

Gender issues and Confucian scriptures: Is Confucianism incompatible with gender equality in South Korea?

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Abstract

Korean Confucianism has been described as “the enemy of feminism”: feminists often argue that Confucianism is the source of the patriarchal society. Feminist scholars have produced significant works about Confucianism’s role in preserving the idea of women’s subordination to men; they argue that the idea of men’s superiority to women is embedded in Confucian philosophy. In this article I will examine whether Confucian philosophy is responsible for women’s subordination to men in such Confucian texts as *Naehun*, *The Book of Change*, *The Book of Poetry*, and *The Analects*. *Naehun* was written by the mother of King Sŏngjong in 1475, for the purpose of the Confucian education of Korean women; I will look also at other, related, Confucian texts used for Korean women’s education. Confucian classics such as *The Book of Change*, *The Book of Poetry* and *Confucian Analects* will be included in the analysis to investigate whether Confucianism legitimizes women’s subordination to men. In the analysis of these Confucian classics, I will focus on the ongoing debate between scholars of Confucianism and feminism in Korea today.

Introduction

Is Confucianism incompatible with gender equality in South Korea? This issue has been at the centre of much recent debate about Confucianism in Korea. Ever since Confucianism became a part of Korean philosophy, it has been the subject of constant debate which has led to the development of an overall Korean Confucian sensibility. The discussion between traditional Confucianism and feminism regarding gender equality in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries seems to be one of the most significant debates in the history of Korean Confucianism. Nothing is more threatening to modern culture than the debate over gender equality. Gender equality is directly related to human rights and is one of the fundamental ideas on which democracy is based. Equally, Confucianism, an integral aspect of Korean culture, cannot survive if it is not compatible with gender equality.

In this article I focus on the discussion of gender equality in Confucian scriptures and how this discussion affects South Korean society today. I examine passages in Confucian classics that have been controversial in

relation to gender equality in Korean society. I also analyse Confucian texts for women's education written by female authors in the Chosŏn¹ dynasty (1392–1910). The texts analysed here are limited to those which have been discussed in the debates over gender equality and Confucianism.

Korean feminists have argued that Confucianism advocates patriarchy: they believe that Confucian ideologies act against gender equality. *Yangsong p'yŏngdŭng* (gender equality) is the slogan of the women's movement in Korea. From the point of view of Korean feminists, women's subordination to men is based on the tradition of patriarchy. In patriarchal systems men have power over other members of a family, community or society; not only is the father of a traditional family considered superior to any females but so are the grandfather, the great grandfather, and the first and other sons.

The Korean *hoju* system, introduced in 1953, was a family registration system under Civil Law. All members of a family were registered under *hoju* or "the family head", thus "family" consists of the family head and the other members. Korea's patriarchal system means that male members of the family are generally *hojus*. When a father dies his first son inherits the position of family head while younger sons usually establish separate families on marriage. Daughters become members of their husbands' families when they marry and women only inherit the position of family head when there are no surviving males. Feminists believe that the *hoju* system represents an outdated patriarchy informed by Confucianism.

Until the Constitutional Court announced in 2005 that the *hoju* system was incompatible with the constitution, this system had been one of the most urgent problems for Korean feminists. The *hoju* system was abolished on January 1 2008; this has been seen as a triumph for the Korean feminist movement. This abolition is the result of co-operation between government, especially the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, and non-governmental organizations such as Korea Women's Associations United.

Many people, not just those who identify themselves as "feminists", joined the movement to abolish the *hoju* system. Religious people representing Buddhism, Protestantism, Catholicism and Wŏn-Buddhism crafted a "social leaders" statement for the abolition of the *hoju* system which was published on June 11 2003 – they agreed that the *hoju* system should be abolished in order to promote gender equality and the dignity of the individual (*The Yonhap News*, June 11 2003).

The only religious group to announce a position against the abolition of the *hoju* system was *Sungkyunkwan*, the Association of Korean Confucians, its official opinion being that the *hoju* system was a valued part of Korean

1 In this article, romanization of Korean follows the McCune-Reischauer system. Romanization of Chinese follows the *pinyin* system. In line with East Asian tradition the family name is written before the given name for both Korean and Chinese. Romanization of Chinese characters depends on the language of the text in which the characters appear: Chinese characters in Korean texts are romanized according to Korean pronunciation while those in Chinese texts are romanized according to the *pinyin* system. However, Chinese names in Korean texts are exceptionally romanized according to the *pinyin*.

tradition and should, therefore, be preserved. Lee Seungkwon, in charge of rituals for *Sungkyunkwan*, said: “The *hoju* system is an indigenous Korean tradition that has been inherited from the Koryŏ Dynasty” (*The Yonhap News*, October 25 2004). Korean Confucians argued that the *hoju* system should be preserved because it was the foundation of the Korean family system and also part of a valuable national tradition. They felt that its abolition would be a threat to the family system and therefore also to traditional Korean values.

The confrontation between Confucianism and feminism over gender equality had existed prior to the movement to abolish the *hoju* system. It became apparent within academic circles when, at the autumn conference of *Ch'ŏrhak yŏn'guhoe* (a philosophers' society) in 1998, feminism met Confucianism face-to-face. Feminist philosopher Kim Heisook declared Confucianism an obstacle to gender equality, while Confucian philosopher Lee Sook-In spoke in favour of Confucianism. Kim (1999) argues that the concept of “women's rights” should be included in Confucian ethics; she believes that the concept of women's rights based on individuality is missing from Confucianism. Lee (1998) opposes this view and argues that the concept of “women's rights” is not incompatible with Confucian values, pointing out that the ideas of women's rights and gender equality in Kim's article are based on the Western concept of individuality, which is not a part of Korean tradition. She further supports her arguments in other articles (1999a; 1999b).

Another conference, held by the Korean Association of Confucianism under the title “The Encounter of Confucianism and Feminism”, on November 27 1999, provided a rare opportunity for Confucian studies and feminist scholars to meet and discuss whether Confucianism and feminism can co-exist. Scholars from each side had different answers to the question “Can Confucianism meet feminism?” An Byeongju (2001), on behalf of Confucianism, opened the discussion and pointed out that, historically, Confucianism was constructed by reformation. Therefore, he suggested, Confucianism should be sufficiently flexible to evolve and become revitalized under the influence of feminism. Other Confucian scholars, such as Lee Unsun and Lee Sook-In, supported the idea that Confucianism should meet feminism in this way. However, feminist scholars, such as Huh Ra-Gum and Go Gaphui, did not believe that Confucianism could change in such a way that feminism would be acceptable in the ideology. They all argued that Korean Confucianism was still full of gender discrimination. Shortly after the conference, feminist theologian Kang Namsun (1999) wrote a newspaper article entitled “Confucianism and feminism: about their impossible encounter” (*The Women's News*, December 25 1999). This article sought to answer scholars who believe that Confucianism and feminism should find common ground for future discussions of “Korean feminism”. Kang's answer to the question “Can Confucianism and feminism meet each other?” is simple: no. She posed another question for debate: “Why should feminists understand Confucianism when it is the most obvious obstacle to the liberation of Korean women?” She argues strongly that “Korean feminism” should

progress by abolishing the gender discrimination and patriarchy promoted by the hegemonic Confucian ideology rather than by preserving Confucianism under a shield of “Korean tradition”.

Another theologian, Lee Unsun (2000a), wrote a response for the same newspaper about a month later, arguing that feminists should not reject Confucianism as a whole. She contended that Confucianism is an important source of Korean identity, informing a Korean feminism that can be distinguished from “Western” ideas of feminism. She insists that feminists should re-evaluate Confucian tradition and use it to make feminism distinctively Korean (2000b).

Feminist philosopher Huh Ra-Gum (2000) suggested that Lee’s position distorted feminist efforts to develop an understanding of women’s issues within the Korean context, which necessarily includes the influence of the Confucian tradition. Huh argued that Korean feminism as a distinctive ideology could not be found through an acceptance of the problems caused by Confucianism as the source of Korean identity. She eventually proposed reflexivity for both feminists and Confucians, including scholars reading Confucian studies, and suggested they find a “meeting” point before criticizing each other.

In 2000, the conference “The Encounter of Confucianism and Feminism 2: Reading Confucianism from Feminists’ Point of View” was held by the Korean Association of Confucianism. The debate here was less intense than at the 1999 conference: the focus was on scholars sharing reinterpretations of Confucianism from female perspectives. Choi Youngjin (2000), a male philosopher of Korean Confucianism, argued that it was absolutely necessary, and also possible, to remove all anti-feminism from Confucianism. He focused on the idea of gender equality embedded in Confucian philosophy and suggested that all elements of gender discrimination could be removed from Confucianism to create a system based on gender equality, i.e. a “Confucian feminism”. Kwon Soonhyung (2000) pointed out that during the Chosŏn dynasty, Confucianism contributed to the securing of a woman’s position as the patriarch’s wife by prohibiting a widow from marrying. In the Koryŏ dynasty (918–1392), during which Confucianism did not penetrate into everyday life, women divorced and widows remarried. According to Kwon this was evidence that women could have been considered scapegoats for strategic marriages between families. She argues that prior to the ban on widows remarrying, women were “recycled” to make alliances; in this way, Confucianism in the Chosŏn dynasty, while not reflecting today’s standards of gender equality, gave women more rights than they had had under the Koryŏ dynasty. However, she still stresses the fact that traditional Confucianism is responsible for gender discrimination in modern Korea.

The debate continued in 2001 when Lee Seung-Hee, another leading feminist scholar, raised an objection to the argument that Confucianism and feminism could meet each other. She targeted Lee Unsun’s two articles (1999; 2000a) in which it was argued that Confucianism could contribute to the progress of Korean feminism. She denied this and explicitly claimed that “the relationship between Confucianism and

feminism is too far apart to get that close to each other” (2001: 138). She pointed out that Confucianism was responsible for gender discrimination and argued that feminism did not need a “transfusion” from Confucian tradition; rather, Korean feminism needed an acknowledgement of the wrongness of “feudal Confucian leftovers”.

In the very next volume of the same journal, Lee Sook-In (2001) expressed her dissatisfaction with Lee Seung-Hee’s criticism. Lee Sook-In had argued that Lee Seung-Hee oversimplified Confucianism as the enemy of feminism. According to Lee Sook-In, Confucianism was more complex and could therefore accommodate gender issues; many scholarly publications attest to this, but Lee Sook-In claimed that Lee Seung-Hee intentionally ignored these diverse aspects of Confucianism in favour of an extremist position. Lee Sook-In concluded that Lee Seung-Hee’s argument was based on a bias against Confucianism and unnecessary essentialism.

An attempt to reinterpret Confucianism from a female point of view is expected in the twenty-first century because “the power of women” cannot be ignored in Korea. The increase in the number of female scholars and students reading Confucian studies facilitates a change in the conventional Confucian view of women. Male scholars are also realizing that a reinterpretation of Confucianism from a female point of view is an urgent task in order to sustain the profile of Confucianism in Korean society.

Observing these debates, I came to the conclusion that present-day feminism can co-exist with Confucian scriptures. As feminists have pointed out, some current Confucian practice may be an obstacle to the feminist movement. However, according to my reading of Confucian classics, Confucian philosophy itself is not against gender equality. If present-day Confucians do practise Confucianism in a way that ignores gender equality, this is not based on Confucian philosophy but on other, profane, interests.

In this article I examine whether Confucianism legitimizes women’s subordination to men on the level of scripture. Rather than discuss Confucian practice, which is highly diverse, I will focus on Confucian scriptures. The sources I consult here are *Confucian Analects* (論語), *The Great Learning* (大學), *The Book of Changes* (周易), *The Book of Poetry* (詩經) and *The Book of Rites* (禮記).

In addition to classical Confucian scriptures, I will also examine scriptures from the Chosŏn dynasty written by Korean women for the purposes of educating other women. These texts are *Naehun* (內訓 Teaching for Women, 1475), *Yŏbŏm* (女範 Role Models for Women, 1764), *Chagyŏngpyŏn* (自警篇 The Book of Self-Discipline, 1710) and *Ōnhaeng sillok* (言行實錄 The Book about How to Behave as a Woman, 1795). These four texts prescribe behaviour² and show that women in traditional

2 *Kyuhap ch’ongsŏ* (閩閩叢書 The Encyclopaedia of Women’s Work, 1759–1824) and *T’aegyo sin’gi* (胎教新記 Teachings for Pregnant Women, 1801) were also written by female authors. However, these two books do not focus on behaviour but on specific topics. Therefore, contemporary Korean scholars interested in gender equality issues do not discuss these texts. *Kyuhap ch’ongsŏ* is a kind of encyclopaedia about housework, covering cooking, making clothes, weaving, dying, sericulture, etc. *T’aegyo sin’gi* is about the self-discipline practised by a pregnant woman.

Korean society made efforts to secure their position and rights; through these texts we can find the possibility of compatibility between Korean feminism and Confucianism.

Gender equality in Confucian classics

In early Chinese texts in general, it is significant that the gender of the subject³ is not usually fixed. In such texts, a single character is often used in more than one context and represents more than one meaning. For example, the character 義 (*yi* in Chinese, *üi* in Korean) means “righteousness” in one context and “ritual” in another. Later, the usage is fixed: the character 儀 (*yi* in Chinese, *üi* in Korean) represents “ritual” and the character 義 is likely to represent “righteous” only. By the same token, the pronoun 他 (*ta* in Chinese, *t’a* in Korean) means “a person” or “a thing” rather than “a man” before the character 她 (*ta* in Chinese, *t’a* in Korean) was invented and used to represent “a woman”.⁴ Therefore there is usually nothing wrong with the interpretation of the subject as a person who could be either male or female. However, a common misinterpretation is a groundless presupposition that the subject is male.

Confucian Analects, the book of Confucius’ (551–479 BCE) teachings,⁵ includes only one passage relevant to the gender issue:

The Master said, “Of all people, girls (*nuzi* 女子) and servants (*xiaoren* 小人) are the most difficult to behave to. If you are familiar with them, they lose their humility. If you maintain a reserve towards them, they are discontented”.⁶

This passage is often misunderstood as evidence of Confucius’ discrimination against women.⁷ However, in this context it is more appropriate to interpret the word *nuzi* (女子) as describing a particular group of women, i.e. maidservants, as the counterpart of *xiaoren* (小人), rather than women in general as the counterpart of men. Legge’s English translation is correct: he translated *nuzi* (女子) as “girls” rather than “women”. In parallel with the word *xiaoren* (小人) meaning “lower-class

3 In classical Chinese, the subject is often omitted if it is obvious or a general person (such as “one”). The gender of the subject is often unclear.

4 It is not until the early twentieth century that the character 她 was used as a pronoun to refer to “a woman” whereas 他 refers to “a man”.

5 As with most early Chinese texts, it is accepted as fact that *Confucian Analects* was neither written by Confucius himself nor by a single anonymous author: it was a compilation of scriptures from the Confucian school throughout the pre-Qin period (before 221 BCE) and the Han dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE) in China. Since He Yan (何晏 193?–249) with his fellow scholars wrote a commentary called *Lunyu jijie* (論語集解), the scripture of *Confucian Analects* has been fixed as we read it now.

6 Legge (1966: 271), “惟女子與小人爲難養也。近之則不孫，遠之則怨”.

7 For example, a Korean newspaper says “... Confucius, who thought that women and *soin* (小人) were especially difficult to handle ...” (*The Hankook ilbo*, July 23 2006). Lin Yutang (林語堂), a famous Chinese writer, also interpreted this phrase as Confucius’ view of looking down on women (Kim Yeongsu, 2003: 104).

people” such as servants, he intended to highlight the connotation of “lower-class women” such as maidservants. In short, this passage cannot be evidence that *Confucian Analects* contains discriminatory statements about women.

Feminist scholar Shin Ock-Hee (1999: 17–8) mentions a famous passage, “(A person) ought to cultivate oneself. Only after that, (a person) ought to take care of one’s family. Only after that, (a person) ought to rule one’s country, and only after that, (a person) will be able to order the world”,⁸ and argues that this phrase justifies patriarchy⁹ and women’s subordination to men. The original passage in *The Great Learning* (大學) is as follows:

The ancients, who wished to illustrate illustrious virtue throughout the kingdom, first ordered well their own states. Wishing to order well their states, they first regulated their families. Wishing to regulate their families, they first cultivated themselves.¹⁰

Shin Ock-Hee interprets this passage as being representative of the ethics of Confucian men: only men should rule the family and the kingdom, and women are restricted to supporting roles. According to Shin, in Confucian ethics the division of labour between men and women is strict, and this passage in *The Great Learning* displays the idea of women’s subordination to men in terms of labour division. She further argues that this idea regarding Confucian ethics is still widespread in Korea.

This passage has been understood to describe only men’s obligations, since traditional Confucian society is male-dominated and women cannot be included in the category of “the ancients”. However, neither grammatical nor contextual problems arise if the subject “the ancients” is translated in the feminine. In other words, this passage simply delivers instruction about “illustrating virtue” rather than a proclamation of male domination.

Since feminists accuse Confucianism of justifying women’s subordination to men, scholars of Confucian studies try to defend Confucianism. Gender equality is a common value widely respected in Korean society, at least on the level of ideology. Scholars of Confucianism therefore share a sense of ideological crisis: if Confucianism is incompatible with the idea of gender equality, it is difficult for most Koreans to accept Confucianism as a valuable tradition that should be preserved.

Confucian philosopher Choi Youngjin (2000) argues that women are equal to men in Confucian philosophy. He analyses the idea of *ŭm-yang* (陰陽)¹¹ in *The Book of Changes* (周易).¹² *Ŭm-yang* represents the basic

8 This is my own translation of the passage “修身齊家治國平天下”.

9 The patriarchy and its structures are the most controversial issue in the women’s movement for gender equality in Korea. The ideology of the patriarchy expands to wider society outside the family boundary and the image of the patriarch is easily identified as the male leader of society who dominates political and economic power.

10 This is my own translation of the original passage, “古之欲明明德於天下者 先治其國 欲治其國者 先齊其家 欲齊其家者 先修其身”. For the original text, see Legge (1966: 310–11).

11 *Yin-yang* in Chinese.

12 *The Book of Changes* (周易) is one of the Five Classics (五經) of Confucianism.

dichotomy in East Asian philosophy: *ŭm* is often explained as minus (negative) and female/feminine whereas *yang* is explained as plus (positive) and male/masculine. Choi supports his argument with a fundamental approach¹³ to *ŭm-yang*: *ŭm* is neither inferior nor subordinate to *yang*, and neither can exist without the other. *Yang* is embodied within *ŭm*, and *ŭm* is likewise embodied within *yang*. Choi's argument reflects his criticism of the feminist philosopher Kim Heisook's (1996) view of the *ŭm-yang* relationship. Kim suggests that feminism, or women's liberation from repression, includes liberation from the ideology of *ŭm-yang*, which justifies women's subordination to men on the philosophical level because *ŭm* is subordinate to *yang*.

Confucian philosophers and ethicists in contemporary South Korea do not always deny the feminists' accusation concerning Confucianism. For example, Park Kyoonseop (2000), a Confucian ethicist, does not try to rescue Confucianism from the feminists. He maintains that *The Book of Poetry* (詩經) has been used to justify the restriction of women's roles to housework. In some passages in *The Book of Poetry*, this description of women's roles is obvious. Park quotes this passage¹⁴ by way of example:

Sons shall be born to him:¹⁵ –
 They will be put to sleep on couches;
 They will be clothed with robes;
 They will have sceptres to play with;
 Their cry will be loud.
 They will be [hereafter] resplendent with red knee-covers,
 The [future] king, the princes of the land.

13 The interpretation of *ŭm* as being subordinate to *yang* is based on Zhou Xi's (朱熹 1130–1200) commentary on *The Book of Changes*. It is largely believed that Zhou Xi interpreted *yin-yang* (*ŭm-yang* in Korean) as *yang* being superior to *yin*. In his commentary, Zhou Xi assumes that *yang* should be invigorated and *yin* should be repressed (Zhou Xi, *Zhouyi benyi* (周易本義), “kungua” (坤卦), “chuyao” (初爻), “未嘗不扶陽抑陰之意焉”). Since Zhou Xi's commentary on *The Book of Changes* has been accepted as the orthodox one, the criticism that the philosophy of *yin-yang* justifies female subordination can be made when readers read only this part of commentary. However, we should note that the phrase “*yang* should be invigorated and *yin* should be repressed” (扶陽抑陰) is part of the commentary on the first SIX of a particular hexagram *kun* (坤), interpreted as the state of pure *yin*. I think that what Zhou Xi means by this phrase is that, in this particular state, *yang* should be invigorated and *yin* should be repressed to make a balance between *yin* and *yang*. If the phrase “*yang* should be invigorated and *yin* should be repressed” is interpreted as the general rule of the relationship between *yin* and *yang*, this can be seen as an over-interpretation against the general principle of *The Book of Changes*, i.e. balance and harmony based on equality. In this sense, I describe Choi's approach to *The Book of Changes* as a “fundamental” one due to his comprehensive understanding of the general principle of the book.

14 In his article, Park quotes only the part of daughters in the poem examined here. In order to clarify discrimination within the context, I quote the passage of sons as well, which is in parallel with the daughters' part.

15 The poem that follows is part of the poem “Sigan” (斯干) in *The Book of Poetry* (Legge, 1972: 306–7). “Him” in the text refers to the main character of the poem.

Daughters shall be born to him: –
 They will be put to sleep on the ground;
 They will be clothed with wrappers;
 They will have tiles to play with.
 It will be theirs neither to do wrong nor to do good.
 Only about the spirits and the food will they have to think,
 And to cause no sorrow to their parents.
 乃生男子、載寢之床、載衣之裳、載弄之璋
 其泣嗶嗶、朱芾斯皇、室家君王。
 乃生女子、載寢之地、載衣之裼、載弄之瓦
 無非無儀、唯酒食是議、無父母詒罹。

He accepts the feminist criticism of Confucianism, saying that Korean Confucianism is to some extent responsible for discrimination against women in South Korean society. Based on the passage he quotes his argument is reasonable. However, with the exception of this passage, I found no evidence of discrimination against women in other parts of *The Book of Poetry* and this is only part of a single poem among 305 in *The Book of Poetry*. Therefore, it is an exaggeration to argue that *The Book of Poetry* is based on discrimination against women or even women's subordination to men.

Another Confucian scholar, Lee Sook-In (1993), agrees with the feminists who argue that Confucianism contributes to the preservation of patriarchy and male domination in Korea. However, she argues that such a contribution is purely historical. Focusing on *The Book of Rites* (禮記), one of the Five Confucian Classics (五經), she demonstrates how the relationship between Confucianism and the idea of male domination was historically formed. In her analysis she regards *The Book of Rites* as a historical text rather than religious scripture: *The Book of Rites* shows that the equal relationship between men and women in the pre-Qin period (before 221 BCE) changed into one in which women are subordinate to men in the Han dynasty, during which the book was written.

In short, on the level of the major Confucian scriptures, Confucianism is compatible with gender equality. In Confucian classics such as the Four Books (四書) and the Five Classics (五經) it is difficult to say whether or not Confucianism justifies women's subordination to men. As suggested by Choi's argument above, it is necessary to understand that *ūm-yang* is not fixed but always changing. In other words, *ūm* can become *yang*, and *yang* can become *ūm*: this is the fundamental logic of the cosmos in *The Book of Changes*. If *ūm* is subordinate to *yang*, or even if *ūm* is simply repressed, it will not be possible to perpetuate the changes of the cosmos and the title *The Book of Changes* will become meaningless.

I agree with Lee Sook-In's view (1993) that the relationship between Confucianism and patriarchy is historical.¹⁶ The coalition between Confucianism and patriarchy occurred during a time when Chinese society

16 Lee Sook-In's (1993) definition of "historical" is based on Marxism, particularly the Marxist concept of historical evolution of social structure.

was organized as a patriarchal order, and Confucianism provided the political philosophy for leaders who were redefining Confucianism in East Asia. In other words, the idea of women's subordination to men was not embodied in Confucian philosophy but historically combined with Confucianism by those who established their social order based on patriarchy. In traditional East Asian societies, Confucianism served as the philosophy of the state. A large part of the belief that Confucian scriptures promote the idea of women's subordination to men is based on commentaries rather than on the main texts. Therefore, to determine whether Confucianism is compatible with gender equality, it is first necessary to distinguish Confucian philosophy from Confucian practice, and Confucian scriptures, such as the Four Books (四書) and the Five Classics (五經), from commentaries pertaining to them.

Gender equality in Confucian texts by female Korean authors

A woman living in a male-dominated society may strive for gender equality on the individual as well as on the social level. A woman under the condition of male domination faces two questions: "How can I obtain freedom and power as a woman?" and "How can I reform 'the ancien regime' of male domination?" The latter question seems to be more difficult than the former. The women's movement to reform the social system, especially when that social system is based on male domination, offers an answer. The history of the women's movement is rather short; however, the history of women's resistance to male domination on an individual level is much longer.¹⁷

The first question is inevitable for women in everyday life. Freedom of thought and behaviour is essential for an individual in any society, no matter how much freedom that society allows a particular individual. To exercise freedom an individual often has to exercise power over others. In a male-dominated society women have to develop individual strategies to exercise freedom and power, and demonstrate that they have their own beliefs and desires just like men. Because women are subordinate to men in such a society, freedom and power are much more limited. Even in an extreme condition of subordination, a woman cannot live as if she had no individual desires or beliefs of her own. Rather than live like a puppet, under conditions in which only limited freedom and power are allowed, an individual's strategy is likely to become indirect and delicate.

Naehun (Teachings for Women), *Yōbōm* (Role Models for Women), *Chagyōngp'yōn* (The Book of Self-Discipline) and *Ōnhaeng sillok* (The Book about How to Behave as a Woman) are Confucian texts written by female authors for the purposes of educating Chosŏn-dynasty women. They demonstrate how women established their strategies for gender equality in such an extremely male-dominated society. These texts

17 Zetian wuhou (則天武后, 624?–705) is an extraordinary example. Unsatisfied with her position as the wife of a king and mother of two kings, she became the only female emperor in the history of China.

presupposed female subordination: to these authors male domination seemed natural. Although they learned Confucianism from Confucian classics, they did not think that women should be educated in the Confucian classics in the same way as men. They believed rather that women's ways should be different from those of men. As women who understood their role as subordinate to men, they taught their own strategies for increasing freedom and power under the given conditions of the Chosŏn society. Moreover, they tried to secure a position for women in the male-dominated society.

The author of *Naehun* had the family name Han (韓). Like most Korean women in traditional society she did not have an officially registered first name, although she probably had one within her family. She was born in 1437, the daughter of the minister Han Hwak (韓確) and died in 1504 during the reign of King Yŏnsan (1476–1506).

Han is often called Insu daebi (仁粹大妃) or Sohye wanghu (昭惠王后). She was the mother of King Sŏngjong (1457–94) and the name Insu daebi reflects this relationship; daebi (大妃) being the official title given to a king's mother. Wanghu (王后) is the official title given to a king's wife. Han was not in the position of queen, or king's wife, because her husband, the crown prince, died before his accession to the throne. However, she gained the title Sohye wanghu (昭惠王后) when her husband was raised to the honorary position of king by her son Sŏngjong. In Korean history she is well known as King Sŏngjong's mother. On behalf of her son, who was crowned at an early age, she intervened in political affairs and exercised power. I follow the lead of most other scholars¹⁸ and call her Sohye wanghu (昭惠王后).

Sohye wanghu's unique position and experience enabled her to publish *Naehun*. As the mother of a king she was fully aware of the role of women in producing subjects who would maintain Confucian order in the country. *Naehun* was written because Sohye wanghu wanted to provide her daughter-in-law with a good education. In the preface, Sohye wanghu expressed her wish to have a good daughter-in-law, one whose mind was "as beautiful as jade".¹⁹ In case her daughter-in-law did not behave well, she needed a teaching manual to provide her with proper instruction, and since she was highly educated in the Confucian tradition she was able to write the text herself. Although she conceived of the text as an instruction manual for her daughter-in-law, she did not want to limit the readership of *Naehun*. As a woman in the highest position in the country, she knew her text promoted women's education in general and could be used for the betterment of the whole country.

18 i.e. Cho (1996), Han (2005), and Yuk (1996).

19 "Although Yao (堯) and Shun (舜) were sagely kings of the world, their sons were Danzhu (丹朱) and Shangjun (商均) (who did not have the ability to rule the country and therefore failed in succession to the throne). Although a strict father gives a good education, his children can still be bad. Moreover, I am a widow. How can I have a daughter-in-law with a mind as beautiful as jade?" (This is my own translation of the Sino-Korean text "堯舜天下大聖而子有丹朱商均 嚴父教訓之前尚有不淑之子 況余寡母能見玉心之婦耶". For the original text, see Yuk (1985: 18)).

Ironically, her daughter-in-law Yun, the wife of Sōngjong, was accused of “inappropriate behaviour” in her position as queen and sentenced to death. It is assumed that Sohye wanghu had a great influence on this historical event. When Yun’s own son, King Yōnsan, succeeded to the throne, he had many of the people involved in his mother’s death killed. Sohye wanghu herself was blamed by her grandson.

Yōngbin (映嬪 ?–1764) wrote *Yōbōm* in the Korean language. As with other female authors, little is known of her life and personality. Her family name is Yi (李) and her given name unknown, as with most women in the Chosōn dynasty. Yōngbin was the name given after she became the king’s wife and mother of the crown prince. She is also called Sōnhūigung (宣禧宮) after the name of her house. Unlike Sohye wanghu she was not brought up in an upper-class family. She became a lady-in-waiting and later one of King Yōngjo’s (英祖 1694–1776) concubines. Her son became the crown prince Changhōn seja (莊憲世子) but tragically died before his accession to the throne. Her grandson, Changhōn seja’s son, became King Chōngjo (正祖 1752–1800). Her daughter-in-law, King Chōngjo’s mother, Hong (洪), also called Hegyōnggung (惠慶宮), is famous for the essay *Hanjungnok* (閑中錄).

Kim Hoyōnjae (1681–1722), the author of *Chagyōngp’yōn*, was brought up in an academic environment. Her lineage, Kim, was one of the most famous aristocratic lineages of that time. Her grandfather and father were government officials and famous for their scholarship. Her husband’s family was equally noble and scholarly: her father-in-law and husband learned from eminent scholars and served the king’s court. She had a son and a daughter. Although her husband was known to be a good person, he did not seem to care for his wife. Hoyōnjae composed hundreds of poems in which she revealed her loneliness, and based on her learning of Confucian philosophy she wrote *Chagyōngp’yōn*. The primary purpose of the book was personal self-cultivation, one of the core ideas of Confucianism, but the author wanted other women to use this book for their own self-cultivation.

Kwōn Ryuhandang, the author of *Ōnhaeng sillok*, likewise had a good academic background. She lived in the eighteenth century (the exact years of her birth and death are not known). The Kwōn family seemed to provide a good education for her as an aristocratic lady. She was famous for her knowledge of Confucian scriptures even before her marriage to Yi Pyōk, one of the early adapters of Catholicism and other Western ideas. After her marriage, she translated Chinese books about those Western ideas into Korean.²⁰ Her knowledge of Western ideas, Catholicism in particular, was displayed in her book *Ōnhaeng sillok*. She was unable to give birth but did include a chapter on “how to educate a daughter-in-law” in her book. She was also interested in educating common people: her book demonstrates that she experienced the life of common women to some degree and used her text to educate them.²¹

20 Kim Sinyeon (1999: 10).

21 Contemporary South Korean scholars seeking to discuss Confucianism in relation to feminism are particularly interested in these educational texts by female authors because they believe that they reflect women’s attitudes towards Confucianism at the time. There are Confucian texts for women’s education written by male authors,

In the Chosŏn dynasty, female authors' strategies for gender equality in their educational texts focused on the concept of *pyŏl* (別),²² translated as "division", "distinction" or "difference". The authors believed that, through the concept of *pyŏl* (別), women can secure their position in a male-dominated society and protect the ideals of gender equality in Confucian classics. In other words, they believed that women were different from men because the roles of mothers and wives were different from men's roles. Based on "the ideology of Confucian woman", the so-called *hyŏnmo yangch'ŏ* (a wise mother and good wife, 賢母良妻), their texts show that the common goal of these educational texts was "how to educate women to become wise mothers and good wives".

Confucian texts for women's education in the Chosŏn dynasty seek to teach women "how to behave properly in a feminine way". The educational purpose is based on the Confucian concept of *ye* (禮),²³ which essentially means "how to behave in the right way". *Ye* is often simply understood as a code of conduct. Codes of conduct are based on the relationships generated by kinship, marriage and other social activities: gender, age and social status depending on class, position in the court, marital status, position in the extended family, and generation, are factors which decided a person's relationship with others. Codes of conduct regarding the relationship between men and women are based on the concept of *pyŏl* (別). Generally speaking, according to *ye*, men should behave in a masculine way and women should behave in a feminine way. In short, Confucian texts for women's education in the Chosŏn dynasty teach women how to practise *ye* in a feminine way. Confucian philosophers' words and illustrations of old stories and anecdotes are used to show women how to do this.

The four texts, *Naehun* (Teachings for Women), *Yŏbŏm* (Role Models for Women), *Chagyŏngp'yŏn* (The Book of Self-Discipline) and *Ŏnhaeng sillok* (The Book about How to Behave as a Woman) have common characteristics. First, even though women in aristocratic families were often ineligible for Confucian education, the authors of these texts are Confucian intellectuals and female aristocrats. For example, Sohye wanghu, author of *Naehun*, referred to Confucian teachings, cited canonical texts such as *Confucian Analects*²⁴ and *Mencius*,²⁵ and included the words of Confucian

such as Song Siyŏl's *Kyenyŏsŏ* (Instructions for Women's Education), Han Wŏnjin's *Hanssi buhun* (Han's Teachings for Women), and Yi Tŏngmu's *Pu'ui* (Women's Ways of Behaviour). However, these texts are seldom discussed by contemporary scholars in relation to feminism in South Korea because such discussion focuses mainly on women's ways of accepting Confucianism and women's self-consciousness as reflected in the texts discussed above.

22 *Bie* in Chinese.

23 *Li* in Chinese. *Ye* is translated as "ritual" or "propriety". This concept is very important in Confucianism and interpreted in many different ways.

24 "According to *Confucian Analects*, when (one) receives food from the king, (one) ought to sit in the right way and taste a little bit of it before eating." (My translation of the passage "論語曰 君賜食 必正席先嘗之". For the original text, see Yuk (1985: 28).)

25 "Mencius says, 'For a human being, there is his/her way: if one eats full, wears warm and stays comfortable, without learning, one is close to a beast.'" (My translation of the passage "孟子曰 人之有道也 飽食暖衣 逸居而無教 則近於禽獸". For the original text, see Yuk (1985: 35).)

philosophers such as Zhou Dunyi (周敦頤 1017–73)²⁶ and Shao Yong (邵雍 1011–77)²⁷ along with other anecdotes.²⁸ Second, they presuppose women's subordination to men. Third, their educational purpose is to teach women how to behave properly as women in a male-dominated society. In other words, much of the text focuses on codes of conduct intended to guide women in the ways of wise mothers and good wives. Finally, the authors exhibit their intentions clearly: to teach women the best ways to exercise freedom and power and to secure their position as being as "equal" as possible to men in the male-dominated society of the Chosŏn dynasty.

While the texts share these common characteristics, they each exhibit aspects that differentiate them from one another. Of these four texts, *Naehun* is the one most studied by contemporary scholars.²⁹ As many scholars³⁰ point out, *Naehun* is significant because it does not focus on women's passive obedience to men. In *Naehun*, Sohye wanghu demonstrates what women's power means under the given conditions of male domination.

Under the social conditions of patriarchy, marriage is crucial for a woman's identity and security. According to Sohye wanghu, the concepts of *obulch'wi* (五不取), *ch'ilgŏ* (七去) and *sambulgŏ* (三不去) are significant in terms of women's power that can be acquired by fulfilling obligations in Chosŏn society through marriage. *Obulch'wi*³¹ describes the five kinds of men that women can refuse to marry. *Sambulgŏ*³² describes the three cases in which a married woman cannot be expelled from the husband's family.

26 "Master Zhou says, 'Zhongyou liked other people telling him his flaws. Therefore, his fame became everlasting.'" (This is my translation of the passage "濂溪周先生曰仲由喜聞過 令名無窮焉". For the original text, see Yuk (1985: 36).)

27 "Master Shao warns his descendants by saying, 'A person on the high level practises goodness without learning, a person on the mid-level practises goodness only after learning, and a person on the low level does not practise goodness in spite of learning.'" (This is my translation from the passage "康節邵先生 戒子孫曰 上品之人 不教而善 中品之人 教而後善 下品之人 教亦不善". For the original text, see Yuk (1985: 37).)

28 For example, there is an anecdote of the Sage King (文王), who is known as the first king of the Zhou dynasty of China (1046–771 BCE). In Confucianism, the Sage King and his son Dan (旦), also known as Zhougong (周公), are believed to be the founders of rituals before Confucius.

29 Cho (1996), Yuk (1996), Koh (2002), Han (2005), and Kim Eon-Soon (2005).

30 Koh (2002) and Kim Eon-Soon (2005).

31 "For a woman, there is *obulch'wi* (五不取). A woman does not marry a son in the family of treason. A woman does not marry a son in the family of rebellion. A woman does not marry a man who serves a sentence coming down for generations. A woman does not marry a man whose family has a deadly disease for generations. A woman does not marry the eldest son whose father passes away." (This is my own translation of Sino-Korean text in Yuk (1985: 76).)

32 "For a married woman, there is *sambulgŏ* (三不去). A married woman who behaves well and has no place to return cannot be expelled. A married woman who has served a three-year mourning of parents-in-law cannot be expelled. A married woman who married a poor lower-classed man but made him rich and noble cannot be expelled." (This is my own translation of Sino-Korean text in Yuk (1985: 76).)

And *ch'ilgō*³³ describes the seven reasons for which a husband is allowed to divorce a wife.

Obulch'wi and *sambulgō* represent codes of conduct designed to protect a woman's position, whereas *ch'ilgō* is related to a woman's obligations. In the Chosŏn dynasty, a woman's freedom to choose her husband was extremely limited. Under such conditions, *obulch'wi* implies that Sohye wanghu intended to give women at least a minimal level of freedom to avoid the most difficult kinds of hardship in marriage. By the same token, in *sambulgō*, she intended to guarantee a minimum level of security for a married woman.

Unlike *obulch'wi* and *sambulgō*, *ch'ilgō* is often interpreted as a rule used for suppressing women. However, a different interpretation is possible. Female subordination was common in the Chosŏn dynasty and a husband could easily expel a wife from his family regardless of her will. What Sohye wanghu manifested by *ch'ilgō* is not the idea that a husband can expel a wife in such cases, but that a husband ought not to expel a wife without such serious reasons as those outlined in *ch'ilgō*. For example, a husband who simply dislikes a wife cannot divorce. In short, *obulch'wi*, *ch'ilgō* and *sambulgō* reflect their author's intention to make a woman's position in marriage secure.

Yōbōm, a Confucian text written by Sŏnhūigung, is also relevant to this debate.³⁴ *Yōbōm* consists of short biographies of 123 women whom Sŏnhūigung considered role models for women. The lives of these women are recounted mainly to suggest that they represent ways to behave as mothers, wives, daughters and daughters-in-law. *Yōbōm* also introduces women with talents outside the roles defined above, in such sections as *Hyōnnyō* (賢女; women with wisdom), *Pyōnnyō* (辯女; women with good speech skills), and *Munnyō* (文女; intellectual women).

As Kim Eon-Soon (2005: 187) suggests, *Yōbōm* is significant because the author pays special attention to women's individual talents as well as their roles as good mothers, wives, daughters and daughters-in-law. The focus on women's intellectual talents is lacking in other educational texts. Choi Hyejin (2004b: 62–3) interprets *Yōbōm* as a book that demonstrates women's active involvement in fulfilling their roles. She argues that the women described in *Yōbōm* did not passively accept the ideology of being Confucian women; rather they made an effort actively to realize the ideology in order to become better people.

In *Chagyōngpyōn*, the author Kim Hoyŏnjae's concept of *ūm* and *yang* also demonstrates how she interprets gender equality under the condition of women's subordination to men. She wrote: "Since *ūm* and *yang* are different in character and men and women are different in conduct, women

33 "For a married woman, there is *ch'ilgō* (七去). A woman who does not respect her parents-in-law can be expelled. A woman who does not have a son can be expelled. A loose woman can be expelled. A woman with jealousy can be expelled. A woman suffering from a deadly disease can be expelled. A talkative woman can be expelled. A woman stealing things can be expelled." (This is my own translation of Sino-Korean text in Yuk (1985: 76).)

34 Ryu (1981), Choi Hyejin (2004b), Yoon (2004) and Kim Eon-Soon (2005).

do not dare to follow the sages' teaching. However, there is no difference between men and women in terms that they both should practise speaking beautiful words, conducting themselves according to social rules, and learning true knowledge". While she suggests that women need educating as much as men, she draws a clear line between male and female ways of achieving this. She uses expressions such as "women are not able to learn from the Four Books (四書)" and "men read sages' words and learn about sages' behaviour; women do not learn such things". Although Kim Hoyŏnjae herself read Confucian classics and became a Confucian intellectual, she did not think that other women should read Confucian classics. She believed that, just like the concepts of *ŭm* and *yang*, women were both equal to and different from men.³⁵

Kim Sinyeon (2000) asserts that Kwŏn Ryuhandang's *Ōnhaeng sillok* is the most Korean-like book for women's education. She argues that unlike the other texts, which are targeted mainly towards female aristocrats, this book was written for lay women in Chosŏn society; Kwŏn Ryuhandang uses examples from lay women's everyday lives to illustrate her points. Moreover, Kim highlights the idea that Kwŏn Ryuhandang tried to introduce new ideas, such as Western ideologies like Catholicism, into women's education.³⁶ I agree with Kim's point that *Ōnhaeng sillok* has such characteristics. In addition, I believe that this book shares characteristics with the three other texts. This book is also based on Confucianism and focuses on teaching women how to behave properly as mothers, wives, daughters, and daughters-in-law under the conditions of women's subordination to men.

Conclusion

Although Korean society is still to some degree male-dominated, Koreans continuously think about how to reform the *ancien regime* of male domination and put feminist thought into practice. Accordingly, gender equality is one of the premises on which democracy in Korea today is based. With diverse efforts, Korean women have achieved far more power and freedom than previously.

Furthermore, Korean women today do not feel uncomfortable studying the Confucian classics, which were once believed to be only for men. Many

35 For more about Kim Hoyŏnjae, see Choi Hyejin (2004a).

36 However, *Ōnhaeng sillok* is based on Confucianism, not Catholicism. Although the phrase "God says" appeared, lessons that follow are mainly from Confucianism. For example, lessons such as "God says, do not talk much. If someone talks too much, they are likely to make mistakes"; and "God says, the teaching about family lies in harmony, the teaching about life lies in diligence, the teaching of a year lies in spring, and the teaching of a day lies in dawn" are not different from Confucian teaching. In Confucian Analects, there are phrases warning people not to talk too much, such as "be prudent in speaking (信於言)". There is a Chinese saying, "The plan of one's life lies in his/her early age, the plan of a year lies in spring, and the teaching of a day lies in dawn". Thus, the philosophy of Catholicism and the Western idea of individuality do not seem to have a significant influence on Kwŏn Ryuhandang's actual writing of *Ōnhaeng sillok*.

women are studying Confucian philosophy from Confucian classics,³⁷ and this phenomenon provides a clue that Confucianism is considered a positive way to interpret and explain Korean society. This would not be the case if, as some Korean feminist critics suggest, Confucian classics were full of passages portraying women as inferior to men and deeming women's subordination to men natural.

Many Korean feminists have blamed traditional Confucianism for today's male-domination in South Korea. However, as examined above, we should not attribute this to the Confucian scriptures, which are the source of Confucian identity as well as Confucian philosophy, but to the supporters of male-domination who manipulated the interpretation of these scriptures. Confucianism is compatible with gender equality at least on the level of Confucian scripture. We should return Confucian scriptures to their original place – a place in which women are equal to men. Therefore, more energy now needs to be put in to correcting misinterpretations of the Confucian scriptures – and the resulting sexist attitudes. It is also necessary to scrutinize further the historical changes and Confucian practices that reflect such a misrepresentation of Confucianism and Confucian scriptures.

In addition, based on the above discussion of Confucian texts for women's education written by female authors in traditional Korea, we can develop frames of reference in examining the female contribution to securing self-respect and rights in East Asia beyond Korea. This research can also contribute to an expanded and comprehensive understanding of the formation of women's identity in traditional societies in East Asian countries.

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37 The proportion of female to male students majoring in Confucian studies at Sungkyunkwan University (whose pedagogy is Confucianism) is often high. The number of female students at Taedong Institute of Classic Research (a three-year boarding school teaching Confucian classics) has also become larger in recent years.

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