

The Discourse on Women in Korea: Episodes, Continuity, and Change

Shin Kwang-yeong

This paper examines the changing discourse on women in Korea by exploring five episodes; the state birth control policy, the factory girl, the sexual torture, the comfort women, and the cosmetic surgery. Each episode represents the significant transformation of perception of women, by destroying and at the same time reappropriating traditional images of women based on patriarchy. It also shows that the transformation of the discourse on women in Korea has been much more complicated and diversified than one might think. This paper also demonstrates how patriarchy has been maintained in a new form in the contemporary Korea society, by preserving the gender relationship characterized by male dominance over female.

Keywords: discourse, Korean women, patriarchy, gender, sexuality

One of the most remarkable political achievements is the establishment of the Ministry of Gender Equality in the Kim Dae Jung government in 2001.¹ Without the tradition of strong feminist movements and the gender politics, the new department within the Kim Dae Jung government reflects the political strategy of president Kim Dae Jung to broaden political support from women. Nevertheless, it displays the significance of women in the national politics and the changing discourse on women in contemporary Korea. In fact, women, gender, and

1. Prior to the establishment of the Ministry of Gender Equality, the Presidential Commission for Women's Affairs was established in February 1998 and the first Committee of Commissioners under the Presidential Commission for Women's Affairs was set up and included seven civilian experts in April 1998. "The Gender Discrimination Prevention and Relief Act" was enacted from July 1999.

patriarchy became subjects of popular discourse in the 1990s, reflecting rapidly changing social and political trends.

The language of women was recently reformulated as a social and political category in modern Korean history. While women as biological subjects already existed, women as social, political, and economic subjects gradually emerged since different social and political events associated with women have been interpreted from the feminist perspectives. It required different language that was newly invented or reinterpreted by various feminist perspectives to change the perception of women. Women's oppression could be acknowledged only through a new conceptual repertoire that allowed men and women to conceive their lives from different perspectives, that is, gender relations. Disconnected historical events or episodes in the last four decades contributed to significantly enhance the perception of women's issues in Korea. Thus the world of 'women' becomes a new signifier that shifts the boundary of meanings between men and women and constitutes a new form of public discourse.

Focusing on public discourse on women in five episodes, this paper analyses the changing perceptions of women in Korea that have shown a contradictory articulation of traditional patriarchy with femininity in the modern capitalist market society. The five social and political episodes reveal the changing discourse on women, destroying, reappropriating and transforming traditional patriarchy. It has significantly changed over the past period as social change has proceeded. Delineation of the dynamics of articulation also displays the ways in which the nation-state and the market affect reappropriation and transformation of the traditional perception of women. However, the reconfiguration of the perception of women reveals the persistence of traditional patriarchy in different forms. Different forms of perception of women undermine the stereotypical perception of women that has played a hegemonic role in oppressing women. The social process of changing perception of women consists of a process of commodification of women's beauty and sexuality that has fully exploited the traditional perception of women as sexual subjects. As an unintended consequence, the exploitation of women's sexuality in advertisements also destroyed the traditional perception of women associated with motherhood. At the same time it reveals a new social technology that oppress-

es women in the market society. As Foucault suggests, perceptions of women can be discursively formed in modification, disturbance, overthrow, and destruction of the existing discourses (Foucault 1972: Ch. 1). Patriarchal symbols are recursive and repetitive. Thus the discourse on women through the major episodes provides an open sesame to reveal the transformation of patriarchy, nation-states, and the relationship between them in Korea.

Patriarchy and Women

Patriarchy is “a system of social structure and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women” (Walby 1990: 20). Although patriarchy is a predominant system across societies, each society has a unique patriarchal system that produces and reproduces male supremacy over females with different ideological configurations embedded in national and local cultures. Patriarchy in Korea has been grounded on Confucian culture that postulated hierarchical social orders according to age and sex. Women were excluded from the public sphere and confined to agricultural and domestic work in the past. While the social exclusion of women was quite prevalent in the pre-modern societies throughout the world, the unique feature of the Korean patriarchy was that a morality based on Confucianism strictly located women’s social and familial positions within the social hierarchy. Women have been forced to accept their cursed lives, developing self-justification in which their misery was interpreted as retribution for the deeds of a former life.²

Except women of the *yangban* class, the nobility, ordinary women belonged to an outcast social group in the Chosŏn dynasty. The *yangban* were the aristocracy that exploited the labor of, and moral hegemony over, the peasants. While the *yangban* as a hegemonic class lost its power under the colonial rule, they maintained economic power as landlords. The discourse on women was based on the Confucian culture that was produced and reproduced by the moral and behavioral

2. Jon Elster calls this “situation-induced beliefs,” an illusionary perception of reality produced by insurmountable external conditions. See Elster (1983: 145-148).

practices of the *yangban*. The ideological construction of women did not change much during the colonial rule, or even in the post-colonial period. Although there were a small number of modern women, called new women (*shinyōsōng*), who were educated in the westernized high schools and colleges, symbolizing the advent of enlightened women as a social force, they did not have a strong impact on the people's perception of women (see Kim Keong-il 2000). Nevertheless, they heralded the changing role of women and the rising new social category of women.

The independence of Korea from Japan and the division of the nation transformed the ideological matrix in which nation, anti-communist ideology, family, tradition, and motherhood were re-articulated to build an ideal image of women in the new nation. While the new nation emphasized unity and harmony of family as a source of social harmony, the family was a patriarchal stronghold in which the oppression of women by men materialized and reproduced by Confucian ceremonies. Though the Korean War and economic instability threatened the family system, patriarchy was intact and the perception of women did not change much.

The great transformation of the image of women took place during industrialization in the 1960s, with the state's population control policy, and the rise of class differentiation. The 1960s was the transition period marked by the radical change of the perception of women. The state's population policy directly challenged the traditional concept of women and family. To curb the population growth, the military government began a birth control program with the introduction of family planning. It included the diffusion of contraceptive devices, the legalization of abortion, and the sterilization of women and men. It attacked the traditional concept of good family characterized as having many family members and the lineage system.

As the military state chose an economic growth strategy to justify its military coup launching a series of economic growth plans, an urban middle class began to emerge. The separation of wage labor and domestic labor appeared among salaried white collar workers in urban areas. Women who were fully devoted to household chores and child-care belonged to the middle class with stable household incomes from their husbands' jobs. "Wise mother and good wife" was the ideology

of the middle class women. Young girls aspired to meet a good husband and to become a wise mother and good wife. Many young girls received a college education because it was considered a part of the qualification of a good wife. Girls of the working class also accepted the ideology as the ideal role of married women. Thus the middle class ideology of women predominated the imagery of women across different social classes. Once the ideal model of the role of women and family of the middle class was formed, it began to play a hegemonic role in shaping women's perception of their roles beyond class boundaries.

Democratization contributed to the crisis of patriarchy not because women directly attacked male dominance but because it awakened women's consciousness and evoked feminist movements. Several political events revealed the state's violence against women, such as the sexual torture of a female dissident by police. Discrimination of women for employment, promotion and layoffs in the public as well as the private sector became a political issue as feminists developed conceptual tools and master frames to interpret their lives and status in the society.³ Democratization provided an opportunity to criticize women's oppression more freely and to organize women's groups to promote women's interests.

Narratives of major episodes will reveal how discourses on women have been affected by the great social and political transformation in Korea for the last three decades. The episodes disclose the distinctive features of the Korean patriarchal system that are usually unnoticed. The episodes are not random events. Rather they are closely associated with the deep structure of the patriarchal system that is enduring as a long duree and at the same time are transforming due to social change.

Episode 1: Women, sexuality, and the state amidst the birth control policy

The Korean State has controlled civil society by intervening in the private sphere. One of the major areas of state intervention in the civil

3. David Snow and his colleagues developed the concept of frame alignment to study the process of social mobilization. See David Snow et al. (1986).

society was the control over the sexual reproduction of men and women. The population control that had been a major part of state policy was associated with the economic policy. Following India and Pakistan, the population control policy was introduced by the military state in 1961 (Kim Du-sup 1988: 96). In the 60s, this policy focused on the control of childbirth, explaining the rationale of birth control, and providing contraceptive devices to women. The Ministry of Health and Society (MHS) became the main administrative body and the Family Planning Association, as a civilian counterpart of the MHS, was formed to execute the birth control policy across the nation. In the 1970s the population control policy included men by providing free surgery for sterilization during reserve army training. The state also legalized abortion and gave sterilized families the right to move into public housing in the (KDI 1978: 65).

The policy discourse on birth control challenged the Confucian concept of family that was based on blood lineage. In traditional society, the concept of a good family was a family with many children reflecting Confucian family values and the high mortality rate of traditional society. A family with many sons was especially the envy of other families. Fecundity was morally justified and economically vindicated because sons loyal to their parents became sources of labor power contributing to the family economy as well. A big family with a strong family consciousness was the ideal family model in traditional society. "Strong family consciousness has been the core of Confucianism" in Korea (Koh Byong-ik 1996: 195). Contrary to the traditional concept of the family, the ideal concept of family imposed by the state was a family with one or two children, regardless of their sex. The nuclear family was regarded as the modern family in an advanced society. The population education that started in high schools in 1973 inculcated new family values that challenged the traditional ones.

The state's birth control policy also transformed the traditional concept of sexuality. Human sexuality became an object of the state's social engineering. Individual sexuality became an instrument for achieving the national goal of economic growth. The state's instrumental rationality permeated into the private sphere and the human body. An individual's sexual behavior should be in accordance with the state policy so as to control population growth. The state power became a

power dominating the privacy of men and women. Population control allowed the state to colonize the private sphere, impeding the human body and sexual autonomy. While the use of contraceptive devices allowed women to control their bodies, the state directed women's sexual lives towards restraining population growth.

The legalization of abortion displays the most contradictory nature of state intervention in sexual reproduction. Traditionally, women did not have any power to control their body. Conception was considered as a natural phenomenon that could not be avoided. The legalization of abortion provided women with the means to control their body and life by denying unintended conception. It contributed to weaken women's disadvantage stemming from biological reproduction. However, it did not enhance women's rights as did the cases in the West. Abortion was not legalized as the right to choose, or freedom of choice, but as a functional need of the state to curb population growth. According to criminal law, abortion is still illegal. The Mother Son Health Care Law in 1973 that legalized abortion limited the possible cases of legal abortion to incidents such as rape or the serious illness of mothers etc. In practice, however, abortion became a popular practice among women, perpetrating violence against women's bodies.⁴

Women were totally excluded from the legal discourse on the formation of the Mother Son Health Care Law. Traditionally, men did not care about possible conception during sexual intercourse. While conception was regarded solely as a matter for women, abortion required the husbands' agreement, denying them the rights of self-determination over their bodies. Thus abortion became another form of violence against women as a consequence of an unwanted conception, or the failure of contraception (see MacKinnon 1987; Poovey 1992).⁵

The state's birth control policy shows the changing relationship between the state and civil society and between the state and family. First of all, the state institutionalized the control over reproduction of women, and later, men's reproductive capabilities. Childbirth was no

4. Park Sook-ja reported that the number of abortions is almost one million per year. This shows that the number of abortions is twice that of normal deliveries. Only 50 cases have been prosecuted (Park Sook-ja 2001: 75-76).

5. While abortion was a subject of debate between the conservative and feminists, it also became a subject of debate among feminists. See Sherwin (1993).

longer considered as a matter for married couples or family affair. It became a part of social engineering geared towards a national project, absorbing individual families into the state project. The intrusion of state power into the family in civil society was based on medical technology alien to traditional Confucian society.

Second, the state's birth control policy damaged the traditional concept of families based on Confucian values and introduced new violence against women, denying women the right to self-determination over conception and abortion. It implies that women were freed from the traditional Confucian concept of childbirth but were victims of another form of violence against their body when unwanted pregnancies were predominant.⁶ The state's birth control policy contributed to a weakening of the Confucian concept of family. At the same time, however, it reaffirmed the traditional concept of women's sexuality controlled and dominated by men, by legalizing abortion and tolerating illegal abortion. The state's birth control policy and practice confirmed the fact that women did not have social or legal rights to control their bodies in Korea.

Episode 2: *Kongsuni* and *Samo'nim*: new words and new social classes

The invention of social category, or labeling, reflects the social process of making distinctions, which in turn displays the formation of social groups as a result of social change. The capitalist production regime and the market economy require different types of women from those in the pre-capitalist agrarian economy. It needed a cheap female labor force to lower the production costs and at the same time generated new women whose husbands were owners of the new production system. The success of capitalist industrialization resulted in class differentiation among women and new words or expressions were invented to represent the increasing class differentiation among women. It shows the discursive elements of class differentiation in which expressions can be transformed by inventing new words or by substituting

6. For more details of the debate, see Callanhan (1995).

one meaning for another.

Kongsuni represented the formation of female workers as a new social category in Korea in the 1960s. Industrialization in the 60s accompanied the mass influx of young female workers from the rural area to the urban area. In East Asia, it was a universal phenomenon that light industries such as the textile industry, garment industry, and footwear industry, in the early stages of industrialization demanded large scale cheap female factory workers.⁷ Most of them who came from the rural areas were unmarried and under twenty years old without family networks or housing facilities. Thus, they stayed at the factory dormitory in which they were under the supervision of dormitory regulations, curfews, and bed-checks. Unmarried young female workers were known as “*Kongsuni*.” They were shameful of their work because Confucian culture degraded menial labor and female factory workers were regarded as having very low social status. *Kongsuni*, literally meaning ‘factory girls,’ brought the image of a servant and humble status. As Koo (2001: 128-129) notices, “the label *Kongsuni*, in particular, troubled sensitive young women workers who had left their rural homes with high aspirations of upward social mobility.” They recognized the fact that working in the factory instead of learning in high schools earned scorn from other male workers and the community. Thus they tried to hide their social status from their friends and others.

In accordance with the rise of female factory workers, the wives of factory owners formed a new social class and social status group. They also represented a new social category that symbolized class differentiation among women in industrializing Korea. They were called “*Samo’nim*” that had the literal meaning of ‘mother of a teacher.’ While the owner of the factory was called “*Sajangnim*,” literally meaning ‘owner of the company,’ his wife was called “*Samo’nim*.” In Confucian culture, teaching was regarded as the most respectful job and thus teachers enjoyed a higher social status. *Samo’nim* referred to the most prestigious social status for women on the grounds that they sought to be treated like the wife of a teacher. Later, *Samo’nim* became the honorific word when calling any unfamiliar woman of high social status. There are two terms to call married women: *Ajumma* and *Samo’nim*. While

7. For the Japanese case, see Tsurumi (1990). For the Taiwanese case, see Kung (1994).

Ajumma connotes an ordinary woman with a derogatory nuance, *Samo'nim* refers to a respectable woman of high social status.⁸ The two words demonstrated the two different frames of reference of women determined by social status. New words and expressions represented changing class relations by linking social meaning to the class position or the status position of women.

Linguistic differentiation among everyday language reflects not simply differentiation among women but also class differentiation as a result of capitalist industrialization initiated by the state. Though *Kongsuni* and *Samo'nim* belong to the same sex, they are not the same social beings. The two different terms, however, revealed both patriarchal social relations and class differentiation among women, with changing images of women in the industrializing society. They also displayed the dependency of women on men's class status in class society. They demonstrated that women did not have their own economic status and their economic status was dependent on their husbands' class position in the patriarchal society. The complex relationship between class and gender was not fully discovered until the 1990s when the women's discourse in the public media emerged within politically related events, impinging upon class relations and gender relations. It took a long time to fully acknowledge gender relations embedded in class relations. Feminist discourses raised a challenge to patriarchy and class relations by providing an alternative discourse necessary for disentangling the complex matrix of male dominance over women and class exploitation. Alternative discourses developed as many feminist writings were translated into Korean in the 1990s.⁹

8. Recently the discourse on *Ajumma* emerged when some feminists argued that the negative connotation of the word was based on sexist ideology. They tried to free the word from the sexist ideology by addressing the potentially positive social and political roles of ordinary housewives. See Brown (1999: 185-220).

9. For example, Michele Barrett's *Women's Oppression Today* (London: Verso, 1980) was translated into Korean in 1995 and Ueno Chizko's *Patriarchy and Capitalism* (Tokyo: Iwanami, 1990) was translated into Korean in 1994.

Episode 3: Sexual torture and sexual harassment: state violence and the awakening women's question

In the 1980s, the women's question was founded by the disclosure of sexual torture of female dissidents by policeman. A woman was arrested in the mass demonstration against the military dictatorship in Inch'ŏn in June 1986. The May 3rd Inch'ŏn Demonstration was an epochal protest that ignited a series of violent protests by students, workers, and political dissidents. The woman in question was a former student of Seoul National University and became an organizer of workers. She was one of the ex-student workers, called *hakchul* in Korean.¹⁰ Police questioned her to find out if she was affiliated with any of the illegal organizations that organized the violent street demonstration and tortured her to disclose the location of the leaders of the demonstration. A policeman used sexual torture to make her confess. An attorney for her made a public disclosure of the sexual torture. It provoked a mass condemnation among the ordinary people against the policemen as well as the military regime. Sexual torture was a symbolic behavior that destroyed the expected relationship between the police and a suspect in Confucian culture.¹¹ Religious organizations, civic organizations, and women's organizations organized a "Joint Committee for Sexual Torture in Puch'ŏn" and 166 attorneys joined the protest movement against sexual torture. The attorneys indicted six police officers at the police branch in Puch'ŏn on the charge of violating the basic human rights of the suspect. Full of angry women in the court, they were sentenced to five years in prison. It was a long struggle for the women against the dictatorial state taking three years to get the final decision in court. The committee became a platform for the formation in 1987 of the Korean Women's Association United (KWAU), which was the most influential women's organization of the 90s in Korea.

The Puch'ŏn sexual torture incident disclosed the sexual code rooted

10. It was popular for radical university students to enter into a factory to organize workers and lead the working class movement in the early 1980s. See Koo (2001: Chapter 5).

11. One congressman of the ruling party denied the possibility of sexual torture, saying that sexual torture is impossible and the sexual torture is a dirty word invented by dissidents to overthrow the political system (<http://www.skngo.or.kr/413/jw0001.htm>).

in patriarchy and violence. Discourse on sexuality has been a taboo that was abided by men and women. While sexual violence and prostitution were everyday affairs, silence was considered a matter of good manners. Confucian morality downgraded talking about sex and sexuality as immoral and vulgar. The incident provoked public embarrassment because it opened up public discussion and investigation of the sexual torture. It contributed to awaken men and women to see sexual violence as a crime. Victims of sexual violence regarded it as a shameful misfortune that could be concealed from others. Thus sexual violence was severely underreported to the police because it was a humiliating moment for a woman to describe sexual assault in front of policemen. Victims of sexual violence could experience a secondary victimization under the patriarchal institution (Chung 2000).

The incident raised sexual violence as a subject of public discourse as well as being an outcry of the people against the state violence. Sexual violence began to be reconsidered as a part of the patriarchal system (see Shim 1989; Chang 1999). Studies of sexual violence acquired academic citizenship among feminist scholars as well as legal scholars. The concept of sexual violence went beyond the boundary of feminism and legal studies to history, cultural studies, social science, and health science. Due to the Puchŏn Sexual Torture incident, family violence and child sexual abuse as well as the state violence were discovered as social and political issues (Kim 1988; Cho 2000; Korea Council for East Asian Peace and Human Rights 2001). It triggered a chain reaction amongst victims of sexual violence. Amidst this, the comfort women issue became the most epochal issue that transformed the perception of women, sexuality, and war and ignited an outburst of transnational women's movements against sexual violence and war crimes.

Episode 4: The comfort women: from women's shameful fate to the transnational feminist discourse

Since the Puchŏn sexual torture affair was revealed, gender discourse has undergone a tremendous transformation due to the political transition from authoritarianism to democracy and the rise of the femi-

nist movement. Discourse on gender and sexuality became an issue to be discussed more openly in public. One of the factors that contributed to the demolition of the old taboo was the outcome of the articulation of gender discourse and nationalist discourse in case of the comfort women as another type of state violence against women. Comfort women refers to those Korean women who became sexual laborers for the Japanese troops before and during the Second World War.¹² When gender discourse became connected to national history, simultaneously the comfort women discourse altered the perception of the comfort women completely. The comfort women had concealed the fact of their sexual slavery because they were afraid of getting a bad reputation and social exclusion by neighbors. In the past, women who worked in sexual slavery suffered from social stigma and psychological trauma due to defamation of losing womanly virtues as demanded by the patriarchal social order. Therefore, they were reluctant to reveal their personal experience to others. Nobody paid attention to the case of the sexual slavery. Sexual slavery was a subject of complete public obliteration. Thus, the comfort women were “the hidden outcasts” in Korean society before their recovery through the newly arisen activist perspective of the crime committed by the Japanese state.

During the democratic transition, some women’s groups affiliated with pro-democracy movement organizations began to raise the issue of comfort women as a part of their critique of the government’s ignorance of the crime committed by the Japanese military during Japanese colonial rule. The Japanese government and old politicians denied the existence of comfort women during the Japanese colonial period. The issue of comfort women was recovered from old history after more than 50 years of independence. But it became one of the most delicate and complex issues in Korean history associated with nationalism, feminism, the transnational social movement, and post-colonialism.¹³

When Roh Tae-woo, president of the 6th republic, visited Japan in

12. There is no complete document on the number of the comfort women. It is estimated to range from 50,000 to 200,000 women, 80 percent of whom were Koreans (Soh 2001).

13. The comfort women issue became a key issue that united various women’s organizations and social movement organizations across nations, accompanied by academic research. Research papers on the comfort women were published by major international journals such as *Asian Survey*, *Women’s Studies International Journal*, *Peace Review*, etc.

1990, several organizations demanded that Roh ask the Japanese government to disclose the existence of comfort women. The Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Sexual Slavery by Japan was established in 1990 by those organizations. It began to demonstrate regularly in front of the Japanese Embassy in Korea and disseminated information about the comfort women during Japanese colonial rule. The experience of comfort women was published in popular journals and newspapers. When a number of Koreans filed a suit against the Japanese government demanding compensation for the violation of human rights of certain categories of Koreans under Japanese colonial rule in 1991, the comfort women issue became an international issue. As the issue became an issue of public discourse, the social movement for the comfort women began to get connected to similar organizations in other East Asian countries as well.

Establishing networks with other organizations in other countries, the issue of the comfort women is no longer an issue related to nationalism, it has become a human rights and feminist issue. Women's human rights or sexual assault over women by men have become core issues related to the comfort women issue. Also, it has become a transnational women's movement agenda since comfort women were not only confined to Korea. The comfort women were recruited from various regions in Asia including China, Taiwan and Japan. The definition of comfort women was also reformulated to include women from other Asian countries. Now, the comfort women refer to women of various ethnic and national backgrounds and social circumstances who became sexual laborers for Japanese troops before and during the Second World War. The comfort women issue became an international issue as the UN Commission on Human Rights and US women's organization engaged in the investigation and reported the case of the comfort women to the Economic and Social Council of the UN in January 1996 (UN Commission on Human Rights 1996).

The comfort women issue displays the most dramatic frame shift or the transformation of the perception of the comfort women from 'hidden outcast' to victims of the Japanese state's sexual violence. Enforced sexual labor for the Japanese military represents not only an atrocity of Japanese imperialism but also a serious violation of women's human rights. Now, the comfort women issue is an interna-

tional issue related to militarism and sexual violence against women. It also changed the discourse on sexual slavery from the nationalist perspective to the international perspective. The social movement for comfort women in Korea broadened the perspective of women's studies and popular discourse on sexuality with the involvement of the UN and other international organizations.

Episode 5: Surgical beauty syndrome in post-modern Korea.

Patriarchy in Korea is reshaping the faces of women with the advent of cosmetic surgery in vogue. Cosmetic surgery has become a fashion among young women since the late 1990s. Young women are obsessed with cosmetic surgery and diet. "Nearly 80 percent of women in their 20s said they were willing to undergo surgery if they could be prettier and could afford to pay it, despite the risk of expenses and possible ill effects" (*Korea Times* May 15, 2001). They want to have pretty faces and bodies like popular actors or artists in the mass media. Cosmetic surgery includes painstaking operations such as eyelid surgery, rhinoplasty, liposuction, wrinkle removal, face lifts, and bone cuttings. Because the cosmetic surgery is very costly, some young women organized mutual financing clubs to finance the surgery. Cosmetic surgery has become a boom even among high school girls (*Munhwa Ilbo* June 4, 2001). Thus, cosmetic surgery becomes the most lucrative operation among medical doctors with a 500 billion won market.¹⁴ Private hospitals are advertising for cosmetic surgery on the subway trains as well as in newspapers and magazines. While the plastic surgery department was the least preferred department among medical students in the 1970s, it became the most preferred and the most competitive department to enter at medical schools in the 1990s.

The boom of cosmetic surgery reflects drastic change of the perception of body and beauty, negating the traditional concept of body. The traditional concept of body is based on the Confucian concept of filial

14. According to one newspaper, "the cost for a liposuction is 3 to 5 million won, breast enlargement surgery, about 5 to 7 million won, whereas eyelid surgery or rhinoplasty costs on average a million won. The total market for cosmetic surgery in 2000 was estimated to be 500 billion won" (*Korea Times* July 31, 2002).

piety in which offspring should keep their body as they were given by their parents. A wound to the body had been considered as one of the most unfilial actions of a child toward their parents. Medical surgery was one of the impious things to avoid because it changed the original shape of the body. But now, cosmetic surgery is regarded as a desirable operation in order to have a slim body and a pretty appearance. An increasing number of parents are even willing to provide cosmetic procedures as gifts for their children's graduation from high school or for their children's entrance into a university.

Fetishism for a better appearance is sweeping not only among young women, but also among older women. Older women also aspire to look better through cosmetic surgery in a society where appearance has become the basis of attraction and competitiveness. The rise of the cosmetic surgery reveals a new form of patriarchy in a society where beauty can be bought with money. Women believe that a women's good appearance is much more important than their ability when they enter the labor market, as well as when they want to meet a partner. In fact, the popularity of women's cosmetic surgery reflects men's preference of women's appearance when women are interviewed for jobs in companies, or meet a partner. Women's appearance becomes "social capital", to use Bourdieu's (1986: 248) term, and determines "life chance," to use Weber's (1968: 927) term, in Korean society and women try to enhance their social capital and life chances through cosmetic surgery. Now the changed attitude toward cosmetic surgery is well documented by the following: "Frankly speaking, the people with a better appearance can find jobs more easily and are treated better. The cosmetic surgery fever is just an aspect of our competition-ridden society, in which people make efforts to have better conditions than others" (*Korea Times* May 15, 2001).

It is interesting to note that the new interpretive concept used for cosmetic surgery is 'competitiveness' rather than the filial duty of Confucian values. But the competitiveness of women is largely dependent on men's prevailing perception of beauty. Competition for men's judgement and recognition is an underlying reason for the boom in cosmetic surgery. At the risk of pain and possible medical accidents, women try to conform to men's perception of women's beauty and good looks. While the traditional Confucian concept of body has totally

collapsed, the male-centered concept of beauty still affects women's desperate quest for beauty and good appearance. The surgical beauty syndrome in vogue demonstrates that in spite of the radical rupture of the Confucian concept of body, male-dominance is an integrating principle in the gender relations of Korean society. In general, appropriate body shape and appearance through the eyes of men disciplines women's bodies and women's concepts of beauty in a patriarchal society.¹⁵ But the new form of male dominance is even more delicate, because cosmetic surgery is related with competitiveness, health, subjectivity and the perception of beauty in postmodern Korea.

Concluding remarks

The images and perception of women are embedded in everyday life. The semiotic structure of naming and calling things and human beings has been positioned in the constellation of perception and emotion. An interpellation of men and women as gendered subjects is a routine activity practiced without any special attention or hindrance. Patriarchy still exercises power over women despite long struggles against it over the past half century. Hegemony of patriarchy is based not on its manifest ideas but on the routine practice of gendered social relations.

The above episodes were not random events but events reflecting epochal social and political changes. In addition, they fostered social and political change, revealing and awakening unrecognized social reality. As we see from the five episodes, images of women have been transformed, along with industrialization, democratization and the rise of social movements in the world. The formation of modern images of women has shown a drastic change in the images of human beings and images of gender relations. In particular, South Korea, as one of the most drastically changing societies, provides an excellent case of changing images of women. In South Korea, industrialization and democratization were achieved in three decades. Images of women

15. Applying Foucault's concept of disciplinary power, Susan Bordo describes weight control and diet in America from the micropolitics of body discipline. See Bordo (1993).

have been shifted from a traditional perspective to diversified perspectives. The traditional perspective, based on the Confucian culture, focused on women in motherhood as sacred symbols and at the same time women as female inferiors to males. Confucian images of women emphasize docility and submission as woman-like characteristics. In contemporary Korea, there are a variety of images of women, reflecting various social changes and social cleavages. Some images are undermining other images, by destroying conventional images or by transforming images into new images.

This paper explored the diversified images of women in modern Korean society and found two guiding lights that were pertinent to modern patriarchy: conformity, and challenge to the prevailing patriarchy. When we focus on the episodes that display women's conformity to male dominance, we might report many other episodes other than the cosmetic surgery. However, the point is that this is the continuity of patriarchy in a new form that has developed in modern Korean society with the growing economic affluence and the development of medical technology. To the contrary, when we observe the episodes that show women challenging the prevailing patriarchal system, we might also report many other episodes other than just the comfort women issue. For example, the establishment of the Ministry of Women might be the best example of a new attempt to abolish women's discrimination and oppression by state policy. The point is that traditional patriarchy has been continuously challenged by intended activity, or undermined by an unintended consequence of social change, and new forms of patriarchy have been formulated.

Nevertheless, it is a mistake to regard patriarchy as monolithic and uniform. As we mentioned before, women as a repressed social group display different images captured by different discourses that vary according to class and generation. In particular, class differentiation and political change contribute to diversification in images of women. The multiplicity of changing discourse on women demonstrates that patriarchy has undergone a significant transformation in Korea, the last bastion of Confucian culture in East Asia. Though images of women themselves, dominated by men and their interest, exist as fragmented and fractured forms in everyday life, they exert a strong ideological influence on the perception of women. Patriarchy exists not as a mani-

fest and elaborate system of ideas and language but as a latent attitudinal trait and an elusive emotional framework.

Finally, I want to mention some methodological comments on gender studies. Social discourse on women has proved to be neither monolithic nor linear. Thus, social change that generated the various episodes related to women requires narratives to diachronically capture the ongoing structural change and continuity. We need to decode complicated gender relations embedded in contemporary Korea that has undergone drastic social change. An episodic approach might be one way to reveal the complex dynamics full of contradiction and conflicts as well as the hybrid reproduction of patriarchy. While case studies provide a more detailed analysis, an episodic approach shows conjuncture that represents changing images of women as well as the ways in which patriarchy has been transmuting in the process of rapid social change. While these episodes seem to take place without causal connection, they demonstrate that recurring images of women are formed and reformed with signs and meanings within the master framework of patriarchy in different contexts.

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Shin Kwang-yeong is Professor of Sociology at Chung-Ang University. His research interests include labor movement, class analysis and gender inequality. His recent works concern about the relationship between class and patriarchy, gender difference in job mobility, and the discursive politics.