



Women Intellectuals, Protestant Christianity, and Strategic Choices: *Hyaeweol Choi's* Gender Politics at Home and Abroad

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Henry EM

Among women intellectuals who appear in Hyaeweol Choi's *Gender Politics at Home and Abroad*, Choe Yeongsuk stands out for a number of reasons. She was inspired by socialist ideas, went to Sweden, and studied political economy. Choe was born in 1904, in Yeosu, Gyeonggi province. Like her Christian cohorts who began their studies at Ewha Girls' School, and the very small number who were chosen to study and travel overseas during the colonial period, Choe came from a humble background. At the age of nineteen she somehow made her way to Nanjing and studied at the Nanjing Ming De Girls' School, founded by the American North Presbyterian Church.¹ During her four-year sojourn in China, Choe became inspired by the Chinese women's movement, and she cut her hair short. She became deeply influenced by nationalist and socialist ideas, and as the author appropriately puts it, "[her] dream went beyond Asia" (p. 123). Looking back on her years in China, Choe wrote in the monthly magazine *Samcheolli*:

Henry EM is associate professor of Asian Studies at Underwood International College, Yonsei University. E-mail: henryem@gmail.com.

1. The school was reorganized and renamed Nanjing Professional School for Women in 1986. Cited in Choi, *Gender Politics at Home and Abroad*, footnote no. 70.

Although I knew very well that my loving parents and siblings were waiting for me, I really had no desire to return to my homeland. I was born into a humble family, and so, from the day I left Korea, I suffered financial hardships. For my four years in Nanjing, I had to work in order to pay for my tuition and living expenses. However, my passionate desire to learn more made material poverty bearable. With the same desire for learning, I decided to go to Sweden, which I had always dreamed of from the time of my childhood.²

Shanghai–Dalian–Mukden (Shenyang)–Changchun–Harbin–Manchuria–Chita–Verchneudinsk (capital of the Buryat-Mongolian Republic)–Trans-Baikalia–Irkutsk–Taiga–Krasnojarsk–Omsk–Perm–Sverdlovsk–Moscow–Bjeloostrov (Russian frontier station)–Leningrad (St. Petersburg)–Abo–Stockholm. This was the most likely route Choe took from Shanghai to Stockholm, the author tells us. In Stockholm, Choe eventually gained admission to the Department of Political Economy at Stockholm University, where she received her B.A. in 1930. For a short time, she worked in Prince Gustaf Adolf's Library filing East Asian materials. On her journey back to colonial Korea, she visited twenty countries, spending the longest time in India, where she met Mahatma Gandhi, and Sarojini Naidu for a second time, following upon their first meeting in Sweden.

The author cites a July 1922 issue of *Gaebyeok* to point out that Sarojini Naidu had been introduced to Koreans first as a poet. Then, Naidu became renowned in Korea when she became president of the Indian National Congress. As a nationalist, Naidu was also hailed, as in the January 1931 issue of *Samcheolli*, as a “revolutionary woman” who galvanized Indian women's suffrage. Naidu encouraged Choe to remain in India and work as a journalist, but Choe felt obliged to return to Korea. After nine years abroad, Choe returned to Korea in late 1931 and published her interviews with Gandhi and Naidu in *Samcheolli*. Less than six months after her return,

2. Yeongsuk Choe, “Geuriun yennal-ui hakchang sidae, seojeon daehaksaeng saenghwal” (Missing our School Days, My College Life in Sweden), *Samcheolli* 4.1 (January 1932): 72–74. Cited in Choi, *Gender Politics at Home and Abroad*, footnote no. 73.

Choe died. She was twenty-seven years old.

Choe's obituary appeared in *Samcheolli*, and then writings on her appeared, which historian Theodore Jun Yoo has grouped into three narratives: 1) In the language of voyeurism and scandal, that Choe had an illicit relationship with an Indian man and had been impregnated with their bi-racial child; 2) As an attempt to defend a friend (Im Hyo-jeong, for instance), the scandal narrative recast as a modern, cosmopolitan love story; and 3) Choe as a young temptress, such as in her portrayal in a biography of Ahn Chang Ho, as trying to drive a wedge between Ahn and his wife while a student in Shanghai (Yoo 2009, 162). Although Yoo's article is cited, to the author's credit, the three narratives are not described. What is more relevant for the author are the circumstances in which Choe died. The author speculates that Choe's death might have had something to do with the fact that she had difficulty securing a position once she returned to Korea.

Choe was conversant in five languages, and she held a B.A. from Stockholm University. Yet in Korea she could not find a job as a journalist or a teacher, and as the author points out, at the time of her death Choe was peddling vegetables on the streets to support herself. The author notes that in her writings Choe rarely mentioned her teachers at Ewha, which suggests that Choe remained outside of the missionary/Christian network. Moreover, Choe seems to have been heavily influenced by socialist ideas, both during her time in China and while studying political economy in Sweden. Having socialist views and remaining outside the Christian network, the author writes, "possibly worked against her efforts to secure a job" (p. 127). The author is as careful a writer as she is meticulous a researcher.

Such was the power of the Christian (American, Protestant) network in colonial Korea, including the alumni associations, that it could identify a talented girl from a poor family, support her during her studies in Korea, sponsor her during her studies abroad, and then hire her at her alma mater or at another Christian organization after she returned to Korea. Or not, as in the case of someone like Choe who did not conform to expectations. The author writes, "this global Christian network was essential for that first generation of professional women" (p. 127) It was not a free ride, of course.

Among other things, these students had to work. For women, jobs as babysitters or housemaids were common. Moreover, scholarships were scarce. However, the author argues, despite their tiny number, the impact that these elite women had on the path of Korean modern womanhood was immense. She quotes Yi Man-gyu (1889–1978), who wrote in 1934 “Christian-influenced women have near complete hegemony in the women’s world” in Korea (p. 13–14).

In her Introduction to *Gender Politics at Home and Abroad*, Choi describes the book as “essentially a sequel” to her earlier work, *Gender and Mission Encounters in Korea: New Women, Old Ways* (Choi 2009). In that first book, the author argued that Protestant (especially American) missionaries’ emphasis on Korean ways and domesticity had aligned with the views of male Korean intellectuals who envisioned the role of an educated woman as a “wise mother and good wife.” Yun Chi-ho and Yi Kwang-su were quoted at length. *Gender Politics at Home and Abroad* is a women’s history, and precisely because it is a transnational history of young (poor) women from colonial Korea, the author had to search through sparse and scattered archives (local genealogy societies, grade books, campus magazines, alumni records) to write this history of Korean girls who were educated at mission schools, young women who went abroad to study in North America and Europe, and then returned to become the first generation of women intellectuals under Japanese colonial rule.

Toward the end of the book, the author states that she traced how the undercurrents of patriarchal norms and relationships persisted in the face of modern transformations. Choi reminds the reader that “a woman voicing her opinions in public invited social criticism, especially if she advocated women’s rights, challenged patriarchal norms, or expressed a desire for selfhood” (p. 31). Utilizing a fairly comprehensive array of sources, including colonial-era literature and cinematic works, the author dissects the scorn and insinuations of madness tossed at Na Hyeseok and other high-profile women intellectuals like Pak Induk (Pak Indeok) and Kim Hwallan. The author writes, “The self-awareness of such women as individuals and their desire to pursue the ‘freedom to do what one believes is right’ was a

continuing source of great anxiety and public criticism” (p. 67).

Sometimes male commentary and moralizing about these New Women was indirect, as in Chae Mansik’s 1933 novel *Inhyeong-ui chip-eul nawaseo* (After the Doll’s House) and the 1936 feature film, *Mimong* (Illusive Dream), in which both contemplate what Nora, in Ibsen’s play, might have done after leaving home. The author’s reading of such texts gives us more than a glimpse into the gender politics of Korea of the 1930s. What is not made as clear is “how patriarchy can adjust to sustain itself at different historical times” (p. 206), especially in the context of war mobilization and the impact it must have had on gender politics from 1937 onward.

Choi examines new areas—for example, the activism of Protestant women intellectuals in the rural revitalization movement in the 1920s and 1930s. Although the rural campaign spearheaded by Protestant women was carried out with funds raised mostly in the United States, leaders like Kim Hwallan and Pakh Induk looked to Danish folk high schools as a model. Their approach was consciously [strategically?] apolitical focusing primarily on basic literacy and practical knowledge for improving home life and family finances (p. 154). We get a glimpse of a grassroots activist like Choe Yongsin, revered for her selfless dedication.³ But, we don’t know what kind of (political) impact she might have had on a village like Saemgol (Cheongok) near Suwon.

In her earlier book, the author did not entirely shy away from talking about collaboration. Drawing on the work of feminist/activist scholars like Pak Seok-bun, Yi Hye-jeong, and others, the author stated,

Kim Hwal-lan [sic] offered her services to the colonial power in the form of public speeches to mobilize men and women for the war effort and actively engaged in pro-Japanese organizations. Along with other prominent women, such as Pakh Induk [Pak In-deok], Mo Yun-suk, and

3. When Choe Yongsin died in Saemgol, she was twenty-six years old. It seems Pakh Induk drew unfavorable comparisons. Pakh Induk commuted from Seoul to Yanggok, near Gimpo, where she conducted classes for rural women leaders. In interviews, Pakh Induk revealed that in her leisure time, she played the piano or the Hawai‘ian guitar.

Ko Hwang-gyöng [Ko Hwang-gyeong], Kim Hwal-lan propagated the slogan *naesön ilch'e* (Japan and Korea are One Entity), a Japanese propaganda effort designed to eradicate Korean national identity. (Choi 2009, 151)

The author noted Kwon In-suk's critique that male nationalists tend to direct a disproportionate amount of public criticism toward women collaborators in comparison to their male counterparts. Choi then took this a step further, speculating on the possible parallels in motive and rationale between Kim Hwallan's actions and participation in the war effort by Japanese women's groups. That is to say, the author speculated on collaboration with the colonial state as a way to broaden the scope of women's work and influence. In *Gender Politics*, however, the author states in a footnote that the issue of collaboration will not be taken up because it requires a separate study. If the author does take up such a study as a future project, it would have to be a proper sequel, in the sense that that story would have to grapple with the repercussions of the strategic choices made under conditions of war mobilization, and the impact that war mobilization had on gender politics from the late 1930s to the end of the Korean War (if not beyond).

For readers unfamiliar with modern Korean history, it might come as a surprise that the political/strategic decisions that high-profile Christians like Kim Hwallan made in the late colonial period compelled them, after 1945, to quickly and actively take up key roles in the anticommunist, right-wing, pro-US camp. As Korea came to be liberated and partitioned in August, 1945, and the United States took sovereign control via military government south of the 38th parallel, Kim Hwallan quickly renewed her overseas Christian contacts. In February 1946, for example, she attended the national conference of the YWCA in Atlantic City, New Jersey. She brought with her jewels donated by (Protestant) women of Korea, ostensibly in thanks for the sacrifices made by American men in their victory over Japan. At the conference, Kim Hwallan also defended Korean men like Kim Seong-su who were voicing their opposition to American plans for Trusteeship over Korea, because those plans would involve the Soviets and the communists in

the process of forming a unified government for Korea.⁴

In both her earlier work and in *Gender Politics at Home and Abroad*, I think the author makes an undeniable argument that Protestant Christianity and its institutions were key for a significant number of Koreans to gain access to modern education, medical care, opportunities to travel, and new lifestyles. At the same time, when she writes that though Korea was colonized by Japan, it was Euro-American sources and models that Koreans embraced, it is easy to overlook the author's brief mention of Heo Jeongsuk's critique of "American capitalist civilization that has the power to create beautiful living dolls" (p. 143). The author writes that Euro-American countries were colonizers, but that for Koreans, the West "did not pose a colonial threat." For the argument in this book, the author is keen to point out, "[Westerners] were viewed as potential allies who could support the Koreans in their struggle against the Japanese. This disassociation from colonial ambition in Korea played a significant role in creating the dynamics between various parties involved" (p. 10). But that was a dynamic that could work when the American colonial empire extended only to Hawaii and the Philippines. After the collapse of the Japanese empire in 1945, and with US troops in China, Japan and southern Korea, the situation was very different.

Regarding the "various parties involved," and to the extent that such numbers are reliable, we should remind ourselves that Christians accounted for only 2 or 3 percent of the total population of South Korea in the late 1940s (Lee and Suh 2017, 479). Also, according to polls taken in October 1946 by the United States Army Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK), in the American zone (south of the 38th parallel), of 8,000 Koreans polled, 70 percent supported socialism, 10 percent communism, and 13 percent capitalism.⁵ According to a Korean Journalist Association public opinion

4. To reach the YMCA conference, no planes were available so Kim Hwal-lan made a request to USAMGIK (United States Army Military Government in Korea), and the US Army flew her out. See Kim (1964, 118). I would like to thank Raia Sekarini for bringing this passage to my attention.

5. Department of Public Information, 'Type and Structure of a Future Korean Government,' 10 Oct. 1946, US Armed Forces in Korea, G-2 Weekly Summary, RG 319, NARA. Quoted

survey of July 3, 1947, 70 percent of 2,495 persons supported the Korean People's Republic as the name for the new nation. According to this same poll, 71 percent preferred the People's Committee led by the Korean Communist Party to the existing administration created by the US Army Military Government.⁶ In other words, anti-communism did not have a strong social base in Korea in 1945. Christian intellectuals like Kim Hwal-lan were among a very small number of conservatives that the USAMGIK supported.

Even if most Koreans had a favorable view of Americans during the colonial period, for many, as the above polls indicate, the idea that United States is a distant and benign power was disrupted and then undermined when it drew a line across the 38th parallel, established a military government in southern Korea, and left much of the ruling colonial elite in positions of power. I think the author is right when she argues that elements of Protestant modernity were “manifest in gender ideology, material cultures, and public engagement” (p. 27). But when we look at Korea's modernity like a palimpsest,⁷ paying attention to text fragments that are still visible, as the author has done, a more critical view has to emerge of not just American involvement in modern Korean history, but also of Protestant modernity itself: partition of Korea and American occupation south of the 38th parallel (1945–1948), support for right-wing groups like the Northwest Youth Corp, with its roots in the Protestant émigré community (indicative of its name), that committed horrific massacres on Jeju Island (1948–1949), support for South Korea's Rhee, Park, and Chun authoritarian regimes, U.S. military camptowns and regulated prostitution, ROK troops deployed to the US war in Vietnam, and South Korea's Protestant Christianity reliably at the forefront of anti-communist, anti-North Korea rallies, defense of U.S. troop

in Park (2005, 664).

6. *Jayū sinmun*, July 3, 1947. Quoted in Park (2005, 664).

7. In the West, in premodern times, writing materials such as papyrus or parchment were expensive and took a long time to produce. So, to recycle and reuse these resources, the original text was scraped or washed off. But the process of erasure was usually not thorough enough, and some parts of the original text would still be visible.

presence in South Korea and the US-ROK alliance, and most recently, Islamophobia and opposition to the anti-discrimination law. The theologian Keun-Joo Christine Pae reminds us of what is at stake when she looks at the present in palimpsestic time, as a meeting point between the past and future. As she writes, “In the history of America’s wars, someone’s past is always somebody’s future” (Pae 2019, 114).

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