

The Legacy Lingers On:
Korean Confucianism and the Erosion of Women's Rights

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Photo 1: girl swinging

Confucianism is not just clever saying in fortune cookies. Confucius envisioned a society where good people behaved in a civilized manner through education, proper government and family life, all guided by a system of rites and rituals. He was born in China, but China never made consistent use of his teachings. China, although incorporating many Confucian ideals (patrilineage, for example) used Confucian doctrines along with others, as suited their purpose. They never chose to be a distinct "Confucian" country. Korea, on the other hand, at the change of dynasties in 1392, made a conscious decision to become a thoroughly Confucian country. This paper looks at one aspect of what can happen when such good intentions are taken to the extreme.

The past, an unrelenting archer, is forever aiming arrows into the present. In the current year of 2004, a young Korean woman told me the following story:

"After hearing your talk, I went home and cried in a most heartrending way. The oppressive institutions of recent centuries have weighed heavily on my own life, even growing up in the USA. For example, it is obvious to both myself and my sister that our mother

treated our brothers like precious princes, and us like common house servants. As children, both my sister and I started dressing and acting like "tomboys," and as adults discussing this, we both sensed that being a girl was so undesirable and such a raw deal, that we were both trying for a little more respect as second-class imitation boys. To add to the confusion, we both encountered teasing for appearing to be lesbians, which neither of us were naturally inclined to be. I don't think the daughters of Caucasian families in our neighborhood experienced the same deep fear of being abused or discounted simply for being a girl, that my sister and I both felt."

Where did it come from, this legacy that lingers in the lives of so many Korean women? The goal of this hour is to see how one legal system managed, over 300 years, to gradually erode some, and then all, of the rights of Korean women. We must look first at the country of Korea and then at some basic Confucian teachings.

Visual introduction to Korea - Photos 2-4: maps; 5-9: people/houses

Korea

Korea is a peninsula in northeast Asia (photo 2), appears as a bridge between China and Japan (photo 3), and in close-up is mountainous and (Koreans say) shaped like a rabbit (photo 4). Old style houses were thatch roofed (photo 5) for the poor, and tile roofed (photo 6) for the upper-class, but today most people live in high-rise apartment buildings (photo 7). Photos 8 and 9 show traditional and modern clothes.

There are four basic facts one should know about Korea. The country has a long history as a civilized and literate land, with the first dynasty starting about 57 BC. In the early years, Confucianism existed side-by-side with other religions and ways of life. Only 20% upper-class were educated and ruled the country; the other 80% were uneducated workers; all our information comes from that upper-class for they alone left written records. Government positions were held by men only; otherwise, women had (almost) equal status.

Confucian Teachings

Confucius, an ordinary fellow born in China around 500 BC, quickly mastered the teachings of the Chinese sages and decided his mission in life was to restore the practices of the ancient emperors and sages. For over fifty years he taught that good government lay in choosing honest and educated officials, yet he was usually misunderstood and ignored in his life, and died relatively unknown. The main thing that China used from his teachings was the civil service exam to cull learned men for government officials. Later scholars (Mencius, 300 BC) and later still (Chu Hs , 1200) organized his teachings into a virtual library of Confucian thought, emphasizing the practice of ethics, education, statecraft, and the goal of the “superior man.”

Themes of Confucianism As they entered Korean life

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|-------|---|
| 1200s | 1. Confucian education, literature, history |
| 1400s | 2. Confucian government policies, ritual |
| 1500s | 3. Confucian guides to family life |
| 1550s | 4. Confucian ethics and philosophy |

The key concern of Confucian teaching is ethical living on this earth. Man is born good, and can be perfected, and thus the focus is on correct actions to build harmony across society. Life is guided by five moral imperatives:

between ruler and subject, righteousness

between father and son, affinity

between husband and wife, separation of functions

between elder and younger, proper respect

between friends. fidelity

Ritual and etiquette supply the glue that maintains these proper relationships.

The perfect woman must obey her parents when a child,
her husband when a wife, and her son when a widow.

The Confucian transformation of Korea began in earnest in 1392 when the architects of a new dynasty (Choson) made a conscious break with the old and decided to build a new government based clearly and completely on Neo-Confucian teachings. To appreciate the magnitude of this shift, one must look back into the previous dynasty.

Pre-Confucian Life, before 1392

Confucianism arrived in Korea during the 300s, and functioned mainly as the basis for education. Male students studied Chinese writing and Chinese literature in order to pass the government civil service examination and become ruling government officials. One notices a striking similarity to early European scholars who had to learn Latin, for anything worth reading was written only in Latin.

Photo 11: men taking the government exam

Very little is written about the women in this far-off time. To get a glimpse of what their life was like, one must look at pre-Confucian marriage, inheritance, and ancestor rituals. There, to our surprise, we find that women fared quite well. We begin with the story of an upper-class girl born around 1356, name unknown.

When the famous General Yi, who later overthrew the ruling king and became founding king of the new dynasty of 1392, went hunting one day, he became very thirsty and looked for a well in a local village. He asked for a cup of water from a maiden who was getting water at the well. As she gave him the cup of water, she put some leaves on top of the water to float there. When General Yi asked why, the maiden replied, "The General must be very thirsty, and if he were to gulp down the water, it might do him harm. With the leaves on top, he will have to

drink slowly." General Yi was quite impressed by this, and visited her father and asked his permission for her hand in marriage."

He had married his first wife when they were teens, and together they had six sons. Now at about age forty, he married Lady Kang as his second wife, and she and her three children lived at a separate estate, most probably with her own birth family.

A few years later, danger threatened the capital, and General Yi was in the midst of it. He sent one of his adult sons to rescue his two families. He immediately galloped off to one estate and then the other, gathering each family. He personally put them on or helped them down from the horses as they fled to safety.

In the story above, women experienced what we might consider normal freedom of movement. For example, the teenage girl was approachable by an adult male, and was free to originate the idea of the willow leaves. As was common at the time, he married her although he had a wife and six sons already. When he dashed to protect them from danger, we see that the wives kept separate households most probably because their inheritances gave them the means to be the head of their own households. Finally, the women escaped on horseback - nothing spectacular, until this freedom was later revoked. Now let us look at the laws that held this life style in place.

Women Share the Inheritance

Inheritance in pre-Confucian times --mainly land and slaves--went to daughters as well as sons, for they enjoyed equal rights and duties. Privately owned land listed both brothers *and sisters* as co-heirs. In the early 1200s a case went before a judge when a father's will gave the major portion of the inheritance to the daughter, and the son received almost nothing. The judge ruled that a parent's devotion is impartial to all their children and therefore it could not have been the father's intention to be generous to one and stingy to the other.

Women and Marriage

Also in pre-Confucian years, plural marriages were common, and these wives were not ranked; a man could simply marry more than one woman, each of equal rank. Having more than one wife was possible because the man did not have to support each one--remember the inheritance--and often a wife continued to live with her birth family or after age thirty, in her own separate home. Census registers of 1333 and 1372 list many women as heads of their own households. [Note that things were not completely equal: women could not have multiple husbands].

Women and Ancestor Memorial Rites

As previously seen, men and women generally maintained free and easy contact, and this freedom carried over to the ancestor memorial rites. Most upper class families already had accepted the Confucian practice of caring for the ancestors, but they carried out these elaborate rites in the custom of their times, and responsibilities rotated equally among husbands, wives, sons and daughters.

The Joining - Korea Chooses Confucianism (the Choson Dynasty, 1392-1910)

In 1392 one dynasty gave way to another, and the new rulers sincerely wanted to revitalize the country--government and populace--by adhering to the "new" Confucian ideology put forth by Chinese scholars of the 11th and 12th centuries. For them, Confucianism was more than a personal choice; it was the best and most civilized way to run not only the government, but the entire country.

The new government immediately began the task of transforming Korea into the society that is still familiar today. Confucian scholar-politicians assumed command and Confucian ideals gradually gained control over the official mode of government. Changes in private family life, however, faced a wall of passive resistance and the struggle continued throughout the next 250 years.

The Erosion of Women's Rights

Did Confucius speak out against women? Can one refer to a specific statute against women in the Confucian doctrine? There is no "Confucian" law, thus there was no "Confucian" law against women. However, Korean officials enacted laws to bring society gradually into line with Confucian doctrine, and one of the standard criteria of Confucianness was patrilineage, the overwhelming importance of the father and the father's line of ancestors. The erosion of women's rights became the flip side of the growing societal importance of the men. It is perhaps an example, over several hundred years, of a good idea taken to unconscionable extremes.

The laws below are listed in chronological order, so that one can notice the gradual tightening of restrictions. However, notice the areas where losses for women are most severe: freedom of movement, inheritance, marriage, and ancestor rituals.

The First Twenty Years: Women lose Freedom of Movement

1392 - Upper-class girls not allowed to associate with boys after age seven.

1400 - Women must not go out in open palanquins.

Women banned from the streets during the day, for "they did not have to look after public affairs."

1404 - Women forbidden to go to Buddhist temples.

1412 - If a woman did go outside, her face and body must be fully covered.

Photos 12,13: women in hoods

The Next Fifty Years: Ranking of Wives, Sons, and Confinement of Women

1413 - Wives are ranked, with a clear distinction between primary and secondary wives. Secondary wives are excluded from the list of kin.

1427 - The Board of Rites tries to force compliance to a sons-only performance of ancestor rites. Even so, few families complied and the deadline had to be extended.

1431 - Women forbidden to go to a shaman's house.

1437 - The law tightens ancestor rites. Now they must be done, not by any son, but by the eldest son. Only if the eldest son was unable, could younger sons, even male cousins, take over. Never women. Still, many families just ignored the law.

1447 - Punishment begins. An entire family could be punished for "trespasses" of women. Women received 100 lashes for a temple visit or a mountain outing.

1450s - Women are confined to the inner rooms.

1462 - Women forbidden to ride horseback.

In Korea, there is a once-a-year sporting contest reserved completely for women: swinging, in a standing position, on a swing suspended from a spectacularly tall frame. The winner, of course, is the one who propels her swing to the highest, even perpendicular, position. There is more to that swing than a simple contest. Legend has it that as Confucian laws confined Korean girls “behind the walls” of their family houses, they began to build their swings higher and higher as one way to peek at the world beyond the walls.

Photo 15-17: girls swinging

The Next 100 Years: Remembrance of Ancestors Siphons off Women’s Inheritance

1471 - Eldest son is officially ranked as preferred heir.

1476 - Earliest extant genealogy records place sons and daughters in the order of their birth.

1554 - Ancestor ritual now clearly forbids wives any authority. They are responsible only for the food.

1555 - Royal edict finally orders the arrest of those who failed to conform to Confucian rules. This shows that, after 150 years, many families did do the proper rituals but still allowed all family members to take part.

1500-1600 Women lose control of their own property. A woman’s inheritance (land, money, slaves) no longer goes to her directly, because she is not responsible for all those rituals. Inheritance from her own family now bypasses her and goes to her husband, for he, as the man, is responsible for the multitude of ancestor rites.

1600s - All power officially goes to eldest son--ritual, economic, rights and duties.

Finally, here in the 1600s, 250 years after it was first announced, the ruling power of the father’s line (patriarchy) held Korean society in its grip. The family name carried from father to son to grandson became all important, and girls were more and more ignored.

1637 - A voice of Opposition

A famous statesman, Kim Yuk wrote:

"A human being, upon being born, is initially only one single being, but it proliferates and its descendants reach thousands of people. Seen from their beginnings, they all came forth from the same origin.

Therefore, the sons of sons are grandsons and have the same family name as their ancestors, and the sons of daughters are also grandsons, even though they have a different family name.

Is someone's love for a daughter's sons different from the love for a son's sons? The natural affection is exactly the same for both. How could I love exclusively my sons and grandsons and not those equally loved by their ancestors?"

[Deuchler, Martina. The Confucian Transformation of Korea, p.166]

His plea was ignored. Women became unimportant in their own right, and were considered mere links between the father's and mother's line.

Nothing Left to Lose Except Their Names

1700 - Women gradually lose all property rights.

1750 - Genealogies list sons and then daughters.

1800 - Genealogies and family registers leave daughters out altogether. They are listed without a name, only as "daughter: married to Mr. X of such-and-such clan."

Photos 18- genealogy record page
19-character for son/daughter
20-page enlarged: son vs. daughter

Finally, in the late 1700 and 1800s, a few women began to leave written records. From them we find that not all women went docilely to their doom!

1830 -A Daughter's Plan

Women were expected to be content with this constrictive life. Here are the words written by a 14 year old girl around 1830.

“Man has his place between heaven and earth as one of the three divisions of creation, and woman shares it with him. Yet she is hidden away in the inner quarters, buried out of sight. When she goes out she covers her head and wears a coat by which her limbs are always bundled. She is not at liberty to go out by herself; she is like a prisoner, unconvicted of any wrong, yet locked up for life.

Yet she has a heart and soul that yearns to break free from every bond and become something more in the world than a mere kitchen drudge. Why should these meaningless restrictions be put upon her?

Must I be imprisoned and be satisfied behind the bars? Must I follow the usual path and be buried from sight forever. Hence my plan was made, and I spoke many times to my parents about it. After a long delay, they agreed. That very day I had a boy’s suit made.” [Then she and her parents traveled all around the peninsula].

Rutt, Richard, trans. “Footprints of the Wildgoose” (Horak hongjo, by Kumwon) in Transactions. Royal Asiatic Society, Korea Branch, v.68, p.57, 1993

Photo 20: boys at school (showing hair & dress similar to girls')

1895 -A Foreigner’s View

“Korean women are very rigidly secluded, perhaps more absolutely so than the women of any other nation. In the capital, a very curious arrangement prevailed. About eight o’clock the great bell tolled a signal for men to retire into their houses, and for women to come out and amuse themselves, and visit their friends.

The pitch dark streets presented the singular spectacle of being tenanted solely by bodies of women with servants carrying lanterns.

At twelve the bell again boomed, women retired, and men were at liberty to go abroad. A lady of high position told me that she had never seen the streets of Seoul by daylight."

"Absolute seclusion is the inflexible rule among the upper classes. The ladies have their own courtyards and apartments, towards which no windows from the men's apartments must look. No allusion must be made by a visitor to the females of the household. Inquiries after their health would be a gross breach of etiquette and politeness requires that they should not be supposed to exist.

Bishop, Isabella Bird. Korea and Her Neighbors. 1895, Reprinted by Yonsei University Press, Seoul, 1970, p.47 & 348

Photo 21: Mr.Foote in open chair
Photo 22: His wife in closed chair

1920 ? - A Poet's Wake-up Call

*A doll as my father's daughter
A doll as my husband's wife
I was a toy for them.
Let Nora go
Gently let her go,
By knocking down the high walls
And throwing open the gates at deep inner quarters,
Let her loose into the air filled with freedom.*

*I am a human being,
Even before being a husband's wife
And before being a mother of children
First of all, I am a human being.*

*I am a human being,
The shackles are already broken
The road to freedom is open*

And the heaven-given power is overflowing.

*Ah! Young girls,
Follow me as you awaken yourself
Rise up and exert your power!
The light of a new day is shining.*

Na Hye-sok. Han'guk yosongsa, v.2, p.378 (in Kim, Yung-Hee, "Women's Issues in 1920s Korea," Korean Culture, Los Angeles, Korean Cultural Center, v.15, summer 1994, p.26)

1941 - One Girl's Tantrum

"I was ten and never had gone to school. Where I lived with my father at the gold mines, there wasn't any school, and Father said it was too far to go to the village. So I had never been to school at all. I don't know if it was because I was a girl or really there was no school nearby.

When I became ten, I insisted that I wanted to go to school. I threw a tantrum! I stamped my feet and cried my eyes out. Finally they separated me from my family so I could go to school. I stayed with relatives.

In order to enroll me, my father invited the Japanese principal to the only restaurant in town, and entertained him with a sumptuous dinner. Of course, I wasn't allowed into the restaurant, so I waited in the courtyard, and the next morning I started school. I guess feeding the principal did the trick.

Kang, Hildi. Under the Black Umbrella; Voices from Colonial Korea, 1910-1945. Ithaca. Cornell University Press, 2001, p.43

Conclusion: A broader View

The seclusion of women began as part of the plan for an orderly and civilized society, but as often happens, plans get out of control. "Separation of function between husband and wife" led to women being kept at home and out of sight. "Proper respect between elder and younger" often forced a young

woman to become a servant under the control of her mother-in-law. "Proper adherence to one's place in the hierarchy" could force a woman to use respectful language to a young (spoiled and spiteful) boy simply because he was of her husband's generation. Confining several generations of women to the "women's quarters" for life often produced jealousy, bickering, or worse. Was there no relief?

To some degree, a woman would receive residual respect from all those who respected her husband. In addition, her children must give respect to her as well as to their father. Honorific language must be used, of course to the father, but also to the mother and even an elder sister. And if a woman lived long enough, she eventually became a lead manager of her entire household. At this point, depending on her own inner personality, she had the power to mitigate, or to pass on, the legacy of Confucian abuse of women.

Photo 23-24: Modern women

In closing, we return to the words of the young woman who opened this discussion: "All these years later, the systematic nature of that differential treatment still grieves me. This look at Korean history so clearly illustrates how women's status can change for the worse through systematic and deliberate fiat. This horrifying narrative proves just how constructed inequality can be, and forces me to question my deeply held assumptions about my own lesser worth as a woman.

Imposed by law during the 14th, 15th and 16th centuries, the legacy lingers on.

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