

## 11

## EAST ASIA

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The feminist movements in East Asia emerged at challenging periods in the histories of each country. Foreign incursions brought news of the global women's rights movements, disrupting centuries-old power hierarchies in East Asia. In the face of the aggressive expansionism emanating from Europe and the United States, every aspect of East Asian society, economics, and politics was in flux, including entrenched systems of governance and social order. In 1868, Japan's Meiji era (1868–1912) began with the restoration of the emperor's power and the rapid internationalization of the country that followed; China's Qing dynasty (1644–1911) led by the Manchu imperial line slowly crumbled, and from within its ruins emerged Asia's first republic in 1911; five centuries of the Choson dynasty (1392–1910) ended with Japan's colonization of Korea. *Every* single person's relationship to their leaders and roles within their families were changing, not just women's. Subjects became citizens, farmers became soldiers, women became factory workers, and students became global travelers. Neologisms emerged, often from Japan, to describe the new political and relational formations. The country became known as a "nation-family" (*kokka*, *guojia*, and *kukka* in Japanese, Chinese, and Korean), implicating women directly in a globally oriented notion of collective identity. Various forms of limited suffrage challenged the transfer of power via hereditary lineage. Industrialization and urbanization created demand for labor – both male and female – that would unseat parental control and increasingly put wages directly in the hands of youth. New forms of mobility with trains, steamships, and bicycles broadened travel experience to women. To ordinary people around the East Asian region, political and economic power became visible as a site of possible contestation. Amid all this change, "the woman problem" achieved prominence. Reformers and conservatives alike debated the challenges women's status posed for the nation. Women were major voices in this debate.

This context provided space for a reconfiguration of foundational gender norms, but feminist ideals were often subsumed by nationalism and rationalized through rhetoric of national strengthening or economic modernization. Women's rights advocates persuaded power holders in both the public and private realms, within families and institutions, that women's advancement in education and employment in industry was good for the nation. Broader philosophical debates about natural rights, or an individual's innate right to liberty and equality, also circulated. These Enlightenment values challenged centuries-old hierarchies of Confucianism in all three countries where men dominated women and elders dominated youth. But the struggle for

survival of the “nation–family” faced with foreign imperialism and colonialism became the most widely accepted rationale to garner support for women’s liberation in East Asia.

Japan would transform the fastest. Ideas and structures generated there became the models that Korean and Chinese reformers adapted to their own versions of modernity. Japanese translations of Western texts were the basis for most early Korean and Chinese translations – including those discussing women’s rights. By the turn of the century, Chinese and Korean reformers, rebels, and feminists were spending extended periods of time in the vibrant cities of Tokyo and Yokohama witnessing the results of the previous two decades of reform. Japan provided a model for the whole of East Asia.<sup>1</sup> Reforming the relations between men and women and the connection between the family and the state were central to these dramatic shifts.

Democratization of educational opportunities was an important early driver of broader social and political change in Japan. In 1871, the Meiji government instituted 16 months compulsory primary schooling for both boys and girls.<sup>2</sup> Policy makers argued that educated women would be better mothers and therefore better teachers to their children – a classic Confucian rationale. The high moral value placed on mothers’ roles as teachers helped break barriers for women’s entry into post–primary education. Women’s secondary and higher education expanded from the 1880s with a focus on teacher training. Employment opportunities for women flowed as well, since the new primary schools needed female teachers. Industrialization provided another justification for girls and women’s education – an educated population was deemed vital to a modernizing economy. Japan’s industry was hungry for modern workers including women.<sup>3</sup> While educating women was linked directly to the Japanese government’s nation–building program, once armed with literacy, women set about promoting their rights in the realms of politics, law, and employment. From the turn of the nineteenth century into the twentieth century, numerous women’s rights groups and publications flourished.

The Meiji government’s education initiatives also provided opportunities for women elsewhere in East Asia, even while their own governments lagged behind. Women from China and Korea soon traveled to Japan to study, gaining experience in both public and private Japanese women’s colleges. These institutions were crucial in building women’s solidarity across the three countries as leading feminists from Korea and China often had benefited from a period of study in Japan.

This nascent pan–East Asian feminist connection was soon disrupted by the surge in nationalism and either suspicion of, or direct opposition to, Japan’s rise. Japan’s early and successful modernization helped propel a war with China in 1894, forced subjugation of Korea in 1910, and resulted in a full–scale invasion of China from 1932–1945. Conversations between feminists across national borders became fraught, and centuries of rich cultural exchange, trade, and communication fractured. Pan–East Asian feminist solidarity still occurred in secret among socialists and pacifists, but it was tempered by the threat to national survival posed by Japan. Korean or Chinese feminist communication with Japanese women could be misconstrued as colluding with the colonizer or the enemy. The nation–building rationale that had justified the expansion in women’s rights to the “nation–family” was less convincing in the context of this existential threat. Through the searing national experiences of war and revolution, defeat and victory, disgrace and triumph, the feminist movements of China, Japan, and Korea would go their separate ways over the course of the twentieth century – responding in their distinct modes to the challenges of patriarchy and inequality.

### **Japanese feminists battle to be heard and struggle against backlash**

The transformation of Japan’s gender norms during the Meiji era was dramatic. During the previous Tokugawa era, women were expected to be obedient to their menfolk, within the view that women were inherently lesser than men. There was no legitimate space for women

in the public arena, and while women outside of the elite samurai class of hereditary military and political power had more scope for employment beyond the domestic sphere, they were still constrained by an overarching male-dominant system. The Meiji reformers ruptured this status quo – not least through advocating for compulsory co-education but also through their engagement with newly circulating ideas that the status of a nation’s women was a marker of its level of civilization. While Western colonists and economic imperialists frequently used this idea to justify their military-enforced takeover of other countries and economies, the notion gained considerable traction in Japan among the Meiji reformers. In advancing Japan’s international standing, women’s status came under close scrutiny.<sup>4</sup> Alongside education reforms, an 1872 proclamation prohibited the buying and selling of daughters into prostitution and other forms of slavery. But these early changes were not designed to encourage women to participate in transforming their nation or its gender norms. Japanese men initially sought to achieve markers of civilization they expected would allow them more effective engagement with American and European men. Nonetheless, feminist ideas took root over the coming years.

An Imperial Constitution adopted in 1889 with a representative parliament and greater popular input into national debates framed individuals as legitimate contributors to public debate while ignoring calls for women’s political rights altogether. But discussion about women’s status during the last three decades of the nineteenth century was connected directly to foundational principles informing the emerging Japanese nation-state. Marnie Anderson explains:

Discussions about women allowed the Japanese to feel as though they were moving toward a level of civilization on par with the West, while at the same time preserving their unique traditions. Indeed, the particular virtues of Japanese women are a recurring theme throughout the Meiji discussions.<sup>5</sup>

The nation provided space in which women’s status relative to men was open for discussion.

In 1890 women aspirants for national political participation waged protests about two new pieces of legislation. The Association and Political Meetings Law barred women from joining political parties and another excluded women from attending the new Japanese parliament, the Diet, even as gallery observers. Called the Representatives of Concerned Women (Yūshi fujin sōdai), the group was composed of educated women with strong links to reformist men. They were also active in the Tokyo Women’s Reform Society (Tōkyō fujin kyōfūkai), which advocated for the abolition of prostitution, along with temperance and monogamy. These were all key concerns of the global Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), and the Reform Society eventually became the WCTU’s Japanese branch. Their protests against the prohibition on women entering the parliamentary gallery were ultimately successful, but they were unable to overturn the ban on women joining political parties. Denied formal citizenship, Anderson argues these women were nonetheless “enacting citizenship.”<sup>6</sup>

One of the women leading this wave of activism was the writer Shimizu Toyoko (1868–1933). Among Japan’s first professional female journalists, she argued that unless the law was overturned, women were effectively “non-persons” (*hajjin*).<sup>7</sup> Shimizu claimed that women are entitled to natural rights just like men. Managing multiple calls on their time, women would become better mothers if they were directly involved in politics. Asserting that “women are humans,” Shimizu also argued that “women are citizens too.”<sup>8</sup> Her logic ran that all the nation’s citizens should be drawn into the public sphere to benefit the nation, not just the menfolk. Shimizu sought to show her readers that the laws were not only unjust, but they were also foolish.

Socialist feminist Fukuda Hideko (1865–1927) also saw women’s rights and political involvement as integral to strengthening the nation.<sup>9</sup> Fukuda was active in the People’s Rights

Movement in the 1880s, having been inspired by the stirring public speeches of Kishida Toshiko (1863–1901), whose argument for equal rights was a response to the irrational discrimination of women based on physical differences.<sup>10</sup> Fukuda created a women’s group in her hometown in western Japan to discuss feminist ideas and started a girls’ school but was soon drawn to more radical, especially anti-imperialist, political activism in Tokyo. In 1885, she was involved in a plot to sail to Korea with explosives to disrupt the Sino-Japanese accord and support the Korean independence movement. She was imprisoned for treason but released as part of an 1889 prisoner amnesty to celebrate the promulgation of the Meiji Constitution. This experience furthered Fukuda’s resolve to work for women’s education and labor rights, and by 1900 she had moved away from her liberal nationalist views and strongly identified with socialist principles. Fukuda was the first woman to publish an autobiography in modern Japan. *My Life So Far* (*Warawa no Hanseiga*) appeared in 1904 and described her development as a woman and an activist. She wrote of her concerns about the gendered aspects of the socialist movement, as well as the exploitation of working-class women.<sup>11</sup>

Not all women were persuaded of the value of winning rights to participate in the Meiji political system. Anarcho-socialist Kanno Sugako (1881–1911) martyred herself to destroy the “Emperor System” that she deduced perpetuated women’s slave-like status under patriarchy. The Meiji government promoted the ideal woman as a “good wife and wise mother” (*ryōsai kenbo*), reaffirming their domestic and maternal roles in the state rather than their public citizenship. Kanno saw this maxim as deceptive and oppressive because it positioned women as men’s slaves and confirmed economic dependency.<sup>12</sup> It hypocritically demanded that only women be chaste. She declared that men “would do well to look to their own chastity and become ‘good husbands and wise fathers’ . . . before harping on chastity and virtue just for women.”<sup>13</sup> As a rape survivor, she found these double standards particularly galling. Emulating Russia’s Sophia Perovskaya, Kanno saw regicide as the solution. Her anarchist connections and the content of her journal, *Jiyū Shisō* (*Free Thought*), led to Kanno’s imprisonment and martyrdom.<sup>14</sup>

Other feminists sought engagement with the status quo political system and struggled for reform within it. This path would lead many women into complex and sometimes contradictory relationships with the increasingly militaristic and anti-democratic government of the 1930s and 1940s. In 1920, stalwart anti-militarist feminist Ichikawa Fusae (1893–1981) and Hiratsuka Raichō (1886–1971) formed the New Women’s Association (Shin Fujin Kyōkai, NWA) to focus on women’s suffrage, rights, and welfare.<sup>15</sup> Their association campaigned to overturn the same laws that Shimizu had struggled against – the ban on women’s participation in party politics – but the 1922 revisions only granted them the right to attend political public meetings.<sup>16</sup> In 1925 universal male suffrage was granted – removing economic qualifications for male voters – but women’s political rights were denied.<sup>17</sup>

Their political activism was coupled with publishing activism. Hiratsuka distinguished herself by establishing Japan’s first all-women literary magazine in 1911, *Seitō* (*Bluestocking*) – a direct reference to the eighteenth-century European Blue Stockings Society of literary women. *Seitō* published articles on sexuality, chastity, and abortion as well as women’s political status and employment conditions. An essay by Fukuda Hideko in 1913 advocating socialism as the solution for women’s liberation caused the entire issue to be banned. The journal was a major conduit for Western feminist ideas with translations of Ellen Key, Olive Schreiner, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, J. S. Mill, and Henrik Ibsen.<sup>18</sup> These texts were the basis for later Chinese and Korean translations. Like Kanno, Hiratsuka promoted a fresh alternative icon, the New Woman – a global model of the independent modernity possible for women. The New Woman’s consumer-oriented counterpart, the Modern Girl, resonated with the rising power of capitalism of the industrializing nation in the 1920s and beyond.<sup>19</sup>

The state's persistent preoccupation with women as mothers presented some scope for feminists to push for political and social change. The Meiji motherhood discourse contended that women's special roles as mothers required full suffrage rights to best promote children's well-being; women's education and employment needed to be improved so that family life would be improved. In the "motherhood debates" of the 1920s and 1930s, feminists like Ichikawa and Hiratsuka campaigned for state financial support for mothers so they were able to care for their children and be freed of the burden of employment outside the home.<sup>20</sup> Others argued that women should not be reduced to "mothers" – rather, motherhood was but one role among many that women held. For these feminists, the goal was financial independence and the right to self-determination, equal with men, regardless of reproductive status.<sup>21</sup> Prominent among those who adopted this latter line was mother of 13 children, poet, and educator Yosano Akiko (1878–1942).

Yosano was a founding sponsor and contributor to *Seitō* and became one of the most famous and controversial female poets of her generation for her mastery of modern poetic forms and her complex and contradictory combination of feminism, pacifism, and militaristic nationalism.<sup>22</sup> Yosano did not support state financing of mothers but instead argued that women should strive for complete independence from men and the state even while they are mothers or not have children at all. Her life exemplifies the complex political positions many feminists faced with Japan's militarized aggression during the first half of the century. She achieved early notoriety in 1904 with a poem titled "Thou Shalt Not Die" in which she exhorted her brother not to sacrifice himself for the emperor in the Russo-Japanese War. The poem, put to music, became an anti-war protest song. However, from the early 1930s, during the Japanese Imperial Army's expansion into China, Yosano was writing nationalistic poems in support of the war, the emperor, and his troops.

In August 1945, Japan lay in ruins after sustained Allied bombing and the dropping of the atomic bombs. Ichikawa Fusae swung into action, searching for survivors of the prewar Women's Suffrage League to establish the Women's Committee on Postwar Policy. Women's suffrage was also discussed at the first meeting of the postwar Japanese cabinet, but before the government could announce women's impending suffrage, General Douglas MacArthur, Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers (SCAP), proclaimed full civil rights for all Japanese citizens, including women. Ichikawa and other feminists had wanted acknowledgement of their own hard work in achieving Japanese women's right to vote.<sup>23</sup> In the first postwar election, 39 women were elected to the Diet, Japan's national parliament. Yet by the 2010s, the percentage of women at the national level of Japanese politics was one of the lowest in the industrialized world, and the number of women Diet members has not risen significantly above the landmark 1946 election.

The Anti-Prostitution Law (*Baishun bōshi hō*) of 1956, which banned prostitution and licensed brothels, was a major outcome of the feminist movement in the postwar decades. Extreme poverty and the postwar occupation, which utilized the prewar "comfort women" system for the "entertainment" of foreign military personnel, had contributed to a large increase in prostitution.<sup>24</sup> Debate raged: did prostitution violate women's fundamental rights or result from dire social conditions driving women into sex work? Despite the law, the sex industry continued by exploiting legal loopholes and evolving its business practices.<sup>25</sup>

In the 1970s a grassroots feminist movement, Women's Lib (*Ūman Ribū*), emerged from the 1960s student protests.<sup>26</sup> It was led by women who were anti-war, anti-pollution, and disappointed by the entrenched sexism of their male colleagues in the left. Tanaka Mitsu's 1970 manifesto, "Liberation from the toilet" (*Benjo kara no kaihō*), argued that men treated women as receptacles for their bodily fluids and that women's sexuality was suppressed by patriarchy and capitalism.<sup>27</sup> The manifesto was the first postwar text to refer to "comfort women" – the system

of military sexual slavery during World War II.<sup>28</sup> It started the discussion of how Japanese women were complicit in Japan's imperialist past and the oppression of other Asian women. Japan's Women's Lib provided the foundations for women's studies, the development of a "herstory" narrative, and the impetus for challenging embedded misogyny and structural sexism in Japanese society and culture.<sup>29</sup>

Despite the introduction of the Equal Employment Opportunity Law (*Danjo koyō kikai kintō hō*) in 1986 and the Basic Law for Gender Equality (*Danjo kyōdō sankaku kihonhō*) in 1999, discrimination and inequality in the workplace remains a persistent problem. These laws were designed to help women in employment but resulted in a backlash against gender equality. Feminists were accused of being influenced by communism and trying to destroy Japan.<sup>30</sup> In the early 2000s, "gender bashing" and anti-feminist aggression emanated from conservative social movements. In 2005, feminist intellectual Ueno Chizuko's planned speech at a Tokyo human rights seminar was cancelled because the government feared she might use the term "gender free" (*jendā furī*) – a term coined by non-feminists loosely meaning "freedom from gender roles."<sup>31</sup>

Highlighting the endemic and systemic nature of sexual violence in Japanese society has been a major focus of the feminist movement at the turn of the twentieth century into the twenty-first century. The Women's International War Crimes Tribunal on Japan's Military Sexual Slavery was held in Tokyo in 2000. It was jointly organized by the Violence Against Women in War Network (VAWW-NET Japan) and the Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Sexual Slavery by Japan. The tribunal brought together the survivors of Japan's military sexual slavery in Asia to give testimony, as well as international legal experts, scholars, and activists. Since the postwar International Military Tribunal of the Far East (1946–1948) refused to address the issue of sexual slavery, the 2000 tribunal put a large amount of historical documentation on the record. There were prosecution teams from China, East Timor, Indonesia, Japan, the Netherlands, the Philippines, and Taiwan, as well as North and South Korea. Perpetrator testimony by two Japanese veterans who had served in China was also included. Emperor Hirohito (1901–1989), was found guilty of crimes against humanity. Ueno Chizuko says that the tribunal was an achievement of international feminism.<sup>32</sup> The issue remains unresolved at the political, and to some extent societal, level and continues to be present in diplomatic tensions in East Asia.

The new generation of Japanese feminists are visible in public and media spaces, leading anti-nuclear protests, weekly protests at the Prime Minister's Office against the State Secrets Bill in 2015, and anti-base protests in Okinawa in 2016 after the murder of a local woman by an American serviceman. Joining the global #MeToo movement, Japanese women have protested in public about sexual abuse, harassment, and justice for rape victims. Since 2019, when a succession of sexual assault court cases resulted in not guilty verdicts, there have been monthly demonstrations nationwide called Flower Demos (*furawā demo*). Queer and lesbian feminists have also emerged demanding equal rights and challenging gender norms. It would be naïve to assume the feminist movement is unified, but it is clear that a diverse array of feminisms currently coexist and thrive in Japan.

### China's feminists mediating republicanism and socialism

Chastened by the Chinese navy's defeat against Japan in 1895, a group of reformers advocated large-scale social change – including the position of women. The leaders, Kang Youwei (1858–1927) and Liang Qichao (1873–1929), began by reforming their own families by refusing to bind their daughters' feet and refusing to marry their sons to footbound women.<sup>33</sup> Their reform program linked footbinding with women's ignorance even though their daughters were extremely well educated. Together these contributed to the nation's weakness.<sup>34</sup>

Strong, healthy, and well-educated women would make better mothers and produce sons able to rebuild the Chinese nation. Japan's Meiji reformers had made the same argument 30 years earlier, and the results were clear in Japan's naval victory. The benefits for women were immediate as footbinding rapidly declined among elites and as grown women unbound their feet and embraced new opportunities for schooling outside the home. Like the women of Japan, they did not remain trapped by the notion that their liberation was useful only to strengthen their nation.

Xue Shaohui (1866–1911), a prolific writer, translator, poet and educator, flourished within this fin-de-siècle reform push. Along with the wives and daughters of Kang and Liang, she published extensively on prohibiting footbinding and furthering women's education.<sup>35</sup> Xue is one of China's earliest feminists, described as seeking to “unite women of all nations in an effort to create a just and harmonious new world.”<sup>36</sup> She organized the first women's association (Nüxue hui – the Women's Study Society, est. 1897), published the first journal for Chinese women (*Nüxue bao* – *Chinese Girl's Progress*, est. 1898), and started the first Chinese-run school for girls (est. 1898). She advocated that rather than opting for total westernization or for a combination of “Chinese essence with Western techniques,” it was possible to create new people (*xinmin*). This new human would emerge by expanding female nurturing qualities implicit in “woman's *dao*” (*fudao*). The principle could be manifested in one's family, in the public sphere, and ultimately in the whole world.<sup>37</sup>

To facilitate sharing of international ideas, Xue published *Biographies of Exemplary Foreign Women* (*Waiguo lienü zhuan*) in 1906. Her title's use of *lienü* invokes Liu Xiang's (79–8 BCE) *Biographies of Exemplary Women* (*Lienü zhuan*) – the core text for women's education for centuries. Liu provided models of feminine virtue through biographies that variously encouraged wives to counsel wayward husbands and sons while praising women's suicide in defense of chastity.<sup>38</sup> Xue's modernization of this genre revealed that Western women had transformed their world by creating spaces in which women's contributions were possible despite men's dominance. Expanding women's educational opportunities was central to her text. Intellectual women featured prominently in her arguments that women's education should benefit society beyond the domestic sphere.<sup>39</sup> Marie-Jeanne Roland (1754–1793), for example, featured in the public discussions of heroic women effecting dramatic political change in Europe.

In the first decade of the twentieth century, a powerful new concept emerged that would reconfigure the connection between women and the nation by conceptualizing “women as a collective” – *nüjie* (lit. “woman's world”). This term recognized women's collective oppression and “signified not only a new connection drawn between women and the Chinese nation but also the relationship between women's past and the present, the gendered social relations between men and women. . . , the relationship between women and the modernizing world.”<sup>40</sup> Publisher and writer Chen Xiefen (1883–1923) was among the first to circulate the term in her journal *Nüxue bao* (*Journal of Women's Studies*, est. 1902–1903). But it was a short book by a male reformer that increased its use. Jin Tianhe's (1874–1947) 1903 *Nüjie zhong* (lit. “a warning bell for the women's world,” or *The Women's Bell*) called for the overthrow of the Qing. Women's rights were crucial to the reinvigoration of the Chinese nation that would emerge afterward. Jin's treatise encapsulated all the key ideas circulating about women's role in society – free-choice love marriages, a broad education, travel, economic productivity, suffrage, and participation in national affairs.<sup>41</sup> But the feminists who promoted the idea of a *nüjie* were attuned to its radical potential for identifying women as a sex, united in their common oppression, and not only as a group to be uplifted to benefit the nation. They adapted the term and spoke of “women's world revolution” (*nüjie geming*) and adopted a global consciousness of solidarity with other women by calling for the importation of “new civilization of *nüjie* from all nations.”<sup>42</sup> To these

feminists, *nijie* enabled them to identify *men* as the cause of women's subjection, not women's backwardness or ignorance.

Among those to take up the challenge to lead the Chinese *nijie* was the cross-dressing Qiu Jin (1875–1907). Executed for her anti-Qing activism, she has been heralded as a feminist and nationalist martyr since. Typical of her class, she received an excellent education in literature, history, and philosophy – but rather uniquely she also trained in martial arts. Abandoning an unhappy marriage in 1904, she left to study in Tokyo at the Jissen Women's School. Many of the Chinese women who joined the school split their time between studying home-making and making revolution. Qiu Jin's friends in Japan include the forerunners of China's feminist movement – the suffragists Tang Qunying (1871–1937) and Lin Zongsu (1878–1944), anarchist He Zhen (ca 1884–ca 1920), and the aforementioned journalist Chen Xiefen.

Qiu Jin returned to China to establish a girls' school with a modern curriculum of science, foreign languages, physical education, and military training. Many of her students unbound their feet in order to participate in this training, and the school became the base for an anti-Qing women's army. The campaign to overthrow the Qing and forge a republic promised space for citizenship that did not discriminate on the basis of sex. But women's rights to equal citizenship would be secured through embracing their willingness to bear the duty of citizens to give their lives for the republic. Military duty was paired with political and legal rights in the minds of many feminists.<sup>43</sup> Qiu's capture and execution garnered enormous publicity for both the anti-Qing cause and women's demands for equality.

Tang, Lin, and Chen also returned to China to overthrow the Qing, but their efforts focused on the political and ideological. All three were involved in women's journals and newspapers that promoted women's deeper engagement with politics and social change. The feminist organizations of these years envisioned “women's inclusion in all areas of social and political life” and the radical transformation of “exclusionary structures.”<sup>44</sup> A number of their concerns were particular to Chinese women. China's feminists sought a ban on the buying and selling of slaves and servant girls, implementation of monogamy via a ban on concubinage, and strengthened programs to prohibit footbinding, as well as prohibitions on men's right to divorce women without adequate reason and the promotion of free-choice marriages. They also wanted greater enforcement of laws banning prostitution.<sup>45</sup> At this point, almost all of China's feminists were educated women for whom concubines and prostitutes were a significant threat to their domestic power. Class bias is evident in these early feminist manifestos. One group in 1920 tried, unsuccessfully, to ban concubines from their association to prevent the degradation of its moral status.<sup>46</sup>

The returnees from Japan – Tang, Lin, and Chen – were key leaders of a variety of women's suffrage groups pressuring the republican government, once it was installed in 1912, to include women as equal citizens alongside men. Although this provision had been promised pre-revolution, conservative forces rallied once the republic was formed. The women's hopes for sex equality were dashed in 1912 and 1913 as newly installed legislators told the women to “go and get educated” before asking for political rights. The women's suffragists were acutely aware of the protests taking place globally and hosted Carrie Chapman Catt on her tour of Asia. Their goal was to present to male political leaders the idea that sex equality was an inevitable global trend. In publishing translations of key texts by feminists from all around the world, China's feminists felt connected to Sweden, Germany, France, Britain, and the United States. They saw their struggle as crossing national borders even as the men around them regarded the program for women's advancement in terms of the national interest.

The failure of the new republic's legislators to embed women's enfranchisement in the constitution made it quite evident that the struggle was no longer against the Qing; men within their own parties and networks were the blocks to women's progress. Lin and Tang, like Qiu



Jin, had trained in military tactics and were not averse to violence. In March of 1912, frustrated at repeated rejection of their calls for constitutional sex equality, they surrounded the parliament in Nanjing in a noisy protest. Smashing windows, occupying the chambers, and beating up security guards, the suffragists made it abundantly clear that they meant business. As one put it: “We know how to make bombs and we know how to throw them.”<sup>47</sup> Tang took their campaign to Beijing in August to the founding meeting of the Nationalist Party only to be rejected again. Again, they waged a noisy protest that culminated in Tang hitting a key leader, Song Jiaoren, on the face with her fan in front of a thousand-odd members, reporters, and dignitaries.<sup>48</sup> A few years later, China’s suffragists returned to the public stage and made solid gains in the various provincial level constitutions through new organizations – the United Woman’s Associations (UWA – Nüjie lianhehui). The UWAs were able to capitalize on the reinvigorated reformist spirit known as the May Fourth New Culture Movement of 1915–1919. Larger numbers of younger men joined with their sisters and mothers to propel dramatic social reform. Solving “the woman problem” was crucial. The results were soon evident – Guangdong and Zhejiang provincial constitutions included sex equality provision in 1921, Hunan in 1922, and Sichuan in 1923. Women began to exercise their political ambitions.

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP), formed in 1921, imported the debates that had earlier raged in Europe about the value of a sex-based struggle independent of a class-based struggle. Sharp divisions within the women’s movement emerged. The anarchist He Zhen had presaged these divisions in her writing about women’s rights while she was studying and publishing in Japan. Like the socialist-feminists of the 1920s, she was skeptical of feminists’ suffrage goals, arguing that it did not challenge the fundamental problems of women’s subordination. Focusing on the role of sex in perpetuating inequality, she challenged capitalism, Chinese political economy, and patriarchy within her advocacy of women’s liberation. He Zhen’s view of the struggle for women’s liberation was that it should not be subordinate to any other agendas – nationalist, capitalist, or ethnic. Rather, it was the start of the abolition of the state and private property and the end of social hierarchies.<sup>49</sup> Male advocates of women’s rights, she insisted, regarded women as their property. For such men, improving women’s status was designed to enhance Chinese men’s international status: namely “men’s pursuit of self-distinction the name of women’s liberation.”<sup>50</sup>

She theorized that “woman” was a “transhistorical global category – not of subjective identity but of structured unequal social relations.”<sup>51</sup> This view differs dramatically from Xue Shaohui’s notion of the uniquely female “women’s *dao*” presented only a few years prior. He Zhen’s concept of *nannü* (man and woman; male/female) saw gender as implicated in power hierarchies. *Nannü* was the primordial social class and one that was embedded in the global political economy and manifest in families, workplaces, and institutions alongside other forms of economic classes. He Zhen saw the totality of the structures that had trapped women in unequal social relations – including the realms of labor, law, family, ritual, and scholarship. In contrast to later socialist-feminists, He Zhen presented *nannü* and *shengji* (livelihood) as conceptual keys for understanding the “always-already gendered time-space of social activity, production and life.”<sup>52</sup> Ultimately, she called for the emergence of a society in which there is no longer a need for distinctions between men and women.

As knowledge about socialism spread during the late 1910s and 1920s, European notions of the connection between sex and class were imported along with disdain for “bourgeois feminism.” For these women, the true path to women’s liberation was through class struggle. Bourgeois feminists could be useful to this cause by providing access to larger numbers of politically minded women, but ultimately their programs were flawed. Xiang Jingyu (1895–1928) is foremost among these CCP activists. She regarded parliaments as pigsties in which women

Proof

politicians would simply wallow alongside men while fundamental structures of social inequality remain unchanged. Socialist-feminists began working closely with urban factory women, but from 1927, once the CCP was forced into rural areas after their split with the Nationalist Party, they also mobilized women in farms and small towns. Improving literacy and raising class consciousness was their key goal for “women’s work.”<sup>53</sup>

The Nationalist Party liberal feminists helped secure the new 1931 Civil Codes, which recognized

women and men as individual civil persons, equal in status, rights and obligations. In an unprecedented set of legal breakthroughs, daughters obtained equal rights to inherit their fathers’ property, wives gained mostly equal rights to marry and divorce, and mothers and fathers shared nearly equal rights over their children.<sup>54</sup>

Dramatic changes to the moral order around sexual fidelity had occurred in the New Culture years, making concubinage and men’s visits to brothels problematic, rather than accepted norms. Chastity was no longer only a female responsibility.<sup>55</sup>

During the long, hard years fighting Japan’s military invasion (1932–1945), feminists won provisions for a 10% minimum quota for women in the legislature<sup>56</sup> and engaged in soldiering alongside men at the front lines, but more often in medical, logistical, and communication units, again asserting women’s embracing of rights *and duties* as full citizens. But also, women, they argued, had to participate in the military struggle so that they could liberate themselves from centuries of oppression.<sup>57</sup>

In 1949, the CCP’s victory and the formation of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) included the official logic that the CCP had already granted women equality, obviating the need for a feminist movement. Sex equality was enshrined in land reform, marriage laws, and employment laws; socialism had solved the woman problem, in the male leadership’s view. Any lingering inequalities women experienced would be overcome once fundamental class struggles were resolved. Women’s struggles came second to the fundamental struggles between various economic classes – peasants and workers against bourgeoisie and capitalists. The leading women’s rights activists in the PRC became “state feminists” variously activating women for CCP programs and advocating for their rights where possible.<sup>58</sup> Even after the liberalization of the economy and society from the 1980s, China’s state feminists had to work within the official position that the key to advancing women’s status lay in the opening of the economy to international and domestic competition through “market socialism.” Women-specific policy was focused on implementing the One Child Family policy – “women’s work” meant monitoring fertility. Ancient notions that only sons can perpetuate the family line led those intent on having sons to variously abort female fetuses, leave girl babies unregistered, or commit female infanticide.<sup>59</sup> The result of the One Child Family policy’s devastating femicide was a dramatic disruption to natural sex ratios at birth, leaving large disparities between numbers of men and women in adulthood.

Among the broader population, “feminism” was largely rejected as a Western, bourgeois movement irrelevant to socialism and “traditional Chinese values.” In the twenty-first century, knowledge of international events, global travel and study, and the expansion of women’s studies programs in Chinese universities made young women acutely aware that they faced discrimination on a daily basis in employment, personal safety, and career progression. Grass-roots movements that explicitly identify as “feminists” reemerged and began to wage public campaigns around sexual violence, LBGTQI+ concerns, sexual harassment, and equality of opportunity.<sup>60</sup>

Proof

## Korean feminism – strengthening and rejuvenating

Korean feminism evolved in interaction with foreign and domestic pressures to modernize the centuries-old Choson dynasty, four decades of Japanese colonialism (1910–1945), and the Korean War (1950–1953). A UN-brokered ceasefire led to the formation of a communist state in North Korea and a capitalist state in the South, and this bifurcated the women's movement. Feminists based in the South contended with a military dictatorship in the immediate postwar decades, but by the 1990s, a rising middle class sought and won democracy. South Korean feminism has altered its strategies in response to each of these dramatic shifts.<sup>61</sup> In North Korea, hardline communist ideas about the connection between class and sex led by an isolationist dictatorship have severely limited the scope for women's civil society activism around women's rights.<sup>62</sup>

At the end of the nineteenth century, Korea's imperial leaders faced significant challenges. Western influences that had been strong in the mid- to late nineteenth century were soon overshadowed by Japan's desire for natural resources and the prestige Japan perceived would emerge from "taking colonies." Modeling methods learned from American intruders to their own shores, Japanese influence in Korea steadily expanded. Tensions in the Choson court between those advocating isolationism and reformers seeking "enlightenment" through engagement with "Western learning" tested the Confucian base of Korea's political, community, and family orders. By 1910, the Choson had collapsed and Korea came under full Japanese colonization. During these decades of transition, the idea that good women should remain confined to the domestic sphere had waned, and thinkers and activists grappled with "the woman problem" just as in Japan and China. Confucian ideas of women as inherently inferior to men, along with concubinage, child marriages, and widow chastity, faced serious challenges.<sup>63</sup>

Inspired by their engagement with a changing region, Korean reformers regarded women's education as central to improving not only women's status but also the modernization of the nation and advancing its global prestige. Western commentators frequently used women's lower status as justification for expanding missionary work. Within education-oriented Confucian Korea, the establishment of girls' schools promised increased international respect. Protestant missions from the United States aided in founding 15 Christian-based girls' schools between 1886 and 1905.<sup>64</sup> Methodist missionary Mary Scranton founded Korea's first school for girls in 1886 – Ewha Hakdang. The school transformed into Ewha Woman's University, now one of the nation's most prestigious universities and the world's largest women-only educational institution today.<sup>65</sup>

In 1898, two women published a manifesto calling for the establishment of government-funded schools for girls. Appealing to nationalism, they argued that a nation's level of "civilization" depended on women's education.<sup>66</sup> Inspired by the manifesto, a group of reformers established the first Korean private school for girls – the Sunshong Girls School (1899–1903). The organization leading this campaign is recognized as Korea's first women's association – Ch'anyanghoe. Their agenda matched those of global feminism: sex equality in employment, politics, marriage, and law.<sup>67</sup> Ch'anyanghoe had approximately 400 members, primarily from the nobility, but women from the lower classes – like the courtesan entertainers, the *kisaeng* – were also included.<sup>68</sup>

With increasing access to formal education beyond their homes, Korean women expanded their public impact at a time of great political change. Publishing, writing, and speaking in a growing civil space in which geo-political events provided scope for deeper engagement with "the nation" – especially as Japan claimed protectorship of Korea and increased its economic and political control. A wave of anti-Japanese protests and guerilla resistance became known

as the “patriotic enlightenment.” Women participated by providing funds, food, medical care, and communications support to the resistance but also fought as guerillas. Korea’s existential crisis had opened further space for women to join in previously male-coded domains.<sup>69</sup> Feminists revised their strategies, arguing that women needed political equality in order to become “citizens” (*kungmin*).<sup>70</sup> With serving the king and country as their objective, they reinvigorated their campaign to access public space and power beyond the domestic sphere. As elsewhere, the emphasis on women’s potential to help build the nation diminished the importance of women as individuals worthy of rights.<sup>71</sup>

Newly educated women became the first female journalists, doctors, teachers, artists, and writers of the early twentieth century, claiming public speaking space and modeling new roles for even larger numbers of women. Journals advocating for women’s rights included *Yōjajinam* (*Women’s Guide* – est. 1908). Some contributors argued that educated mothers would benefit the nation. But others promoted women’s right to equality and to individual identity and autonomy.<sup>72</sup> Appeals to women’s roles as mothers through the conservative notion of “wise mother, good wife” remained strong. The male leadership expected women to participate in modernizing the nation, represented as an extension of the family, through this traditional role.<sup>73</sup>

In the 1920s and 1930s, liberal feminists demanded women’s liberation from a slave-like life and encouraged women to “awaken their potential as free, independent and capable beings”.<sup>74</sup> In 1920, the first Korean feminist magazine, *Sinyeoja* (*New Woman*), was launched by feminist writer Kim Wonju (1896–1971). The potency and ambiguity of the “New Women” as a female model also circulated in Korea. Admired for their intellectual and creative talents, New Women were also derided as “frivolous, vainglorious and selfish” and regarded as a threat to the Confucian family order.<sup>75</sup> Feminist contributor to the journal, painter, poet, and educator Na Hye-sok (1896–1948) became a feminist reading journals like *Seitō* during her studies in Japan. In Korea, she was involved in anti-Japanese activities while advancing her painting career, achieving national fame in the early 1920s. When her marriage dissolved in 1934, she was drawn into public scandal. Writing publicly, she spoke about her divorce, the double standards of sexual morality, and the repression of women’s sexuality. As scandal damaged her sales, she survived with the help of Buddhist charities.<sup>76</sup>

The 1920s rapid industrialization saw Japan’s utilization of young Korean women as a cheap labor force, primarily in factories. Socialist feminist groups emerged and waged strikes for these workers against low wages, inhumane working conditions, and sexual harassment.<sup>77</sup> In 1927, socialist feminists led the establishment of Kunwoohoe (Helping Friends Society), the most influential women’s organization at the time. Women of all class backgrounds participated as it grew to 64 branches. Their manifesto called for complete sex equality in all spheres including wages; the abolition of harmful practices such as concubinage, slavery, child marriage, and trafficking in women; and advocated for free-choice marriages.<sup>78</sup> Socialist feminists continued their activism alongside liberal feminists until the Cold War ideology of the US military government that occupied Korea between 1946 and 1948 forced socialist women’s organizations underground.<sup>79</sup>

After the departure of the US military administration, right-wing/conservative women’s organizations proliferated under the regimes of presidents Rhee Syngman (1948–1960), Park Chung Hee (1961–1979), and Chun Doo-hwan (1980–1987). These groups paid little attention to women’s rights and equality. For example, the Korean National Council of Women (KNCW), an umbrella organization founded in 1959 and a key player in implementing the nation’s family planning program, promoted slogans like “National Development by Women’s Power” (1964), “Women’s Duty in Modernization” (1966), and “The 1970s and the Population Problem” (1970).<sup>80</sup> Progressive women’s groups within the *Minjung* (people) movement, dubbed

“Minjung feminism,” also subsumed women’s issues under programs for democratization and independence from imperial powers.<sup>81</sup>

In 1977, Ewha Women’s University commenced the first women’s studies course and became a major site of feminist knowledge production and galvanizing feminist activism. Conservatives challenged its “uncritical acceptance” of Western feminism as irrelevant in the Korean context. Nevertheless, feminist academia helped foster feminist leadership and the work of femocrats in later democratic governments.<sup>82</sup> The year 1987 was momentous in Korea’s transition to democracy, with university students, intellectuals, and the working and middle classes joining forces to achieve constitutional reform. Free elections and the strengthening of civil society transformed the women’s movement. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, gender-specific issues finally became the main agenda. After the establishment of a civilian government under Kim Young-sam (1993–1997), feminist activists, looking globally at international standards, secured considerable policy gains in the area of sexual/domestic violence, sexual harassment, and sex trafficking. Some activists have described this period as “the renaissance era of the women’s movement in Korea.”<sup>83</sup>

The election of President Kim Dae-Jung in 1997 further consolidated democratic gains as the alliance between the government and the women’s movement strengthened. The Kim administration established the first Ministry of Gender Equality in 1998, and activists and women’s studies graduates were appointed to senior positions, the first Korean femocrats. In 2006, Han Myung-suk (1944–), a renowned feminist activist and graduate of women’s studies at Ewha, became Korea’s first female prime minister. Another historic achievement was the abolition of the male-headed family register system buttressing Korean patriarchy, the result of vigorous efforts lasting almost three decades.<sup>84</sup>

A resurgence of conservative governments in the early twenty-first century brought new challenges to the feminist movement. Governments slashed funding and undermined feminist agendas and femocrats’ legitimacy, reducing previous political gains.<sup>85</sup> Young women of the neo-liberal, “post-feminist” era distanced themselves from “institutionalized” women’s movements, and tension grew between the “old” (established, institutionalized) and “young” (independent and autonomous) feminists. The progressive Korean Women’s Association United (KWAWU), a nationwide umbrella organization of 30,000 members and 28 subsidiaries, became a major target of criticism.<sup>86</sup> Regarding the “old” feminism as outmoded, irrelevant, and unnecessary, younger women created their own feminist spaces. Mostly online and hardly visible to the public, these women focused on embodiment, sexuality, and culture, rather than political and structural change. From the mid-2010s, significant changes were triggered by online gender wars with male chauvinist bloggers and the horrific 2016 murder of a young woman motivated by misogyny. Young women renewed their attention to feminism and actively started organizing online/offline campaigns. These new movements are visible, militant, and radical, exemplified by recent #MeToo campaigns and a series of street protests against “hidden cameras” that attracted the largest number of protesters in the history of the Korean women’s movement. Future feminism must embrace diversity among women, a recurring theme in feminist debates, to address why feminism is still relevant for the new generation.

## Conclusion

The work of feminists in Japan, China, and Korea has been intertwined since the late nineteenth century and complicated by war, colonialism, and nationalism. In the twenty-first century, geopolitical tensions have fewer impacts on feminist transnational collaboration. New technologies of communication, along with ease of travel, serve to enhance the sharing of strategies

by women all around the world. Conservative forces in all three countries still marshal similar rhetoric to suppress feminist gains and women's expanding influence in society. Accusations that feminism is "foreign" to the "traditional" cultures of Japan/China/Korea abound as bids to harness appeals to freshly reimagined "national customs" and "innate national traits" abound among anti-feminists in all three countries. The patriarchal ideologies underpinning all three nation-states, despite their vastly different historical trajectories, mean that national leaders are still quick to use "the status of women" or claims to be "defending of the honor of our national women" in global competitions for prestige, resources, and power. Feminists continue to reinvigorate and diversify their activities regardless, just as they have done through the last two centuries.

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