of literati women who were indoctrinated in classical texts, the majority of Korean girls and women had no access to education. Protestant missionaries contributed much to the development of female education in Korea. They introduced women to the marvelous world of letters and provided some degree of literacy. This small taste of knowledge could not be quenched by the limited educational opportunities in Korea, so some women traveled abroad to continue their education. Such opportunities were rare, however, and most Korean women had to content themselves with the little education they received in the missionary institutions.

Even this avenue soon narrowed dramatically. As a result of a series of educational ordinances promulgated by the colonial government, many Christian schools closed down or could no longer attract Koreans because they were not recognized by the state. Despite the formal closing of these institutions, Korean women found a way to receive instruction in basic literacy through informal Bible study groups and church activities. Perhaps the most significant contributions of the missionary schools were in breaking the ground for female education and instilling a love of learning in a population that had heretofore been excluded from the world of letters.

The long Chosŏn era was a period of significant transformation for Korean women. In contrast to static images of a rigid, uniform patriarchal

society that oppressed women, new studies have shown the importance of internal fissures, movements of dissent that promoted greater egalitarianism, and efforts of Korean women to overcome the restrictions on them by utilizing loopholes in Confucian laws or manipulating traditional social relations (i.e., mother-son ties). Despite the strict regulation of their conduct and social interaction, Korean women were able to soften the edges of Confucian patriarchy through their roles as mothers, wives, and spiritual leaders. On the political front, Korean women joined in social movements for change, obtaining an education in radical dissent—a legacy that they would draw on in their efforts against the Japanese occupation.

Finally, Korean women took advantage of the opportunities offered by modern education to ameliorate their status. Although their numbers were small, the first generation of students, mainly graduates of the missionary schools, emerged in the early 1920s to challenge efforts to control their knowledge and identity. Despite the pressures of the dominant Confucian cultural system, the missionaries' attempts to suppress emulation of Western styles, and the repressive measures of a colonial government seeking to reassert traditional subservience and domesticity, the "new women" rejected the boundaries set for them. They would articulate this new identity through their dress, attitudes, careers, and writings in order to negotiate a new vision for Korean womanhood.