



# Christian Feminist Helen Kim and Her Compromise in Service to Syngman Rhee

Haeseong PARK

## Abstract

*Helen Kim (Kim Hwal-lan, 1899–1970) has been well respected as a feminist Christian educator and diplomat: the second Korean woman to receive an American doctoral degree, the first Korean president of Ewha College, a Korean representative to the United Nations and UNESCO, and an evangelist. At the same time, her pro-Japanese activities and support for dictatorship have been roundly criticized. One of her controversial activities involves so-called gisaeng parties, in which Kim mobilized Ewha students and alumni to entertain UN soldiers and officials who were deployed to help the Republic of Korea during the Korean War (1950–1953). Gisaeng is a derogatory term that refers to female entertainers of traditional Korea. These gisaeng parties were connected to Kim's political activities on behalf of Syngman Rhee (1875–1965), the first president of the Republic of Korea. Rhee often used private connections and settings and women to break through political obstacles, especially in the period leading up to the UN-sponsored elections that established the Republic of Korea in 1948 and during the early years of his rule (1948–1960). Helen Kim, together with a politician and a financier, founded the Emergency Citizens League for Information and Friendly Relations in January 1951 and organized publicity activities, one being gisaeng parties. This paper explores Helen Kim's publicity campaigns around the Korean War with close attention to female sexuality. How Kim's Christian and feminist beliefs came into this exploitation of the female body and the feminist understanding of the matter will also be discussed.*

**Keywords:** Helen Kim (Kim Hwal-lan), Ewha Womans University, Syngman Rhee, Nangnang Club, Mo Yun-suk, Korean War, Christianity

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## Introduction

“I sent word to President Rhee that I had followed the Government [in its wartime flight to Busan] and that I was *available for any work that a woman could do* [emphasis added] in time of war” (Kim and Potts 1964, 126). So said Helen Kim to the first president of South Korea Syngman Rhee about a week after the outbreak of the Korean War on June 25, 1950. Helen Kim, or Kim Hwal-lan, is one of the most influential women in modern Korean history, yet at the same time one of the most controversial. Despite a poor or modest family background, Kim’s talents and ambitions established her as the second Korean woman to receive an American doctoral degree and as the first Korean president of Ewha School, the first public education facility for Korean women, established in 1886 by Mary F. Scranton, an American Methodist missionary. Helen Kim dedicated her life to improving the lives and status of Korean women and to evangelizing. To allow her to continue her work and ensure the survival of the various Ewha schools, however, she cooperated with political authorities, from the Japanese colonial government (1910–1945) to the authoritarian Syngman Rhee regime (1948–1960) to Park Chung-hee’s military dictatorship (1963–1979). Was she merely pursuing her ambitions, or did she sacrifice her integrity for her nation and sisters? This remains a subject of considerable debate.

Those who defend Helen Kim, particularly her pro-Japanese activities, argue that she collaborated not for herself but for Ewha schools. It may be true that the collaboration of Kim, an ardent advocate of Korean women’s education, might have saved Ewha College from Japanese seizure or closure during the occupation. Then how about her support for dictatorship after independence in 1945? Was this also a sacrifice on behalf of Ewha? Apart from heated discussion about Kim’s pro-Japanese activities, there has been little research on her service to Syngman Rhee and the South Korean government. She continued to run errands for political authorities even after independence. In fact, she was most politically active under Syngman Rhee. This paper explores Kim’s support to Rhee in the early part of his regime, from the establishment of the First Republic of Korea in 1948 to the Korean War (1951–1953). During this period, Helen Kim held a couple

of government posts, but the majority of her support for Rhee was done as a private citizen. Whether in a private or public capacity, her work for the government revolved around publicity, drawing on the power of femininity. She mobilized Ewha students and alumna to bring about UN-sponsored elections that would establish South Korea in 1948, and to secure political support and material assistance for South Korea during the Korean War.

Most who criticize Helen Kim's pro-Japanese past acknowledge her contribution to Korean women. It may be perplexing to bring together Kim's dedication to the advancement of Korean women and the exploitation of their sexuality for political ends. This paper will account for this discrepancy by probing Kim's life and beliefs. First, Helen Kim's personal life will be explored, which will be followed by an examination of what she did in service to Syngman Rhee around the establishment of South Korea and during the Korean War. Then, Kim's ideas on Christianity and feminism and the feminist understanding of Kim's employment of femininity for the war will be discussed.

### **A Single Woman and Head of a Household**

The most prevalent image of Helen Kim is of a woman who never married and selflessly devoted her life to Ewha schools and Christian evangelization. In reality, she was the head of her family. In her autobiography, *Grace Sufficient*, Kim described her father as a moderately successful businessman in Jemulpo, a port city near Seoul (Kim and Potts 1964, 2). Originally, her father was a migrant widower from Uiju on the Yalu River in the northwesternmost part of the Korean Peninsula. Considering the social atmosphere of the period, which condemned migration as deserting ancestral land and tombs, Kim's father must have been desperate enough to migrate far away with young children (Kim and Potts 1964, 16–17).<sup>1</sup> Kim's

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1. Helen Kim had three brothers and four sisters. Kim relates that the two oldest sisters were stepsisters, and their names go unmentioned in her autobiography. Among her three brothers, Kim only mentions two by name. Helen's father might have had two daughters and one son

mother was also from Uiju, sold as a servant or concubine in Jemulpo (Ye 2004, 51).

It was Helen Kim's mother, rather than her father, who supported and encouraged Kim throughout her life. Kim's mother gave her two precious, lifelong resources; Christianity and education. Kim's mother Christianized the entire family and wholeheartedly supported her daughters' education. In some sense, the name of Helen was given by her mother because it was a baptismal name. Helen Kim did not use the name of Gi-deuk, given her by her father, even when writing in Korean, but rather transliterated her Christian name into Korean: Hwal-lan. Kim's mother, who herself yearned for education, sent all three of her own daughters to school (Kim and Potts 1964, 15–16). When Kim expressed her intention to go on to college, her father emphatically rejected her idea and ordered her to stay at home for marriage, while her mother showed full support (Kim and Potts 1964, 27–28; H. Kim 1999, 40).<sup>2</sup>

Although she was fortunate to have an enlightened and strong-willed mother to rely on, Helen became the person to whom her family turned. The Kim family fortune was soon on the wane, and Kim's two older sisters had to stop attending school. Her oldest sister (not counting two older stepsisters who were already married) was married off to a rich old widower when Helen Kim was eleven (Kim and Potts 1964, 22; H. Kim 1999, 33). The real tragedy was that all her blood siblings died young. Helen Kim took care of all her nephews and nieces as well as her elderly parents. When she was away in the United States for her PhD between 1930 and 1931, Kim's family was scattered. The moment she returned, Kim had to find a house for her dispersed family members (Kim and Potts 1964, 91).

As the head of a family, Kim could not afford any economic insecurity. Ewha was everything for Helen Kim, both emotionally and practically. Seo

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from his first marriage.

2. *Geu bitsok-ui jageun saengmyeong* is the Korean version of *Grace Sufficient*. It is interesting to note the many discrepancies between the two versions, which reveal Kim's great acumen. She understood the different audiences for the books. The English version printed by a Methodist publisher was intended for American Christians while the Korean one was for the general Korean public.

Ji-hui, who studied Kim's feminism and pro-Japanese activities, pointed out the limited and tenuous support for career women in modern Korea, arguing that Ewha was an essential footing for Kim's social activities, financial security, and even identity as an educational administrator (Seo 2011, 111). Helen Kim enrolled her nieces and grandnieces at Ewha University, put them in an Ewha dormitory when she could not take care of them, and hired them as Ewha professors (Kim and Potts 1964, 91). Kim Jeong-ok and Kim Jong-ok, Helen Kim's nieces, were professors at Ewha University. When Jo Bong-ok, Kim Jong-ok's daughter, went to the United States for further studies after graduating from Ewha University, Helen Kim saw her off at the airport, saying, "You have to come back in three years to teach at Ewha."<sup>3</sup> To Kim's disappointment, Jo married and settled in the United States. Although no one can deny Helen Kim's love for and devotion to Ewha, perquisites that she reaped from her link to Ewha cannot be overlooked.

### **Helen Kim's Publicity Activities for the Syngman Rhee Regime**

Thanks to Helen Kim's cooperation with Japanese authorities as well as her administrative skills, Ewha was able to remain open to the end of Japanese occupation, unlike Jungang Normal School (Training School for Kindergarten Teachers). Jungang, another higher education institution for Korean women run by American-educated Christian Louise Yim, was forced to shutter in 1944.<sup>4</sup> Kim's closeness to political authorities continued to benefit her and Ewha even after Japanese rule. Just to name a few instances; on June 24, 1945, the women-only Ewha Technical School beat all other tertiary schools and was accredited as the first comprehensive university in South Korea, followed by Yonsei University on July 31 and

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3. Byeong-im Min, "Cha hanjan-ui chodae: Moma Jo Bong-ok haengjeongdamdangwan" (Teatime: Moma Jo Bong-ok), *The Korea Times*, February 21, 2013, accessed October 10, 2019, [www.koreatimes.com/article/779495](http://www.koreatimes.com/article/779495).

4. Chung-Ang University, "History," accessed October 10, 2019, [https://neweng.cau.ac.kr/cms/FR\\_CON/index.do?MENU\\_ID=240](https://neweng.cau.ac.kr/cms/FR_CON/index.do?MENU_ID=240).

Korea University on August 5. On February 16, 1946, Kim became the first Korean civilian to visit the United States after liberation, and became a member of the first South Korean delegation to the United Nations General Assembly in September 1948. During the Korean War, Ewha was the first Korean college to reopen in exile in the temporary wartime capital at Busan.

Helen Kim's relationship with American missionary circles and her good command of English served her well in the pro-American political climate that followed independence. She was favored by Syngman Rhee, who was the first Korean to receive an American doctoral degree and led the overseas Korean independence movement, mostly from Hawaii. Even in Kim's own accounts, there are two versions of how she first met Rhee. Kim wrote in her Korean autobiography that she first met Rhee on her way back to colonial Korea from the United States in 1925, while the English version says her "very first personal encounter with Dr. Rhee" was when she attended the second conference of the Institute of Pacific Relations in Honolulu, Hawaii in 1927 (Kim and Potts 1964, 80; H. Kim 1999, 107). Regardless of when she first met President Rhee, Kim not only made the acquaintance of Syngman Rhee but also sided with him even before independence. Hugh Cynn, or Sin Heung-u, was likely the catalyst for Kim's familiarization with Rhee and his ideas.

Hugh H. Cynn (1883–1959) was one of the most influential Methodist leaders in Korea. His relationship with Syngman Rhee went back many years, even to school days. Both graduated from a Methodist school, Baejae Hakdang, and became sworn brothers when they served time together in jail because of their radical political views in opposition to the last Korean dynasty, the Joseon, in the early 1900s (Kim and Suh 1987, 176–177). After their release from prison, both went to the United States for study. They kept in touch even after Cynn returned to Korea in 1911. In March 1925, Cynn formed the Industrial Promotion Club (Heungeop geurakbu 興業俱樂部) after his meeting with Rhee in Hawaii in October 1924. This club, composed of patriotic Christians, was founded as a sister organization of the Korean Comrade Society (Daehanin dongjihoe 大韓人同志會), a Korean nationalist organization in Hawaii led by Syngman Rhee. Later in 1925, members of the Industrial Promotion Club led the Christian Leadership Council of

Korea (Joseon gidokgyo bongyeokja hoeui 朝鮮基督教奉役者會議), which discussed how to Koreanize the Christian mission in Korea. Helen Kim, just returned from the United States after receiving her bachelor's and master's degrees, attended the Council and joined the Industrial Promotion Club.<sup>5</sup> Also, it was Cynn who had arranged Helen Kim's academic advisor for her doctorate at Columbia University. Cynn, the secretary general of the Korean National Federation of the YMCA, introduced Helen Kim to Edmund de Brunner, a professor at Columbia who was sent to Korea for research by the YMCA in September 1927.<sup>6</sup> After receiving her doctoral degree, Helen began to push to Koreanize Ewha, which brought her into conflict with American missionary teachers. Kim then strengthened her ties with Korean Methodist men, including Cynn. Gossip about a romantic link between Kim and Cynn even took wind.<sup>7</sup> Despite the political estrangement between Cynn and Rhee in the 1950s, Kim continued to be loyal to President Rhee.

Helen Kim's support for Syngman Rhee centered on publicity, promoting his image and political agenda both domestically and abroad. This was a result partly of Rhee's political strategizing and understanding of women's role and partly of Kim's feminism. Rhee was one of the most prominent independence fighters abroad. While leaders like Ahn Changho (An Chang-ho) and Park Yong-man campaigned for national reform or military resistance against Japan, Rhee pursued a strategy of marshalling diplomatic support for Korean independence. Rhee's manipulation of diplomatic techniques spread well into his presidency. He often used publicity and private connections to turn the tables in his favor. In addition, Rhee's pro-American diplomacy, demonstrated by his connection to American missionaries and confirmed by his study and exile in the United

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5. *Yun Chi-ho ilgi* (Yun Chi-ho Diaries), September 9, 1938. After Japan launched a full-scale war against China in July 1937, the Japanese authorities became intolerant of Korean nationalists, prosecuting the Industrial Club members for the violation of the Peace Preservation Law in May 1938. Helen Kim was also investigated in her relation to the club on September 9, 1938.

6. Mose Park, "Naehan seongyosa" (Missionaries in Korea), June 27, 2019, accessed October 10, 2019, [http://www.1907revival.com/bbs/list.html?table=bbs\\_4&idno=4023&page=1&total=1889&sc\\_area=&sc\\_word=](http://www.1907revival.com/bbs/list.html?table=bbs_4&idno=4023&page=1&total=1889&sc_area=&sc_word=).

7. *Yun Chi-ho ilgi* (Yun Chi-ho Diaries), January 29, 1935.

States, persisted during his regime under the Cold War system. Rhee surrounded himself with American-educated Koreans whom he personally trusted, particularly early in his rule. This is why Syngman appointed Helen Kim to senior government posts even in a male-dominated society.<sup>8</sup> Helen Kim was assigned as an observer to the UN General Assembly in September 1948 and as director of South Korea's Office of Public Information (Gongbocho) in August 1950, during the Korean War.

The composition of the 1948 UN observer delegation displayed Rhee's political style well. Six of the nine Korean representatives had received their degrees from American colleges, and of the remaining three, one graduated from Baejae, Rhee's alma mater. Mo Yun-suk, the only woman delegate besides Helen, had studied English at Ewha. She was an attractive poet. This was not the first time Kim and Mo had worked together for Syngman Rhee. In early 1948, they played a decisive role in Rhee's presidential election. Immediately after liberation, the Korean Peninsula was divided and administered by two hostile superpowers, the United States and Soviet Union. The United Nations dispatched the United Nations Temporary Commission on Korea (UNTCOK) in January 1948 to "facilitate and expedite...the attainment of the national independence of Korea and withdrawal of occupying forces."<sup>9</sup> However, the Soviet Union rejected UNTCOK's legitimacy, and subsequently the US military government and Syngman Rhee called for a general election in a US-ministered southern zone alone. Only three of nine UNTCOK commissioners aligned themselves with the United States and Rhee. Mr. K. P. S. Menon, the chairman of UNTCOK, remained firm in UNTCOK's original stance to establish one government in Korea by an election throughout the entire Korean Peninsula. Rhee was able to win over Menon by highly personal and shrewd diplomacy, or by women.

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8. Eighteen women ran in the first general election on May 10, 1948 in South Korea, but none were elected.

9. United Nations General Assembly Official Records, Second Session, September 16-November 29, 1947, Resolutions, 17-18.



Mr. K. P. S. Menon was an Indian diplomat who loved poetry and was empathetic to Korea, which shared India's colonial experience. Menon met Mo Yun-suk at a reception and felt drawn toward her. When Rhee learned about Menon's attentions to Yun-suk, he capitalized on Menon's emotions. Rhee sometimes pressured, and at other times pestered, Mo into swaying Menon without consideration for the feelings of Mo, a single mother who wanted to behave properly (Mo 1989, 285).<sup>10</sup> Menon eventually changed his stance, supporting Rhee. On May 10, 1948, there was a general election in South Korea alone, and the first Korean National Assembly voted Syngman Rhee into office as the first president of the Republic of Korea on July 20, 1948.



**Figure 1.** From left to right, Mo Yun-suk, K. P. S. Menon, and Helen Kim

Source: *NewDaily* (<http://www.newdaily.co.kr/site/data/html/2015/05/18/2015051800071.html>).

In this Menon project, though Mo Yun-suk was on the front burner, but many American-educated or highly-educated Korean women, including Helen Kim, were also involved. The success of this scheme might have led

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10. Mo had separated from her husband only several years into her marriage in 1934, but their legal divorce was finalized in the 1960s.

Syngman Rhee to make this kind of effort more systematic by organizing the Nangnang Club (Nangnang gurakbu 樂浪俱樂部). Because the club developed out of a social gathering of highly educated women, it is hard to establish when exactly it started. Some sources say 1946, others 1948 or 1949. The first newspaper account of the Nangnang Club appeared on May 22, 1949, reporting that the Nangnang Club, composed of twenty women, including Mo Yun-suk and Choe Rye-sun, had hosted a welcome party for three Americans who had helped Syngman Rhee when he had lived in exile in the United States.<sup>11</sup> Choe was a graduate of Ewha College and the University of Chicago and taught at Ewha. In 1949, Choe held various positions, such as director of alumni relations (*sagyo bujang*) of the Ewha Alumni Association and president of the Nangnang Club in the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) (Kang 1949, 174). Choe was kidnapped by North Korea in June 1950 during the Korean War, after which Mo led the club.

Here it is worth noting that the Nangnang Club was a subunit of the YWCA. Since the establishment of the YWCA in 1922, Helen Kim had been one of its key members. Some YWCA board members accused Kim of "dictatorial rule," even likening her to Mussolini.<sup>12</sup> These detractors complained that Kim tried to dominate the YWCA and fill it with her supporters. The YWCA, along with Ewha, became one of Kim's major institutional bases. Since independence, Helen had served as president, and Choe Rye-sun as general-secretary, of the YWCA. In March 1950, Choe succeeded Kim as the YWCA president. Given the fact that the Nangnang Club was a subordinate body of the YWCA, it is reasonable to assume Helen Kim's involvement in the club from its inception. Kim was regarded as a chief executive officer (*chongjae*) or advisor to the club. Mo Yun-suk recalled that Kim taught Western manners and etiquette to club members (Choe 2004, 290–291).<sup>13</sup>

11. "Nangnang gurakbu juchoe samgwi binhwanyeonghoe seonghwang" (Nangnang Club's Welcoming Party for Three Americans a Great Success), *Dong-a ilbo*, May 22, 1949.

12. *Yun Chi-ho ilgi* (Yun Chi-ho Diaries), June 11, 1934; July 15, 1934.

13. Gi-jo Seong, "Paen keulleob-ui daemo, Yeongun Mo Yun-suk" (Doyenne of the PEN Club, Mo Yun-suk), May 20, 2010, accessed October 10, 2019, <http://www.dsb.kr/detail>.

Some have raised the question of how the YWCA, a religious NGO, could house such a political—quasi-governmental—lobbying body such as the Nangnang Club. Before the war, Korean members of the club were joined by American women living in Korea and did social work together, besides greeting and entertaining foreign personages.<sup>14</sup> It was after the outbreak of the Korean War that, under Mo's leadership, the club was geared towards lobbying for Rhee. The Rhee administration spared no effort in assisting the club, particularly during wartime. Heo Jeong, the Busan native and Minister of Social Affairs, found a house for the club to use in the temporary wartime capital at Busan, and Jang Myeon, or John M. Chang, a prime minister, took care of the club expenses (Choe 2004, 291). According to Mo, the guest lists for Nangnang Club parties were prepared by cabinet members.<sup>15</sup> Because of the club's possible espionage activities, the US Army Counter Intelligence Corps (CIC) investigated the Nangnang Club for several years around the time of the Korean War. The CIC findings were not conclusive about whether the club was a branch of the South Korean government, but did establish with some confidence that the club lobbied for President Rhee through lavish entertainments (Choe 2004, 282). The CIC report also noted that President Rhee and First Lady Francesca Donner Rhee approved and sponsored the club (Choe 2004, 285).

Contrary to the detailed CIC report, there are few records about the Nangnang Club in Korea save for several mentions of it by Mo Yun-suk herself in her interviews. Helen Kim never spoke about the Nangnang Club in public. However, as noted, Heo Jeong arranged in wartime Busan for Kim to be able to purchase at a cheap price a house where she entertained UN military generals and foreign correspondents and diplomats. She named it Victory House (Pilsunggak). The house was also used as a temporary office for Ewha and the YWCA as well as a place of residence for Helen's family,

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php?number=7724&thread=23r03.

14. "Miin chilbaengmyeongdo jeoksipjasa gaip" (Seven Hundred Americans Also Join the Red Cross), *Namjoseon minbo* (South Korea People's Daily), February 4, 1950.
15. Gi-jo Seong, "Paen keulleob-ui daemo, Yeongun Mo Yun-suk" (Doyenne of PEN Club, Mo Yun-suk), May 20, 2010, accessed October 10, 2019, <http://www.dsb.kr/detail.php?number=7724&thread=23r03>.

friends, colleagues, and staff. Foreign guests of the Victory House parties were attended by Ewha faculty members, alumni, and students (G. Kim 1984, 319). Some Ewha faculty members took issue with Kim's activities and did not attend such parties nor send their students to them (Min and Park 1981, 463). Some people derided the Victory House parties as *gisaeng* parties and called Ewha students *gisaeng*, a disparaging term for female entertainers (Min and Park 1981, 243). No matter what others said, Kim thought it was a great success, urging Ewha graduates to start similar establishments. The United Nations Korean House (Yuen Hanguk-ui jip) and the Persimmon Tree House (Gamnamu jip) were soon set up by Ewha alumni in Daegu and Seoul, respectively, in 1951 (An 2001, 101). Helen made another attempt to reach further. She organized Ewha graduates and visited fighting units to perform for and have dance parties with UN soldiers (Kim and Potts 1964, 135). In addition, Helen formed the Emergency Citizens League for Information and Friendly Relations (Gungmin hongbo oegyong dongmaeng; ECLIFR) in January 1951 with the aim of "promoting good relations and mutual understanding between" Koreans and the UN soldiers and personnel (Kim and Potts 1964, 135). Another purpose of the league was to enlighten UN soldiers and other foreigners about Korean culture and give them correct information during the war (Kim and Potts 1964, 136). The League issued a bimonthly English magazine, *Korea*, that introduced Korean culture and history (Kim and Potts 1964, 133, 136).<sup>16</sup> Kim set up a miniature museum of Korean arts in the Victory House and opened it to UN soldiers who otherwise might associate Korea only with scenes of bloodshed and bleakness.

It was unclear how or if Kim's Victory House and ECLIFR were related to the Nangnang Club. ECLIFR was open and civilian, whereas the Nangnang Club was an underhanded lobbying group. However, these two worked in similar ways. Both were PR organizations that had Kim and Mo in leadership positions. Both also tried to keep up soldier morale; the League focused more on foreigners while the Club was concerned mainly with Koreans. In the day following fancy nighttime parties, Nangnang girls

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16. In November 1950, Kim started another English daily, *The Korea Times*, which is still in print.

went out to the fields and woods to provide Korean soldiers and police with hot meals and supplies (Choe 2004, 284). Eventually, both existed to serve Rhee's regime.

According to Yi Im-ha, who studied the exploitation of femininity during the Korean War, Syngman Rhee-style diplomacy was to employ female sexuality in informal settings for political purposes (I. Yi 2004, 116). Rhee was an American-educated Christian who spent half of his life, most of his adulthood, in the United States. He never drank or smoked. He also read the Bible and prayed every evening and had family worship with his wife every morning (J. Yi 2004, 187). Rhee's Austrian wife, Francesca Donner, made it a rule that guests at social gatherings at the Blue House, the official residence of the South Korean president, be accompanied by their wives, which ran contrary to the Korean practice of bringing along a concubine or *gisaeng* to public occasions (Jo 2007, 29).<sup>17</sup> Rhee pronounced at a political convention soon after returning from exile in 1945, "I respect women's opinions," and appointed three women ministers during his presidency (Mo 1989, 273). Following this, it would be twenty-seven years before another woman would be named a government minister. When Rhee received a generous anonymous donation for the war effort in 1951, he assumed that the money was from a woman. He explained to Francesca, who thought the donor a man, how many women in Korean history had fearlessly sacrificed themselves for the nation (Rhee 2010, 367).

Progressive as he seemed, Rhee was a typical Confucian man. He was a sixth-generation only son of an elite family descended from the royal household of the Joseon dynasty. Rhee deserted his first wife, a so-called "old woman" who did not possess a modern education. After his marriage to Donner, Rhee announced that he, as a Korean man, would not help with domestic chores and advised that a good Korean wife was only seen, not heard—in other words, hold your tongue.<sup>18</sup> Being eager for an heir to

17. This practice was based on the Korean patriarchal tradition that respectable women, such as legal wives, must remain inside and away from public eyes.

18. Geun-mi Yi, "Bihwa balgul peurancheseuka: Nae nampyeon Yi Seungman-eun ireon saram ieotda" (Untold Story of Francesca—This is My Husband, Syngman Rhee), *Wolgan Joseon* (Joseon Monthly), March 2001, accessed December 10, 2019, <https://monthly.chosun.com/>

carry on his family name, Rhee was occasionally hard on Donner, who was not able to bear him a son. Also, Rhee, as an ambitious politician, did not hesitate to play dirty, saying to those who were against his nasty tricks, “That’s politics, so shut up” (Mo 1989, 294). Rhee’s cunning statesmanship, coupled with a sexist viewpoint, disposed him to exploit the bodies of Korean women.

### **Helen Kim’s Christianity and Feminism and the Feminist Reading of Her Wartime Activities**

If Syngman Rhee’s conservative view on women, combined with *realpolitik*, resulted in politicking by wining and dining, what drove Helen Kim to join Rhee? Was it ambition or conviction, or both? To answer this question, Kim’s Christian and feminist views, the two great inspirations of her life, must be examined. First, as for Christianity, Kim believed in a Christian activism called Social Gospel that was introduced to Korea in the mid-1920s. Social Gospel, a term coined by Charles Oliver Brown in 1886, was prevalent in the United States and Canada until the 1920s. This Protestant movement applied Christian ethics to social injustice issues, such as poverty, racism, crime, and war. In Korea, the YMCA started the Social Gospel movement when it set up a rural development program in February 1925. In December of the same year, Christian leaders, both Koreans and Western missionaries, met to discuss the future of the Korean mission, deliberating on many concerns around the church. As aforementioned, Korean Christian workers confronted Western missionaries with the issue of Koreanization at the 1925 Christian Leadership Council of Korea. But the Council also conferred on many social problems and presented the opportunity of launching the Korean Social Gospel movement. Two months later, Hugh Cynn formed the Christianity Research Society (*Gidokgyo yeonguhoe*) as an effort to reform Korean Christianity and society. Helen Kim, attending the 1925 Council and joining the Society, raised her voice for a rural enlightenment campaign.

Because more than eighty percent of the Korean population was engaged in agriculture at that time, Helen tried to tackle rural poverty, finishing a dissertation titled, "Rural Education for the Regeneration of Korea," in 1931.

Helen Kim was deeply engaged in rural work through the YWCA. Unfortunately, Kim's YWCA programs for rural women in the 1930s and the 1940s were unsuccessful, though this did not change her belief in Social Gospel. In a speech in 1958, Helen Kim maintained that saving only a soul was half salvation because people needed both love and bread (H. Kim 1986, 150–151). She continued to express apprehension about Christians who shunned politics. Her plea was that politics could seem avaricious but because a government could make or break its people, Christians should engage in politics to establish a Christian government based on justice and liberty (H. Kim 1986, 150–154). She thought that only sacrificial, devoted Christian leadership could develop Korea.<sup>19</sup> She also believed that no one could lead a nation alone so leaders needed honest and trustworthy supporters to establish a government free of corruption (H. Kim 1999, 291). Deflecting criticism over her service to dictatorship, Helen Kim stated:

I am always for my country and therefore, not for any political reasons but from patriotic motives, can cooperate with the individual or the party that bears the responsibility of the nation. In this way I am able to serve my nation consistently in spite of the changes in leaders. (Kim and Potts 1964, 182–183)

If Kim's Social Gospel faith and political view justified her involvement in power dynamics, Christian complementary feminism rationalized her employment of femininity. God created men and women with different roles and responsibilities. But the value of respective functions was equal, and men and women were mutually dependent. Korean society had well accepted Kim's complementarity since her debut in society in the 1920s. Korea of the 1920s saw a new social phenomenon, that of the *New Woman*, who was highly educated and expressive of her thoughts and sexuality in

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19. Helen Kim, "Thoughts of the Times 2," *The Korea Times*, April 4, 1965.

pursuit of women's liberation. Many Koreans condemned New Women as selfish and shallow admirers of the West. Some people might feel a sense of detachment from Kim, one of the first-generation New Women, because of her bobbed hair, American degrees, and the piano and English books in her library, as well as her celibacy. However, Kim was able to sell herself to the public, first by differentiating learned women who dedicated themselves to social reform from flamboyant New Women who hit the headlines, and second by conforming to the prevailing gender ideology of the *wise mother, good wife* (*hyeonmo yangcheo*) (H. Kim 1986, 81).

Helen Kim's complementary feminism considered the home as a woman's proper place, just as the wise mother, good wife theory dictated. Kim thought that women's distinctive qualities, such as being patient, affectionate, and sacrificial, were fit for the home, the foundation of the nation. A woman contributed to society through the home as an educator of the next generation, a transmitter of the culture, and a helper to her husband.<sup>20</sup> However, Kim could not ignore the social reality that discriminated against women at home because of financial incompetence. She claimed women were the largest single group suffering from unfair treatment in the world (H. Kim 1986, 88, 125). Even if she didn't go so far as to demand wages for housework, Kim contended that domestic work was a job as productive as any wage labor (Hakhaesa 1937, 700).<sup>21</sup> Men had to appreciate housewives, and women should be proud of themselves.<sup>22</sup>

Meanwhile, Kim did not want women to remain mere angels of the household, encouraging them to take social responsibility as homemakers and career women. By the early 1930s, Kim assumed that housewives could work outside the home with their husbands' help and some timesaving home

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20. Helen Kim, "The Women share in the reconstruction of Korea," *Korean Student Bulletin* 13.4 (December 1930), 1-2.

21. Hwal-lan Kim, "Jigeop jeonseon-gwa joseon yeoseong" (The Workforce and Korean Women), *Sindonga* (New East Asia) 11 (September 1932), 142.

22. Helen Kim, "The Women share in the reconstruction of Korea," *Korean Student Bulletin* 13.4 (December 1930), 1; Kim Hwal-lan, "Jigeop jeonseon-gwa joseon yeoseong" (The Workforce and Korean Women), *Sindonga* (New East Asia) 11 (September 1932), 142.



improvements.<sup>23</sup> Probably because she observed her students and colleagues struggling with the double burden of family and work, Kim backed down a little, advising her students to pick either marriage or career, or to postpone social activities until middle age when free from the duty of childcare (Jeong et al. 1996, 178; T. Yi 1991, 50; H. Kim 1986, 139).<sup>24</sup> To women who chose to enter professions, Kim heartened them to overcome gender prejudice and organize to fight gender discrimination (H. Kim 1986, 90, 125, 143–144). At the same time, complementary feminism convinced her that femininity destined women for specific fields related to teaching, caring, and serving (H. Kim 1986, 143–144). In Kim’s mind, gender differences need not be a source of discrimination, but might be a basis of power and progress. Kim said that women might appear less capable than men now, but as technology developed, women’s compassionate and peaceful nature, plus their fertility and creativity, would be able to overpower violent masculinity, bringing about a “female-dominated world” (H. Kim 1986, 92–94, 135–136). Radical as she sounded, Kim disapproved of the women-centeredness of Western feminism, arguing that such self-seeking feminism served as a foil to the Korean women’s movement, which was nationalist and complimentary (H. Kim 1986, 126–127).

Helen Kim had projected herself as a feminist and Christian activist who fought for the nation, whereas many people remember her as an anti-national collaborator with political authorities. Public perceptions aside, was Kim honest with herself and true to her beliefs, at least in her own mind? One could argue that Kim’s support for the Rhee regime was motivated by practical rewards, but her complimentary feminism made it easy for her to employ femininity—in some cases even mobilizing her students—to tend to a nation living under masculine brutality and a fear of communism. She

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23. Hwal-lan Kim, “Jigeop jeonseon-gwa joseon yeoseong” (The Workforce and Korean Women), *Sindonga* (New East Asia) 11 (September 1932), 142; Ui-sun Choe, “Jjeon gyosu Kim Hwal-lan yang yeongu-neun jonggyo cheolhak, hyeondae yeoseong-eun ijung chaegim-eul jeotda” (Ewha Professor Helen Kim, Researching Religious Philosophy, Modern Women Must Take Double Responsibilities), *Donga ilbo*, December 19, 1928.

24. Hwal-lan Kim, “Nam-ui haengbok-eul” (Other People’s Happiness), *Sinsegi* (New Century) 9 (November 1939), 32.

defended herself saying these were acts of diplomacy that required womanly instinct. As mentioned above, Kim asserted that distinctive sexual characters assigned men and women to different tasks, and diplomacy was a career befitting women because women were effective and affective negotiators with deep sensitivities (H. Kim 1986, 98; 1999, 230). On the bus to visit with foreign fighting units, she always emphasized to her students that they were diplomats who were introducing Korea to the soldiers while comforting those soldiers with Korean culture and beauty:

Every one of you is a diplomat. ... Let us show our civility and beauty. Foreign soldiers will see Korea through your tender and courteous manners. (Min and Park 1981, 242)

Even after the Korean War, Helen continued to mobilize her graduates for her diplomatic missions. When she was a member of a Korean delegation to the UN General Assembly in New York between 1956 and 1959, she called upon her former students to entertain foreign diplomats and journalists with Korean food, dance, and songs in her New York apartment in what she termed an “intellectual feast” (Kim and Potts 1964, 164–167).

Kim’s complimentary feminism always found its way to power, but her version of feminism was at odds with other feminist views in many ways. A host of feminists have taken an anti-war and/or anti-nationalist stance. Their reasons vary; some argue that women have a peace-prone nature either by virtue of biology or through culture-dictated experience, while others assert that patriarchy is the root cause of war, but that both are coercive hierarchies that inferiorize and exploit others and thus must be eliminated. Such pacifist feminists condemn a masculine and exclusive nation-state system as one of the primary culprits of violence, collectively declaring, in the words of Virginia Woolf, “[A]s a woman, I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world” (Woolf 1938, 108). Feminism in general, as well as pacifist scholarship, castigates nationalism that premises and promotes notions of purity, unity, and exclusivity, blurring any intragroup differences and hierarchies while institutionalizing intergroup distinctions and hatred. However,

feminism does not reject all forms of nationalism. Third-World feminists have joined nationalist movements against colonial and neocolonial oppression because the progressive impetus for change in both nationalism and feminism drives them to converge (Peterson 1994, 81). The problem for Third-World feminists is how to continue conversations with male nationalists to address the latter's patriarchal assumptions (Herr 2003, 142). Discussing the positive-sum coexistence of nationalism and feminism, some feminists introduced non-essentialist nationalism, such as binationalism or polycentric nationalism. However, Insook Kwon, a feminist activist and scholar who has examined the complexity of Korean feminism in relation to nationalism, pointed out that the dominance of nationalism in South Korea has hindered Koreans from developing any feminist discourses that might cause friction with nationalism (Kwon 2006). On the other hand, we have witnessed how nationalism exploits women's bodies and rights in its favor. We can see this most recently in *femonationalism*, a term coined by feminist scholar Sara Farris to describe the usurpation of feminist themes by anti-Islam and xenophobic campaigns in contemporary Europe. Sara Farris has lashed out at right-wing European femonationalists for their betrayal of feminist emancipatory principles.

The nationalist slogan under which Helen Kim supported the war also carried right-wing claims against North Korea. Different from femonationalism, Kim justified her divisive anti-communism on the grounds of Christianity, rather than women's concerns. The shared cultural and ethnic heritage of North and South Koreans made it problematic to apply women's issues to condemn and *otherize* the North. At the same time, religious persecution in North Korea led Kim to believe that communist North Korea was an existential threat to the Korean nation that must be saved by Christianity as well as thrive through democracy. The ongoing armed conflict with the anti-Christian North increased this sense of urgency, impelling Kim to focus on the means to an end, without reasoning much about the ends in themselves. Given this contextual specificity and the intersectional plights of Third-World women, can Helen's wartime efforts, particularly exacting sexual hospitality from her students, be excused in terms of feminism? Most Korean feminists, with the exception of nationalist

feminists who are critical of Helen Kim's pro-Japan activities, are silent on issues surrounding Kim, let alone this matter. Insook Kwon attributed this silence to Korean feminists' failure to produce a feminist view—an alternative to domineering nationalism—and to their unease with faulting Kim considering her devotion to Korean women's advancement (Kwon 2006, 59). Yi Im-ha, one of the few feminist scholars to address Helen Kim's wartime activities, censured Kim for her selfish motivation but characterized her mobilization of students as “disrespectful” rather than sexual exploitation (I. Yi 2004, 115–117). Whether positive or not, Kim's subjectivity can be approved of. She had a tight hold over the situation, initiating, organizing, and ending the mobilization of her students on her own will.

Then were Ewha students victims? Lack of student voices in this matter makes it challenging to know how they thought and responded. One Ewha alumna who engaged in the event said, “We did what we were supposed to do...during that tough wartime,” which resonates with what Helen Kim argued.<sup>25</sup> The traditional Korean relationship between teachers and students is built upon Confucian ethics, obligating students to obey their teachers. Ewha students and graduates were thus unable to gainsay Helen Kim, no matter what they thought (Min and Park 1981, 243). However, the other side of this strict top-down, teacher-pupil relationship was the teacher's selfless love for students. Ewha boasted of its particularly strong, family-like bond between female, mostly single alumna professors, and students, calling the Ewha campus “Ewha Dongsan” (Ewha Garden) (Min and Park 1981, 403). In the back of her mind, Kim, laboring for her students' emotional and physical safety, must have been aware she was treading a fine line between the application of femininity and sexual exploitation under the banner of complementary feminism and nationalism. Kim's careful guidance and affectionate care for students saved them from much trouble, such as scandals or unsavory incidents (Min and Park 1981, 242–243, 278).<sup>26</sup> This

25. Sin-sun Kim, “YWCA 60-nyeonsa, daecheongdong Kim Hwal-lan-ssi suksoreul imsi Y-bonbu-ro” (Sixty-year History of the YWCA, Helen Kim's Residence at Daecheong-dong became a Temporary YWCA Office), *Jungang ilbo*, July 29, 1982.

26. Before the Korean War, Ewha students were forbidden from performing on the stage outside Ewha. During the war, Helen Kim personally chaperoned every student performance trip to

differs from the typical male exploitation of female sexuality, in which male exploiters demoralize, inferiorize, and otherize female exploitees.

Further, the memories of several students suggest that Ewha students might have not only enjoyed these outings or events as opportunities to enter untraditional spheres, but also to feel fulfilled despite their lack of their volition. Some students revealed their fascination with the Western and elegant atmosphere of Victory House (Kim Ae-ma seonsaeng ginyeomhoe 2003, 213). Others, after coming back to Seoul, voluntarily organized themselves into a performance team, visiting troops every winter break. These students called themselves “Ttantara” (a vulgar term for entertainers) and later reminisced about how rewarding the experience was (Min and Park 1981, 200–201). This tradition continued well into the 1970s.

Current feminist scholarship, particularly on war, has begun to recognize the varied roles women have played in armed conflicts beyond the traditional overgeneralization of women’s victimhood or pacifism. However, the discursive frameworks remains largely about motivation and subjectivity, assuming that women are personally inspired and often manipulated by patriarchy (Parashar 2011, 192). This context of confrontation, such as victimhood versus agency or femininity versus masculinity, fails to understand the fluid, contextual, and arbitrary nature of gender and its performativity (Butler 2007). As seen here, the story of Helen Kim and her students during the Korean War defied the binary gender scheme, revealing joy, trust, fulfillment, hope, and empowerment between the two extremes.

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and dance party in foreign military camps and always strongly advised Ewha students to be on their best behavior. Also, there were three houses in Busan, Daegu, and Seoul where Ewha students and graduates entertained foreign figures. Among these three, Helen Kim could not visit the UN Korean House in Daegu as often as the other two. It is plausible that the more casual atmosphere of the UN Korean House in the absence of Kim’s close supervision resulted in several international marriages between foreign guests and Ewha alumni working there.

## Conclusion

Helen Kim was one of the most notable women in modern Korean history, and her fame was not limited to Korea. In 1963, she received the Ramon Magsaysay Award for her outstanding public service among Asians and the Upper Room Citation in recognition of her leadership in world Christian fellowship. Despite her contributions to women's education, Christian mission, and social work, Kim is reprimanded for her cooperation with political powers. Ewha students and school authorities have scuffled over the statue of Helen Kim on the campus. Ewha students, feeling both indignant and ashamed at Kim's pro-Japanese collaboration, want to remove the statue. The Korean public and scholarship alike, haunted by a postcolonial discourse, are acutely conscious of pro-Japanese activities but less attentive to Kim's support for dictatorship. However, all of Helen Kim's assistance to political authorities paid off. Choe Eun-hui, the first Korean newswoman and a contemporary of Kim's, regarded Kim as "a child of fortune who sailed before the wind without adversities."<sup>27</sup>

As a matter of fact, Helen Kim had to brave many difficulties throughout her life. Born into poverty, she lost all her siblings and shouldered the burden of looking after her nephews and nieces as well as her elderly parents. What's more, she hewed out a career for herself despite the sexism of her society and defended Ewha through two wars—World War II and the Korean War. These personal, institutional, and political hardships, plus her ambition, hardened her into a tenacious and pragmatic figure. She made decisions and adopted means based on teleological efficiency, as well as her Christian morality and feminist principles, to maximize accomplishments. Her goal-oriented actions and instrumental rationality was reinforced particularly in cases where resources were limited. Though Kim's ends were worthy, they could not justify the means because the means

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27. "Kim Hwal-lan, eotgalli-neun pyeonggasok baroboneun nun piryo" (Hellen Kim, We Need a Balanced Insight about Her, Amid Mixed Judgments), *Idae hakbo* (Ewha Bulletin), June 1, 1999, accessed November 25, 2020, <http://inews.ewha.ac.kr/news/articleView.html?idxno=2863>.

one employs determine the very nature of the ends produced (Huxley 1937, 10). At the same time, for example, some choices in her most practical decision to mobilize her students during the Korean War were guided by her values and emotions. This kind of inconsistency reflects and affects her positionality; her plural cultural, political, and ideological subject position in society (Camp 1993, 115). The practices that evaluate people as either villain or hero in an either/or proposition, elide contextual and relational accounts with the dominant discourse of the time. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich studied early American women who, like Kim, endured hostile rhetoric regarding women's advancement in society, and concluded, "well-behaved women seldom make history" (Ulrich 1976, 20).

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