

## CHAPTER 3

*“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”*<sup>64</sup>

Through economic development, women in Korea have gained more positions outside the micro sphere, challenging the Confucian tradition that “assigned women to domestic responsibilities as mothers and wives inside the home”<sup>65</sup>. However, “the social structure and cultural norms have not changed sufficiently to support the economic development transition”<sup>66</sup>, as patriarchy continues to be prominent in all micro, meso and macro institutions. Moreover while Australia has a macro sphere emphasis against misogynistic discourse, in Korea, sexism and misogyny in the media and politics has in fact deteriorated due to the male backlash against feminism. Therefore the purpose of this chapter is to examine the significance of patriarchal values and misogyny embedded in Korean culture that continuously demean and marginalise women, as well as feminism.

Feminist movements in Korea have granted women access to the meso and macro levels of society, however according to my interview with Professor Marian Lief Palley, although “in some levels there has been a lot of change”<sup>67</sup>, Confucian patriarchal values are still “lurking in the background as they certainly haven’t gone away”<sup>68</sup>. Thus even with change of laws, “women are still outside of the mainstream”<sup>69</sup>. As this was an interview with only one academic in the subject area, it may be prone to subjective opinion which only shows one perspective on the issue. Therefore the continuation of the prominence of patriarchal values

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<sup>64</sup> Koh, E. (2008). Gender issues and Confucian scriptures: Is Confucianism incompatible with gender equality in South Korea?. *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 71(02), pp.345-362.

<sup>65</sup> Kim, K. (1996). Nationalism: An Advocate of, or a Barrier to, Feminism in South Korea. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 19(1-2), pp.65-74.

<sup>66</sup> Choi, E. (1994). Status of the Family and Motherhood for Korean Women. In: J. Gelb and M. Palley, ed., *Women of Japan and Korea: Continuity and Change*, 1st ed. United States of America: Temple University Press, p.189.

<sup>67</sup> Interview with Professor Palley, See Appendix D

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

perpetuates the “male-dominated authority structure in the family”<sup>70</sup>. This correlated with my questionnaire as 35.92%<sup>71</sup> of the respondents identified their father as the authority figure while only 13.59% responded that it is their mother. Moreover, 50.49% responded that women were ‘always’ more responsible for housework and a further 26.21% answered ‘mostly’. However the questionnaire data was based on a small sample of responses thus may not reflect the experiences of the whole population. Therefore “there has been a cultural lag in the sense that the structure has changed but the functions have not”<sup>72</sup> as feminism has not been sufficient enough to change the micro sphere experiences of women due to traditional Confucian values. Feminist movements were further challenged as the system of hierarchy was reaffirmed after the 2008 World Economic Crisis. Presidential Candidate Ahn Cheol-soo stated that “a majority of our citizens are extremely unhappy about the future and unsure of where we are going”<sup>73</sup>, and as a result men are “looking for a scapegoat for the numerous societal issues and have decided to blame women”<sup>74</sup>. This normalised attitude throughout the micro, meso and macro levels of the society limits feminism’s power in making changes to the societal system. Moreover debate over prostitution after the Preventative Act of Prostitution 2004 created conflict between feminists that believed prostitution was a perpetuation of patriarchy and men’s violence against women’s sexuality and those who argue women’s right to choose prostitution as a way of living. This conflict amongst feminists thus created recognition that “it is impossible to approach the issue of sexuality without understanding the class difference between women”<sup>75</sup>.

Similar to the Australian ANZAC identity, Koran military identity also excludes women from such national identity. However women in Korea continue to be further excluded systematically through the male only military conscription, which “symbolizes achieving

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<sup>70</sup> Choi, E. (1994). Status of the Family and Motherhood for Korean Women. In: J. Gelb and M. Palley, ed., *Women of Japan and Korea: Continuity and Change*, 1st ed. United States of America: Temple University Press, p.193.

<sup>71</sup> Questionnaire – Korea, See Appendix B

<sup>72</sup> Choi, E. (1994). Status of the Family and Motherhood for Korean Women. In: J. Gelb and M. Palley, ed., *Women of Japan and Korea: Continuity and Change*, 1st ed. United States of America: Temple University Press, p.196.

<sup>73</sup> Oslen, H. (2012). Feminist Rebuts Claims Women are Over-empowered in Korea. *KoreaBang*. [online] Available at: <http://www.koreabang.com/2012/stories/feminist-rebuts-claims-women-are-over-empowered-in-korea.html> [Accessed 11 Feb. 2016].

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Lee, M. (2011). Transformations in Gender Structures and the Future of Feminism -A Comparative Study of Korean and American Feminism. *Study of Feminism and Korean Literature*, 26, pp.133-161.

citizenship and true membership in a nation-state”<sup>76</sup>. Feminists claim that it is a system of discrimination against women that does not recognise them as true citizens. Moreover that it is asserting the male dominated nature of the military, thus perpetuating the aggressive and militant masculine identity, as well as patriarchy. Thus feminism in Korea recognises the need to include feminine identity in the military culture as means of “breaking down the patriarchy”<sup>77</sup>. However, it is argued that for both Korean feminists and women in general, “the persistence of a Confucian patriarchal culture into Korea’s present industrialised era is assumed to be a sufficient explanation for the continuation of gendered oppression”. On 11<sup>th</sup> of March 2014, the Constitutional Court reaffirmed “the constitutionality of the military draft law imposing mandatory military service only on able-bodied men.”<sup>78</sup>. Therefore confirmed the systematic exclusion of women within the national identity.

Unlike Australian media that actively rejects sexist attitudes due to emphasis on egalitarianism, the recent murder case in Gangnam station demonstrates the persisting patriarchy and misogyny in Korean media as the devastating murder of a young woman soon turned into a misogynist gender debate. Feminist voices argued that the male suspect’s statement, which notes, “I killed her because women looked down on me”, displays misogyny “in a society where general gender discrimination is tolerated”<sup>79</sup>, moreover a “symbolic example of what happens in a misogynistic society”<sup>80</sup>. However opposing responses followed as men started protesting that, identifying the murder as an act of misogyny is “aggravating hatred against men”<sup>81</sup> that results in “all men being treated a potential criminals”<sup>82</sup>. Moreover “attempts to seek the motive of the murder in the way the

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<sup>76</sup> Kwon, I. (2000). A Feminist Exploration of Military Conscription: The Gendering of the Connections Between Nationalism, Militarism and Citizenship in South Korea. *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 3(1), pp.26-54.

<sup>77</sup> Ko, J. (2011). Military and Gender: Confronting the Inequality and Violence of Military System through Feminism. *Journal of Female Theory*, 24, pp.10-38.

<sup>78</sup> Kim, C. (2014). Constitutional Court Rules Military Service Mandatory Only For Men. *KoreaBang*. [online] Available at: <http://www.koreabang.com/2014/stories/constitutional-court-rules-military-service-mandatory-only-for-men.html> [Accessed 13 Feb. 2016]

<sup>79</sup> Gangnam murder sparks frank discussion on misogyny in South Korea. (2016). [Blog] LiveJournal: ONTD Political. Available at: <http://ontd-political.livejournal.com/11407618.html> [Accessed 3 Jun. 2016].

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Yoon, J. (2016). Exit 10 Gangnam Station, misogyny debate while commemoration continues. *Money Today*. [online] Available at: <http://news.mt.co.kr/mtview.php?no=2016052216090983087&type=1> [Accessed 3 Jun. 2016].

<sup>82</sup> Gangnam murder sparks frank discussion on misogyny in South Korea. (2016). [Blog] LiveJournal: ONTD Political. Available at: <http://ontd-political.livejournal.com/11407618.html> [Accessed 3 Jun. 2016].