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Korea: Gender and Labor

In the pre-modernized state of Korea, women holding positions of power was common. The women who became royalty often voiced their opinions and thereby left legacies still credited to this day for the advancement of Korean society. However, amongst the turmoils of Japanese colonization and World War II, the power of many Korean women greatly fell to a position of slavery and submissiveness, just as the country fell to higher powers. The state of the country greatly reflects the state of the people residing there. Just as such, both Korea and the women who lived there became taken advantage of and are left scarred with a history of violence, treachery, and sorrow.

In Korea's Joseon dynasty, women were granted a few minor forms of independence, including having access to shared rights to inheritance, taking part in plural marriages, and as men could marry multiple women, women could likewise live apart and have several husbands (Lecture November 11, 2021). During the Joseon period, the Queen's clan inherited much power and presided over the royal family. There were several dowagers and queens within the royal family who were both mothers and wives to the kings of Korea. As debates soared over Korea throughout the enactment of the Kanhwa Treaty (1876) and acts of imperialism advancing, there were many changes to state interactions and government functions.

The royal family was no longer the main ruler of Korea come the year of 1919 all the way to the year of 1945. Instead, Japanese colonialism took heed and secured Korea as its own.

Within this time, there was a transition from what Koreans believed to be the “Old Woman,” as in, old-fashioned and traditional, compared to the “New Woman,” a modernized and educated individual. There were certainly stereotypes created by the people who were seeing this shift take place, as most cultures do when shifting from traditional to modern, such as the Meiji Restoration in Japan or the Republicanization of China. Many saw the “New Woman” as a threat or a brat; one that was selfish, privileged, and someone who took education for granted. On the contrary, some had “strong expectations for the newly educated women in the revitalization of the Korean nation under Japanese colonial rule” (Choi). This could be due to the fact that these “New Women” of Korea utilized Japanese literature and history as well as educated Japanese feminist role models to supplement their own education and philosophy. With the base of Japanese feminism and the writings from the powerful *Seito* magazine, Korea’s first feminist magazine, the *Sin Yoja*, was established. Within the *Sin Yoja*, there are writings urging men to reflect on themselves along with the laws and regulations that were put into place by men, yet primarily harm and suspend the actions of women. In addition, there are positive reflections on who women are, encouragements depicting what women can do, and calls for action to rise up to liberate women and reform society (Choi).

At the same time that some Korean women were finally gaining a footing on feminism and intellectualism, Japanese occupation of the country placed some women in completely opposite and traumatizing situations. During Japanese colonial rule, there was a large presence of Japanese officials among the Korean population, so much so that Japanese officials took it upon themselves to seek unruly pleasure within the occupied areas that they had a firm grasp on. Hence, the ‘comfort women’ were brought into the picture. The comfort women were ordinary girls and women who were forced into sexual slavery by the Japanese military that ruled over

Korea at the time. Contrary to myths and arguments that extend into modern times, the comfort women were not prostitutes and were often minors. Many of the women coerced into this system were often told they would be working in a textile factory and could earn money for the debts or lack of money their family had. In the case of Chung Seo-Woon, one of the women who was able to survive the comfort women system, a village official who worked closely with the Japanese military officials offered to her that she could work at a factory in Japan for 2-3 years so that her father could be released from prison. She instead found herself in Indonesia at a comfort women station, never to see her father again (“Herstory - War Crushed Her Body But Not Her Soul // Vidsee.Com.”). This system the Japanese military supported was unjust, full of lies, and a violation of human rights. There are deniers of the fact that this system ever originated from the Japanese military or that Japanese military men ever took part in it, but as of September 24, 2021, there remain thirteen total survivors out of two hundred and forty women, including Chung Seo-Woon who is currently ninety seven years old, who still live to tell their story (Ministry of Gender Equality and Family).

Similar to the feminist movements in neighboring countries and countries to the West, Korean women experienced both times of success and joy as well as times of failure and tribulations. As of modern day, Korea owes much of its political and educational changes to the women who were active mothers, teachers, and activists, among others. Many women who were a part of the comfort women system still make their voices heard to this day, just as the educated “New Woman” of Korea strived to advance and ultimately change Korean society and the awareness of Korean history.

Works Cited

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