

PATRIARCHAL SOCIETY OF KOREA: A CASE STUDY ON KOREAN COMFORT WOMEN

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ABSTRACT

Women status have been focused from various theories in International Relation and in the case of Korean Comfort Women, it is one of the prominent issue which is highlighted by the Feminist scholars. The term 'sexuality' was a topic which was never discussed in Korea until 1938 with the rise of Korean feminist movement things started to change and attitude towards it changed in 1980. This lack of interest among the Korean scholars can be attributed to the philosophical and unique cultural system of Korea brought by their belief in Confucianism. Since the ideology of Confucianism is characterized by extreme sexual segregation and double standard of sexuality morality. Looking into the female sexuality from the feminist perspective it has described sexuality as the socio historical construction. The introduction of Neo Confucianism during the Chosen period the culture of Korea was deeply influenced. Since the ideology of Neo Confucianism was an ideology of change. This ideology of Neo Confucianism affected the Korean women society a lot and it also clearly stated the hierarchal order of the sexes which brought a strong distinction between the status of men and women. Women were accorded to the lowest section of the society. The sexual related problems in Korea was taken seriously only in the late 1980s with the rise of the Feminist movement that brought some changes into an epoch making transition.

Keywords: Patriarchal society of Korea, Korean Confucianism, Korean women of Choson Dynasty, Korean Comfort Women, Poverty and Korean women.

I INTRODUCTION

Patriarchal System of a society generally means the domination by someone superior. It is a structural violence where the power is exercised unjustly by one category of the social actors against others such as created in organized social hierarchal relations fathers against daughters, husbands against wives or power elites against ethnic minorities. In Korea each legal family had a head of the family in its familial hierarchy and the rest of them are under the authority of the head. As the author Eunkang Koh says, a family registration system known as *Hoju* system was introduced in 1953 under the Civil Law, and 'All the members of the family were registered

under *Hoju* or the Family Head, thus Family consists of the Family Head and the other members.’¹ The *Hoju* system was considered incompatible in 2005 by the constitution law and thus was abolished in 2008.

Patriarchalism was reinforced in East Asian especially South Korea during the *Choson* period (1392-1910) which was brought through the beliefs derived from the teachings of Confucian and the patriarchal system flourished and developed in its own unique features along with the Confucian beliefs. Although the origins of this system dated back to the social and historical conditions two millennia before it became prominent during the late *Choson* period. The term Confucianism according to *Insook Han Park* and *Lee Jay Cho* in their article ‘Confucianism and the Korean Family’ referred it as a popular value system of China, Korea and Japan which is derived from the synthesis of the traditional cultural values espoused by Confucius. Confucianism is not a religion but it is a political and ethical system advocating the creation of a new, orderly and harmonious society. The authority of the ruler was based on virtue and love of humanity whereas the general public was taught to be completely submissive to accept the ruler’s authority and to maintain power behavior.

According to the author Young-Hee Shim in her article ‘Feminism and the Discourse of Sexuality in Korea: Continuities and Changes’ says that “Although Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism regard union between men (Yang) and women (Yin) as the roots of all human relations, human morality and the socialization process, it calls for a clear hierarchal orders of the sexes.....it thus accords women an inferior position.”²

Hence this strict Confucian patriarchal system placed women at the bottom of the strict social hierarchy who received no education and women were virtually bonded to abide by the ‘rules of three obedience’ to be subordinate to father before marriage, husband after marriage and sons after husband dies. In this respect Confucianism is viewed as a familial religion and it seems that no cultures have ever placed such emphasis on the family as have the Confucianist cultures of East Asia.

The article traces the importance of Patriarchal System in Korea and its role played in the life of the Korean Comfort Women. It also discusses the influence of Confucianism and whether or not any attempts were made in order to koreanize the Confucius beliefs.

II KOREAN CONFUCIANISM:

The trace of Confucian influence in Korea has a long history. Its goes back to the time when the peninsula was found and the states were formed in it. The influence was probably since the time the Koreans started using the writing scripts as the Confucian precepts were used as the object of study by the Korean elites or nobles in the court.³ It was always that the ruling class of the country that was influenced by the Confucian classics as it acquired the knowledge of history and literature that is considered to be the most necessary concept for forming a government. Though the influence was continuously affecting the peninsula but it was not pervasive.

¹ Eunkang Koh, 2008, *Gender Issues and Confucian Scripture: Is Confucianism Incompatible with Gender Equality In South Korea?* Pp 346.

² Young Hee Shim, 2001, *Feminism and the Discourse of Sexuality in Korea: Continuities and Changes*, pp.135

³ Key P. Yang and Gregory Henderson, 1958, *An outline history of Korean Confucianism*, pp 81

However the influence became intense over the government and society during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and by sixteenth century it had fully dominated the entire thought and philosophy of the Korean society. During the latter periods Confucianism and Korea was so interlinked that the history of Korea was incomplete without Confucianism. The Yi rule in Korea was the longest rule in the history of Korea and it was during this period that the greatness of Confucianism was greatly felt. Confucianism became the chief intellectual concern in the whole era though there were some shortcomings yet it was successfully followed as one of the religion.

After the annexation of Korea by Japan in 1910 Confucianism was deprived and it no longer dominated the Korean society however though it was deeply weakened the ideology of Confucianism did not die out completely. The Confucian thought was maintained in some degree like in functioning of family relations and in dealing with the community structure as all these fell out from the political and administrative realm of the state.⁴ There were certain modification in the Confucian ideology after it was introduced in Korea like the central familial relationship is not just the relation between wife and husband but rather between parent and child, moreover the relationships between family members are characterized more like authority and obedience rather than based on mutual love and equality. It was more like the authority was vested upon the male head and there were differences in status among the family members.

III KOREAN WOMEN OF *CHOSON* DYNASTY

In Korea, the customs of family drastically changed during the *Choson* period, as the Neo-Confucian belief entered Korea in the late 14th century. Korea by the 17th century dramatically transformed with the dominant Neo-Confucian ideology. The native practices were altered with Confucian traditions, hence ancestral worship were given more emphasis. Although there was equality among the sons and daughters in regard to inheriting the property during the *Koryo* dynasty (918- 1392) and the early *Choson* period things changed. The hierarchical relationship was strictly observed between husband and wife in Korean families during the *Choson* period. The father and son relation was equal to the king and his subjects' relation. In an exemplary manner the woman had to sacrifice herself to serve her husband and family.⁵ Traditionally in the Confucian belief ancestors are highly regarded as a deity, the ancestral worship is encouraged which clearly depicted a special ritual and spiritual bondage of that of a father and son.⁶ Hence in the Korean family during the *Choson* dynasty period sons were always preferred over daughters. If a wife bore no son it was common for the couple to adopt one or for the husband to keep a concubine.

⁴ Yi Myonggu and William A. Douglas, 1967, *Korean Confucianism Today*, pp 44.

⁵ Insook Han Park and Lee Jay Cho, 1995, *Confucianism and the Korean Family*, pp 124.

⁶ Insook Han Park and Lee Jay Cho, 1995, *Confucianism and the Korean Family*, pp 118

There was gradual shift from equal distribution to unequal division and the eldest son was made the chosen head of the heir. The women's activities were mostly restricted to the home, they were not allowed to appear in public places without a veil and they were not allowed to take any part in any social role. Especially women of the *Yangban* family during this dynasty were not even allowed to talk to any men except to the close male relatives and after marriage she was not allowed to walk out of the house without her husband's permission. They were thoroughly discriminated at home, for they were given inauspicious names or names that reflected their parent's disappointment. Moreover the women were totally restrained to inherit a property of their own and which made them solely dependent on the male society all through their lives. Women were powerless; they had no choices in marriage whereas men had every legal right to abandon their unwanted wives. Korean women were the most oppressed social class in the Korean society during the *Choson* dynasty.

IV KOREAN COMFORT WOMEN IN JAPANESE PERIOD:

In regard to the comfort station during the Japanese rule the issue has been highlighted only because the maximum sexual workers were young Korean girls and they were inhumanly treated by the Japanese soldiers. "Systematic provision by the military for the sexual needs of its soldiers is common and may be understood as a paternalistic practice rooted in the masculinist view of female sexuality as a commodity- a prevalent view in patriarchal societies."(Chunghee Sarah Soh 2000). Moreover, the Japanese during their colonial rule in Korea imposed their custom of household head system which degraded women more and women lost their status and independence in the society. As per the historical background of the sexual work in Korea this system also existed in form of state organized women entertainers called *Kisaeng* who served the government officials and due to non commercialized economy, sexual work did not develop as a specialized occupation during the Yi dynasty period(1392-1910). This system of female entertainers dated back to late 7th century but became institutionalized only during the *Koryo* period early 10th century. These *Kisaeng* women were simply not sex workers but there was hierarchy the lowest *Kisaeng* specialized in sexual work; the middle group entertained and were part time prostitutes and the highest group served higher official since they considered themselves to be exceptionally beautiful and artistic. However this *Kisaeng* became popular in late Yi dynasty period and served the agrarian elites. It was only during the Japanese rule when the war efforts intensified the women were conscripted to serve the Japanese soldiers in the war fronts. During the Japanese rule there were three distinct organizations of sexual workers, first who served the elite Japanese and Korean men, secondly the ones who served both Japanese and Korean men in urban areas and thirdly the ones who young peasant women who served the Japanese soldiers. However this sexual work reflected the male domination and the power structure of the patriarchal system of the colonized Korean society. Since men in comparison to women have biologically rooted sexual needs as such in a society of patriarchal system it is considered natural right for men to seek sexual comfort outside marriages. The traditional sexual culture to provide a systematic provision for the military for their sexual need is common and according to masculinist view of female sexuality it is kind of

paternalistic practice which is prevalent in the patriarchal societies.⁷ The submission of women to the state and the emperor under the state patriarchal system of Japan was one of the ideal reasons for the establishment of comfort station for the Japanese military soldiers.

The comfort system in the patriarchal Japanese society was conceived as an institutionalization of considerate gifts to the Emperor's warriors for recreational sex. "The patriarchal fascism of imperial Japan, for example, encompassed masculinist sexism. That is, both the wartime and contemporary statist perspectives, as well as the generalized masculinist perspectives of the military and civilians, all share a common understanding of the ultimate function of the comfort system as a recreational sexual amenity for the troops"(Chunghee Sarah Soh 2000). Since Confucian belief is the main basis for the patriarchal system and its prohibition has put women's chastity on priority which has forced women to separate themselves from their own bodies. This patriarchal system has played a vital role in the lives of the military comfort Korean women and the survivors were forced to keep silent from speaking about their work as a sexual slave in the Japanese military army camps for half a century. The ideology of Confucian had taught the women that chastity was more valuable than their lives as such women either submitted or became a comfort woman or they killed themselves to protect their chastity.⁸ The patriarchal system forced the war victims of sexual slavery either to commit suicide or to stay far away from their families because they were ashamed of the loss of their virginity which was of great importance to the Korean girls during that century.

V POVERTY AND WOMEN IN KOREA

However, not all the young Korean women were employed in these brothels but most victims were from poor Korean families, landless tenants or the jobless immigrant groups in the city. Poverty in Korea during the colonization period along with the patriarchal system helped in playing a vital role in establishing and running of these military brothels. The false promises made by the Japanese as well as the Korean officials for well paid jobs lured the young girls from these poor families into these military brothels.⁹ Moreover, it was also known that most of the abduction of these young girls was mostly from the weaker and poorer section of the society who was helpless and powerless. The Koreans were deprived off their economic and political rights. The Korean currency was changed and the Japanese form of banking was introduced. The farm land fell in the hands of the landlords mostly Japanese, as a result the tax burden fell heavy on the people as the taxes were increased at the will of the corrupted officials for their own benefits. Many of the farmers were left with no lands, forcing most of the commoners to live a life of unrelenting poverty, undernourishment and hunger. Since 90% of the Korean population were depended on agriculture during the Choson period (1392-1910) the taxes and the

⁷ Chunghee Sarah Soh,2000, *From Imperial Gifts to Sex Slaves: Theorizing Symbolic Representations of the 'comfort Women'*. Pp 63.

⁸ Young Hee Shim,2001,*Feminism and the Discourse of Sexuality in Korea: Continuities and Changes*. Pp 137

⁹ Pyong Gap Min, 2003, *Korean 'Comfort Women' : The Intersection of Colonial Power, Gender, and Class*. Pp 945

exorbitant poverty forced the Korean farmers to end the year in deficit, they were left with no job, no land. Poverty widely spread among the rural population in Korea, which obliged the inferior section of the society, the women to join these military brothels in order to earn a living for their family. The parents were also forced to sell their daughters in exchange for money and some of the self interested local Korean civilians aided in the recruitment of these comfort women for personal financial gain. However though poverty was just an add-on factor for the progress of these military brothels but the role played by the patriarchal system proved to be main cause of suffering for these Comfort Women.

Hence in the social history of Korea it was not only the pimps but the state officials took part in this systematic exploitation of the powerless and most vulnerable commoners. Thus the published stories of these comfort women survivors and this tragic humiliation of women cannot solely blame the Japanese military rule. It was this system of hierarchy according to the patriarchal system and the head system image of the Japanese which had created a racial identity of the Koreans as an inferior race and condemned Korean women to the lowest level in human worthiness. The suffering of the comfort women also seemed to vary not only geographically and chronologically but with ethnicity. Some of the Japanese sex slaves led a secure life as an imperial gift serving only the officers compared to the young Korean comfort women. Prostitution is a system which includes payment for sexual union but majority of the Korean comfort women testified that they were not paid for their sexual services to the Japanese soldiers. The work of a Japanese sexual worker is not counted to be a sexual slavery but a typical life of a woman performing her role in a patriarchal society whereas in the experiences of the Korean comfort women ethnicity was the fundamental source of social discrimination.