

Book Review

Korean Evangelical Women's Conversion and Institutional Involvement: *Negotiating with Religious Patriarchy*

Kelly H. Chong. 2008. *Deliverance and Submission: Evangelical Women and the Negotiation of Patriarchy in South Korea*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center. 272 pages. ISBN: 978-0-674-03107-4.

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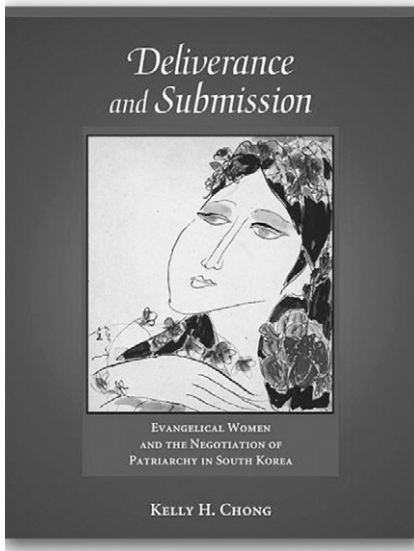
In the annals of Christianity, its growth in South Korea stands as one of the most successful missionary efforts. Protestant and Catholic Christians now comprise roughly 30 percent of the country's population, and Christianity as a whole is the largest religion, outnumbering even followers of Buddhism. Given the prominence of Christianity in the religious landscape of South Korea, it is unsurprising that there has been an extensive array of works on the history and on social characteristics of the religion. However, one area of research which has received a little scholarly attention is gender, particularly women's conversion and experiences. Kelly H. Chong redresses this imbalance by examining the nature of Korean evangelical women's conversion, religiosity, and institutional involvement, as well as the consequences of their conversion. Chong undertook this important research by conducting a sixteen-month-long ethnographic fieldwork in two evangelical churches in Seoul.

The key question addressed in the book is "Why are so many

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women, across classes and cultures, enthusiastically joining and supporting religions that advocate patriarchal structures of authority and morality, and therefore, seem designed to perpetuate their subordination?" (p. 3). In the Korean context, evangelical churches have generally developed into highly patriarchal models as a result of cultural, historical, and social factors. Culturally, these churches have been influenced by the pervasive Confucian gender ideology, which maintains that women are secondary to men. What is interesting, Chong argues, is that contemporary Korean women, many of whom are well-educated and belong to middle class, are dedicated to a religion which serves as a source of oppression for them. She argues that Korean women's participation in evangelical churches actually represents their efforts to cope with the problems and tensions of contemporary family and gender relations.

Chong starts in Chapter 1 with a brief overview of the history of Korean Protestantism, followed by a discussion of the characteristics of contemporary beliefs, practices, and institutional culture. In Chapter 2, Chong describes the ideological foundation and structure of the traditional Korean family system and gender relations, which are built upon the patriarchal and male-centered principles of Neo-Confucianism (hence, her use of the expression "Neo-Confucian patriarchy"), and traces their transformations through modernization and industrialization processes. As Chong notes, some of these changes, such as the nuclearization of the family, the popularity of Western-styled courtship and marriage, and increases in women's educational and occupational opportunities, have intensified the conflicts in family and gender relationships. In Chapter 3, Chong analyzes the motivations behind Korean women's conversions, particularly their experiences of profound emotional crisis rising from marital problems. Chong mentions *han* (pent-up resentment and profound sense of bitterness one feels from years of suffering) and *hwabyeong* (an ailment caused by intense suppression of such negative emotions as anger and bitterness) as the sources of their psychic ailments. Once converted, they are exposed to a variety of religious experiences, includ-



ing emotion-laden prayers, “opening up” of the inner self to God, surrender to divine love, and participation in intimate cell group meetings, all of which serve as emotional and psychological outlets for Korean evangelical women to “overcome and heal their pain as well as empower themselves” (p. 109).

Chapter 4 focuses on women’s participation in church activities, such as Bible classes, seminars, and volunteer work, illustrating

how their dedicated participation serves as a source of fulfillment and helps them derive a sense of achievement. To these women, church has become a center of social interaction in which they gain a sense of autonomy and independence from domestic constraints and conflicts. Chapter 5 examines the ways women respond to the churches’ views on gender and family that reinforce the traditionalist conceptions of gender identity and roles. Chong argues that women’s compliance with the churches’ ideology of women’s submission and obedience is characterized by their efforts to negotiate, resist, and adapt to the patriarchal system. For example, the women she interviewed revealed that their total obedience to their husbands eventually inspired the latter to reform their behavior. Chapter 6 explores the major motivations behind women’s consent to religious patriarchy. Chong argues that women themselves are interested in maintaining and preserving the status quo, for they have internalized the belief that they are the “guardians” of the household, responsible for its well-being. They also identify with their husbands, including their aims and aspirations for the family’s fortune in which their domestic

roles play a central part. Indeed, as Chong writes, “the gender identities of Korean women tend to be inseparably tied to their family-oriented self-conceptions as mothers, wives, and daughters-in-law, and all of the expectations and responsibilities that are bound up with these roles” (p. 182).

The book is theoretically well-grounded, drawing on perspectives from gender studies, conversion, and sociology. It is obvious that the author is conversant with the most important works in related fields, offering comparative insights whenever pertinent. Chong also offers rich historical details on the rise of Christianity in Korea. One of the merits of this book is that it makes an important contribution to our understanding of the motivations behind conversion as well its impact, an area which has hitherto received only scant scholarly attention. Another important aspect is that it departs from typical approaches in the study of Christianity in Korea, i.e., historical, macro-level analyses, and offers an ethnographic analysis of the conversion processes and its impact on the lives of middle-class women. The advantage of utilizing an ethnographic methodology in this case, as the author notes, is that it allows the reader to have a glimpse into Korean evangelical women’s religiosity by learning about their experiences and perspectives in their own words.

The book also brings to light the patterns of gender relations in South Korea, past and present, and the various ways in which middle-class women cope with religious patriarchy and challenges of modernity. Such analysis of the engagement of middle-class women with evangelical churches allows the reader to have a better understanding of the meaning and consequences of Korean women’s participation in various religious activities, and helps provide a more balanced, fuller picture of the success and characteristics of evangelicalism in South Korea.

Notwithstanding these merits, the book is not without problems. The most noticeable problem is the author’s tendency to make too many generalizations. For example, Chong makes sweeping generalizations about the nature of gender inequality in Korea, not taking

into full account some of the progressive changes that have been brought about in recent years. She also makes generalizations about women's active participation in various church activities as if that is the norm. In reality, only a small minority of churchgoers is actively involved. The problem of over-generalization is also evident in her portrayal of the nature of women's lives during the Joseon period. They are descriptions about women belonging to the aristocratic class, yangban, which comprised only a very small number of the population.

Another problem is that the author's analysis tends to be one-sided, just focusing on the side of the story she wants to tell. Only the accounts of women who complied with religious patriarchy are analyzed, while the stories of rejection, which must be true for a sizable number of Christian women, are not given adequate attention. Also, she notes only in passing that the strategy of submission does not always guarantee the desired outcome, i.e., reforming men to become more sensitive to the needs of their wives, but there must have been many women whose submission led to more abuses and exploitation by their husbands. The fact that women accept religious patriarchy might be a sign that they are indoctrinated to believe this, rather than them being active agents who are willing to change the environment that is so oppressive to them. Finally, there should have been a clear working definition of the concept of empowerment; the author uses the term very broadly without specifying which dimension of the concept—i.e., social, political, economic or spiritual—she is referring to.

These caveats are minor and do not seriously distract the overall merits of the book. In short, the book makes a great addition to literature on Korean Christianity and will be of great appeal to anyone interested in Korean religion in general and Korean Christianity in particular.