The Development of Historical Research in Korea

I’m a second generation Zainichi Korean, born to parents who first came to Japan in the 1940s, when Korea was a Japanese colony. Around the time that I was in middle and high school, I began facing ethnic issues. This made me want to study the history of Zainichi Koreans, and in 1970, I studied abroad in South Korea and majored in history.

At this time, South Korea was under the rule of the anti-communist military regime. The topic of how to bring down the military dictatorship was foremost in people’s minds, and research on the Korean independence movement flourished. Although people referred to this as research on the independence movement, it was really only the March 1st Movement of 1919 that was acceptable as a research topic. There were a few reasons for this. Firstly, many of the people who had been involved in the independence movement through the 1930s and 1940s had been socialist. Secondly, although many of the current authorities had participated in the March 1st Movement, they had later become pro-Japanese, making the later independence movement an inconvenient topic for them. And finally, by focusing just on the March 1st Movement, it was also possible to talk about a joint Korean nationalism in spite of the division between north and south. However, access to historical materials was limited at that time, and students couldn’t just freely enter historical archives.

Research into women’s history and into questions of women’s participation in the independence movement was also restricted. The figure of Yoo Gwan-soon who died in prison at the age of 17 is well known, but mostly as a billboard of post-1945 government-manufactured nationalism. Although many women participated in the independence movement, the image of a “pure young woman” sacrificing her life to the movement has proved to be

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1. The term “Zainichi Korean” includes those Korean residents in Japan who immigrated to Japan during the colonial period, as well as their descendants.
2. Yoo Gwan-soon was a student at Ehwa Woman’s Academy (Ehwa Woman’s University today). In 1919, she participated in the March 1st Movement and was arrested. In 1920, she died in Seodaemun Prison in Seoul from torture by Japanese officials.
The standard of research in Korean history up to the present-day has improved considerably since democratization in 1987. In particular, we have been able to overcome the tendency to oversimplify this history as either “control” or “resistance.” Paying attention to gender, we’ve continued to build a comprehensive picture of the lives of people under colonial rule. For example, colonial rule until Total Mobilization[^3] in the late 1930s wasn’t just something operating among the ruling classes at the upper stratum of Korean society. It was also made possible through groups such as the “New Women,” who were educated in Japan, and within the farming villages that made up the backbone of the country. And those people who supported Japanese rule did not do so without inner conflict or ambivalence. But how a person tells the story of their past differs depending on the social context and on their relationship with the listener. Historical research into the conditions of colonial rule has to take these complex factors into account, and one could say that this research is only now beginning to develop.

**The Ambivalence of the “New Women”**

Those people looking to justify Japanese colonial rule typically argue that modernization brought many benefits to Korean women. However, more than 90% of women at the time didn’t attain literacy at school. This was because traditional gender norms combined with the poverty of Koreans under colonial rule made it unlikely that patriarchal norms would accommodate the new education system established under colonial rule.

Even though over 90% of Korean women were illiterate, a small percentage of women were able to receive a modern education and study abroad in Japan. These were the so-called “New Women.” Among these women, there were also those who cooperated with Japanese rule even as they participated in the March 1st Movement and became involved in women’s liberation.

Na Hae-sok, who was greatly influenced by the ideas of Akiko Yosano and the Bluestockings writers[^4], was one of these “New Women.” Seeking sexual equality for both sexes, Na announced her divorce from her husband and defended the sexual desire of women. This was a radical statement of equality at the time, and she was socially ostracized following much public bashing of her ideas. Although there is a tendency in contemporary Korean feminist research to place great emphasis on the role of women in the March 1st Movement[^5], Na’s story provides a valuable perspective on the complexities of colonial rule.

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[^3]: Total Mobilization refers to nation states wartime system in which all factions of the society are mobilized to benefit the war effort.

[^4]: Bluestockings was a literary journal published by Raicho Hiratsuka from 1911-1916. It was written with the goal of liberating women from patriarchal authority, and was Japan’s first radical feminist journal.
phasis on her arguments for sexual equality, it is misguided to evaluate her role just on the basis of her ideas on equality within the modern family system without taking into account her insensitivity to the structural inconsistencies of imperialism and colonial rule.

Hwang Sin-dok was another “New Woman” whose collaboration with the Japanese was not a straightforward thing. While studying in Japan, Hwang became close to Kikue Yamakawa, and briefly embraced socialism. After her return to Korea, she began cooperating with the Japanese, following her belief that a modern education system was necessary for the liberation of Korean women. In this sense, she was not so different from Fusae Ichikawa or Raicho Hiratsuka. Of course, Korean women who drew close to the colonial system had a much harder time than their Japanese counterparts in the postwar period. Hwang eventually joined a right-wing organization as a way of trying to erase her past as a pro-Japanese supporter from public memory.

On the one hand, those women who participated in both the independence movement and in women’s liberation had little choice but to either leave Korea to fight imperialism or to go underground.

On the other hand, there were also those women who put off women’s issues entirely to devote their energies just to the fight against imperial Japan. When you’re under colonial rule, is it not also imperialism to focus exclusively on women’s liberation? So, these early activists had no choice but to incorporate the demand for women’s liberation into the greater struggle for Korean independence. The historical burden of women under colonial rule is to struggle on multiple fronts. Likewise, Korean women too had to search for the parallels between Korean independence and women’s liberation.

The Imposition of a New Family System

One of the first things that the Japanese authorities did under colonial rule was to reform the Korean family system. Early on, the Japanese bureaucracy established a provisional family law (within the 1912 Ordinance on Civil Matters in Korea), which claimed to “respect Korean customs.” In reality, however, the bureaucracy selectively chose those aspects of the family system of one class – the Yangban –

5 Kikue Yamakawa (1890-1980) produced many important commentaries on class issues and discrimination against women, as well as on socialist feminism. After the war, she worked for the protection and social welfare of women and youth laborers as the first director of the Ministry of Labor’s Bureau on Women and Youth.

6 Fusae Ichikawa was a leading activist in the Japanese movement for women’s suffrage. During Total Mobilization, she was a board member of the Greater Japan Patriotic Speech Association (Dai Nippon Houkoku Genron Kai), and in the immediate postwar period she was purged for her role in actively supporting the wartime system. Following the achievement of women’s suffrage, Ichikawa was elected to the National Diet, and would go on to play a large role in mobilizing women’s political participation.

7 Raicho Hiratsuka launched the literary journal, Bluestockings, and was one of the major actors in the prewar feminist movement. Under Total Mobilization, however, she expressed her support for the imperial view of history and for eugenic ideas.

8 The Yangban were the traditional ruling class who monopolized the bureaucracy during the Chosun Dynasty.
that suited their rule. Customs belonging to different classes or different regions, which clashed with these particular norms, were disregarded.

Following this preliminary footwork, the Japanese bureaucracy implemented the full-blown Japanese family system in the 1920s, using the civil code to establish the emperor as the symbolic head of the family system and establishing a gender hierarchy favoring the eldest son. Although Korea already had a patriarchal family system in place, because the clan-based nature of this system didn’t suit Japanese rule, the Japanese authorities reconceived the Korean family as a nuclear family. Although both the Korean and Japanese systems emphasized blood relationships within the family, the Japanese system allowed the custom of adopting a son-in-law into the family. In Korea, it had been common for families without sons to adopt a blood relative into their family. With the 1939 revision of the family law, however, the adoption of the son-in-law was introduced into Korea as part of efforts to create a modern family system.

In 1920, the Ordinance on Civil Matters in Korea was revised to mandate monogamy. Although Korean women suffering under the unstable position of wives in the family system should have welcomed this move, this reform too was a move to “modernize” the family system. Because women were regarded as legal incompetents, most women – regardless of class status or region – were the subjects of gender discrimination. Jeju Island, for example, traditionally had a non-Confucian-based culture. Female shell divers played a central role in the island’s economic activity, and could make their own decisions about marriage (and re-marriage). The new family system based on the norms of the Yangban, traditional ruling class, however, strongly discouraged re-marriage for women. After this system was introduced, the autonomy of the women on Jeju Island was stripped away. Furthermore, since these shell divers were seen as a threat to Japanese ideas about “modern” ways of fishing, they were sent off as laborers to Tsushima and Chiba. This was the colonial modernity experienced by the women of Jeju Island.

Even for those women who received a modern education, the opportunities for employment were so limited that the majority had no choice but to marry and become housewives. The implementation of the “good wife, wise mother” ideology played an important role in stemming their dissatisfaction and providing them with a sense of meaningful purpose within the family.

After Japanese colonial rule ended, the Japanese family system was abandoned. Rather than reverting back to the old system, however, a new “tradition” was established in order to cover up the contradictions of a stratified society. It was during this time that the “tradition” prohibiting marriage with someone having the same surname was established. From this point on, the interests of the women and men who had formerly worked together toward Korean independence parted ways. Although conservative female activists like Hwang Sin-dok had previously felt like they had had no choice but to go along with the strengthening of the patriarchal household, this split formed the beginning of the post-Korean liberation Korean women’s movement.
The Establishment of Licensed Prostitution

Although a system of licensed prostitution was only uniformly established in Korea in 1916, Japanese brothel owners began bringing Japanese women to Korea and operating red-light districts in the foreign settlement areas from 1876 onwards, when the Treaty of Ganghwa opened Korean ports to the Japanese. Since Japanese regulations were implemented unchanged in these districts, you can say that there was de facto licensed prostitution.

In 1916, these regulations were implemented on a nationwide scale. However, while the minimum age at which a woman could legally become a prostitute was 18 in Japan, this age was set to 17 in Korea, and to 16 in Taiwan. Thus, not only were women treated differently based on where they came from, but because the regional regulations also applied to impoverished Japanese women who were sent to Korea and Taiwan, the individual whereabouts of these women often became lost.

Furthermore, because it was stipulated that registered prostitutes were not allowed to marry and that married women could not become licensed prostitutes, women were officially divided into those who could and could not marry. In the colonial period novel “Potato” (Jyagaimo) by Kim Dong-in, an impoverished husband forces his wife into prostitution, and yet this does not damage their marriage. You can say that the Japanese system of licensed prostitution demarcated the vague boundary between marriage and “prostitution.”

In these ways, the reality of colonial rule for women was that they were divided not just on the basis of their traditional social status, but also into those women who could receive an education and those who could not, and those who could marry and those who could not.

Korean Women as Labor Power

While Japanese women were called upon to “give birth and increase [the population]” (umeyo, fuyaseyo), under Total Mobilization, Korean women were called upon to compensate for the agricultural labor shortage following the recruitment of Korean men for forced labor.

Up until that point, the most appropriate place for Korean women was deemed to be inside the extended family. In the immediate aftermath of Korea’s annexation to Japan, there had even been public campaigns celebrating women who were particularly submissive to their parents-in-law. As the labor shortage became severe in the late 1930s, however, colonial authorities focused their attention on the potential labor power of these women. Agriculture was the primary focus of this effort. As Japan began introducing heavy industry into Korea, the emphasis shifted from female to male laborers, and women were pushed out of factories. Around this time, the number of women who had no choice but to work in prostitution rose as well.

Although some Japanese claim that it was under the conditions of Japanese colonial rule that Korean women were able to move from a role of passive submission within the household to a “modern lifestyle,” it was during this time that women took on the primary responsibility for household labor.
Voices from Japan   No.25  March 2011

Pictures of young Korean women mobilized as labor force to support the war effort of the Japanese Empire under the Total Mobilization system printed in a Japanese propaganda magazine.

for agricultural labor and – through Japanese imperial ideology – played a role in the collapse of the Korean family system. The female leaders who championed the idea of “mothers of the empire” played a key role in this regard. The words of these female leaders had far greater success in galvanizing their countrywomen than any orders that could have been given by the Japanese authorities. There is little comparison between the expectations placed on these Korean women with those placed on their Japanese counterparts. The pioneers of Korean education circles, for example, were entirely pro-Japanese. In contrast to Na Hae-seok, who had been publicly ostracized after calling for radical sexual equality, those women after her who received a modern education were called upon not as “good wives and wise mothers,” but as “mothers of the empire.”

De-Imperializing Feminism

About one year ago, I was watching the evening news on television, when there was a segment about an older woman in Kyushu who had spent her life working in waste management. When a burglar entered her house, she turned him over to the police, while admonishing that, “Young people must not live like this.” On Internet bulletin boards, people posted things like “That’s a Meiji-period woman for you! No doubt the burglar was a Zainichi Korean.” Ironically, I had noticed immediately from her name and way of speaking that it was the elder woman who was the Zainichi Korean. It was just a short news segment, but in the same way, the lifestyle of Zainichi Koreans like this woman – people who have had to pull themselves through hard times and endure discrimination from others – slips in and out of public view.

As a Zainichi Korean myself, my antennae went up when I saw this news segment. Most Japanese, however, do not notice the colonialism and historical connotations hidden behind human-interest stories like this one. And so, it is not only that it is hard to see the connections be-
between one’s own circumstances and recent history, but women’s studies and feminism in Japan have likewise lost this kind of intuitive sense.

To be a bit clearer about what I am getting at, it is the indifference to colonialism that bothers me. In the aftermath of Japan’s defeat in 1945, Korea was divided into north and south, causing a war. And today, there is an incredibly harsh system in place in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea – in North Korea. These things aren’t learned about in school and the media fails to take them up. But it looks like ethnic prejudice – which has its roots in colonialism – and even hate crimes are on the rise. You can see it in the way that North Korea is spoken about too. I wonder about how one’s morals and values are compromised when you turn another country into a colony, regardless of how well off that colony might be. But because people have not felt the need to think about the connections between the fundamental meaning of “living” and history, we are now living in a time in which we cannot see our own self-portrait clearly when we look in the mirror. What we see are only distortions.

Fundamentally, I believe that feminism and women’s studies need to take colonialism into account. But recently there have been cases in which Japanese “feminists” have shrugged and said “it has nothing to do with me,” when ethnic Korean high schools have been excluded from the move to make all high schools free. Women’s studies are structured in such a way that people today cannot see the connections between past and present any more – and that also represents an “empire.” In the past, Japanese feminists only saw themselves when the “New Women” fought for “women’s liberation” – they did not see the other issues attached. And even when the issue of the so-called “Comfort Women” is brought up today – although Japan already had a system of licensed prostitution, and there were many Japanese women who became victims of this system because of poverty and sexual discrimination – it is always discussed only as an issue of “those poor Korean women.” Without an awareness of their own past, this kind of patronizing gaze will not change, and Japanese feminists will miss the connections to their own history.

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